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"Human Dignity in a changing Europe –
A Christian response"



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The Role of Catholic Higher Education: some thoughts.

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Thank you for inviting me to address you briefly this morning. And welcome to Birmingham where there are more canals than Venice! Your conference is in the midst of the old gun making quarter where in the 19th century there were over 100 gun makers – now there are three but their pubs remain. I hope you have discovered the delights of the Gun makers Arms around the corner. The beer is good and the sandwich and chips are better.

I have been asked to speak about Catholic higher education in England.

As you probably know from the time of the reformation in the 16th Century Catholics were not allowed to attend University until after the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829. Sons of the wealthy went abroad to Paris, Rome, Bologna, Salamanca. But there was no access to higher education for the Catholic masses. However after 1829 the newly legal Church made a huge commitment to education. First it catered for its poor masses, of Irish and Italian immigrants and the remaining English working class Catholics. It built parish based primary schools, secondary schools, a new Seminary and elite school at Oscott, three miles from here. This was the first major post- reformation building in England and it was built on wild open land on the highest point over the city so that it could be seen from miles as a message: The Catholics were back! And eventually the church built Catholic Teacher Training Colleges. My own University College called after, the soon to be beatified, John Henry Newman started life as a centre for training teachers and 50 % of the primary school teachers in central England are still trained there.

But for a long time Catholic intellectuals remained marginal to British academic life and were excluded from professorial posts especially in theology and philosophy. When he joined the Catholic Church in 1845 Newman himself immediately became marginal to the very University world in which he had been a star.

So Catholic higher education has had to be built from the ground up; with its teaching colleges developing, for the most part, not in the medieval university Towns of Oxford and Cambridge, but in the industrial cities so that today there are Catholic University colleges

and Institutes in Liverpool Hope, Leeds Trinity, Newman and Maryvale in Birmingham, St. Mary's, the Roehampton Institute, and Heythrop College, in London all delivering University level courses in a variety of subjects but all having at their centre an active theology engaged in the social issues of our time, a clear emphasis on the witness to the Christian Gospel, the sanctity of the person and the opening up of access to education for those who, in another time, would not enjoy its opportunities.

Many of the teachers and professors in these institutes act freely as consulters to our Bishops Conference, to the Christian charities, e.g. Cafod, and advocacy groups like Progressio. They work with the Justice and Peace Networks, the Catholic Social Apostolate, (YCW, MCW, KAB, ACO, JOC etc.) e.g. for 20 years I have given my time here and abroad to the Christian Worker movements linked by the inspiration of Joseph Cardijn.

British society is multi-cultural and multi-faith. When I teach the course on Jesus Christ I have Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Agnostics among my Catholic and Anglican students. It makes for stimulating discussion but always in a context of mutual respect. The Catholic University Colleges have worked hard to create an environment where faith and spirituality are at the heart of the Institution, and where the dialogue so necessary for the future of our world can take place. Muslim students choose to come to study with us because faith and religious practice is respected and nourished among us. In particular young Asian women feel secure among us and achieve remarkable grades; which offer them opportunities previously unavailable to their mothers and grand-mothers. They will have a huge influence in the future.

The last Labour government had made a huge commitment to Higher Education. When asked what his three priorities were Tony Blair famously said "*Education! Education! Education!*" The Government's aim was for 50% of the young adult population, at any time, to be in HE. It provided all sorts of opportunities for those who wanted to return to education in mid-life. The Catholic Institutes rose to this challenge. So for example the student population of Newman University College has expanded from 800, when I arrived 10 years ago, to over 3,000 today and many of these are not traditional students. They include single parents, or people returning after bringing up children. Some had left school at 16 without qualifications, some are immigrants and members of minority cultures, some are manual workers whose jobs have all gone. We enable them to achieve what was not available to them when they were young. At the same time we have created scholarships and opportunities for students from other parts of the world.

