

Towards Universal Communion

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AFTER ROE V. WADE WAS OVERTURNED, I remember seeing much commotion among my Chinese WeChat friends. News and opinion articles were shared and reshared, comments were made and fired back, and debates were launched and intensified. I observed that the Chinese response to the US Supreme Court ruling is no less charged and polarizing than that of America, albeit with a different complexion. Most Chinese media responded with dismay, indicating alarm and contempt for the loss of human rights in America. Many of my family and friends echoed this apprehension and expressed concern for my well-being and studies in this country. Others hailed the triumph of America's battle over human rights, its leadership in protecting the unborn, while signaling the extent to which their counterparts' judgement were clouded by politics. Nonetheless, many more remained silent, especially women, amid this public upheaval.

I myself was deeply troubled by the event and the subsequent responses unfolding in both countries. They invited me to a deeper reflection not only on the issue of abortion and reproductive health, but also its complex entanglement with religion, geopolitics, and historical trauma that haunts our daily lives. I have come to believe that the issue of abortion in the US is not and has never been only an American issue, but always a global one. Any proposal of reasoned reflection and civil dialogue on the topic must consider its global nature. Seen in this expansive light, the current situation presents a challenge but also, most importantly, an opportunity for the actualization of universal communion. I am convinced that Catholic higher education—given its primal responsibility in the formation of persons and the transformation of the world—ought to initiate, lead, and model the universal love and openness that is the silent cry of our global society.

In the same way that the universal Church is fully present in the local (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 26), enclosed within American Catholic higher education is the global community. By nature of its mission, Catholic higher education—if it truly is a community of life and learning—should manifest what is already achieved in a living plant,

where the unity of the entire created world is revealed.¹ In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis has spoken about both the power of love that converges every periphery towards an ever-greater sense of mutual belonging and the seeds of a vocation to form open societies that ensure the active participation of everyone (nos. 95–98). What Pope Francis has called for is acute awareness of the unity of the world present in the dynamics of history and in the wealth of human diversity. “Open society” was a term first coined by Henri Bergson, one of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century, in his final book *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. He pointed out the sharp distinction between open and closed societies: “The closed society is that whose members hold together, caring nothing for the rest of humanity, on the alert for attack or defence, bound, in fact, to a perpetual readiness for battle. ... The open society is the society which is deemed in principle to embrace all humanity.”² According to Bergson, open society embodies an *élan vital*, a vital impetus and love that is the source of everything—the love of God.³ It is a spiritual society whose members actualize in time a radical transformation. With the help of God and driven by the impetus of love—that is also a mystic impetus—they as instruments of God would lift humanity up to God, so that divine creation could be completed and reach its end.⁴

Catholic higher education—charged with the task to contribute to the greater good of the world and the Church—shares this very vocation. A Catholic university is universal by virtue of its institution. As a community of life and learning, it is called to be the living embodiment of an open society. Universal love is the soul of its institution and the driving force for its daily functioning. If it is to stay true to its identity and mission, American Catholic higher education must manifest an absolute openness, where every utterance is heard as a call to contemplate the face of the living God and respond to the summons of love. Every experience is seen as a sign of divine revelation and an invitation to the abyss of love, and ultimately every affection—whether joy or sadness—is felt in the flesh and perceived as the “gentle hand”⁵ of divine love.

¹ Edith Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being: An Attempt at an Ascent to the Meaning of Being*, trans. Kurt F. Reinhardt (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 2002), 267.

² Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R. Ashley Audra and Clouesley Brereton (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 266–267.

³ Bergson, *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, 234, 267–268.

⁴ Bergson, *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, 236.

⁵ Here the “gentle hand” is a reference to St. John of the Cross’s “The Living Flame of Love,” where stanza 2 of the poem reads: “O Sweet cautery,/ O delightful wound!/ O gentle hand! O delicate touch/ that tastes of eternal life/ and pays every debt!/ In killing you changed death to life.” For St. John’s commentary on the stanza, see John

In fact, the call for universal love and openness came at an opportune moment, particularly in the context of growing internationalization in higher education. Since the 1980s, as a consequence of global developments including the increasing importance of research and education for economic growth, the rising demand for higher education in the world, and the end of the Cold War, internationalization in higher education has evolved from a marginal and fragmented phenomenon to a central and comprehensive component of higher education policy.⁶ The Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities points out that Catholic colleges and universities have a large number of students studying abroad and frequently host international students, with about 27,600 students studying abroad in 2017–18 and about 38,000 international students enrolled annually.⁷ Nonetheless, Andrés Bernasconi, Hans de Wit, and Daniela Véliz-Calderon drew attention to the reality that “Catholic universities are in a state of flux not only with respect to their internationalization strategies and policies but also, to some extent, in their understandings of what it means to be a Catholic university at home and in the world today.”⁸

In this context I envision the present issue of abortion and reproductive health as an opportunity for Catholic higher education and the Church to renew their commitment to the common good and actualize the mission of universal love. The goal of building a post-