However, in the new financial environment the new government has already made 25% cuts in higher education. We have been told to reduce our numbers and, inevitably to ask for higher qualifications. This will exclude precisely those for whom we have worked so consistently to include and help succeed. This is a serious issue for the Catholic Institutes; not only an issue of finance but of principal. Who has a right to education? Is it only the privileged? Is it only those whom life has been kind to?

There is a new initiative in the North of England at the University of Durham, one of our elite Universities. Because of financial backing and the amazing energy of a young Catholic Professor, Dr. Paul Murray and the previous Bishop Kevin Dunne, a new Centre with a professorship, has been created in Catholic Studies. That would be amazing enough in an

English University where, until recently, all theology professors had to be Protestant. But this professor has responsibilities to the both the University and also to the Bishop and his Catholic diocese. This has never happened since the Reformation. And while the professor must be a Catholic he or she does not have to be ordained. So this is an interesting move away from clericalism too.

This is a wonderful achievement and shows something of the changing role of the Catholic Community in a broadly secular society. A lot will depend on the role the professor takes in the local church. However, the danger of such appointments are that they are based on private finance and we have seen the influence of such private finance at the Universities of Cambridge and Lampeter, where Arab oil money has strengthened the Theology department but also changed and controed its nature.

So who controls the money in higher Education, and where it comes from, and who and what is it for, are very important questions. “Cui bono?” is the old Latin saying. Who gains?

In the face of such financial issues we have to think in different terms. Are there different models? Next week-end I am organising a Conference in London on the Church’s Social Teaching at which five of the Catholic colleges will launch a new web site-named “Virtual Plater” after a Jesuit Charles Plater who helped to found the [Catholic Social Guild](#), in 1909. A college named after him was built in the last century. It offered further education with an emphasis on Catholic social teaching to Catholic working class men and women who had missed educational opportunities or who were still in work. As well as their ordinary courses they were all taught the Church’s Social Teaching to inspire them to work for a more just world.

Plater ceased to exist a few years ago but the interest from the money gained from its sale is used each year to support a variety of experiments in Christian social education and activism. The five University Colleges have spent the last year working together –that is a miracle in itself – to build a web-site which students can use to learn about the Churches Social Teaching and its application in our world. Similar work, for different audiences, is being done by Cafod and Progressio.

Our modules will be able to be accessed by Students in the University Colleges. Courses will be followed on line for credit, and the material will be made available for more informal use among the Catholic Dioceses and Christian Activist and Lay movements. If it is successful then something of Charles Plater’s vision, of the sharing of Catholic Social Teaching among a new generation of committed and engaged Catholics, will be realised in our time. At present the delivery of Catholic Social Teaching even in the Seminaries is patchy, and yet in the wider world context and especially the renewal of Christian Democracy in Europe, again and again, Catholic Social Teaching is being used as a source of reference and inspiration. Again, if successful, we will have another practical model for accessible teaching that is inclusive, and maintains something of our original mission as Catholic education centres for the mass of the people.

John Henry Newman (1801-90), my College's patron, is one of England's greatest Christian thinkers. His life was marked by a personal struggle for integrity and truth. His creative and lively mind engaged with the process by which men and women come to

knowledge and truth. He was aware that simple logic and the scientific method were not the only means of access to truth. His explorations of the human intellectual and spiritual journey, anticipate much of today's work on multiple modes of intelligence and understanding that underpins the way we learn and teach at University and School. In his famous lectures ***The Idea of the University: Defined and Illustrated*** he emphasised the main role of the university is to train the mind rather than to package useful knowledge. To do this he developed a system of tutorials and small group work which again we use to good effect here at Newman. When he died the streets of Birmingham were lined with thousands whose lives he had touched and inspired. He died a Cardinal of the Catholic Church, honoured internationally by the great and the good. But it is his ability to touch and enlighten the hearts of so many, from so many different walks of life, that make him such a fitting patron for modern Catholic Higher Education and its mission to men and women in contemporary society.

Thank you for your kind attention.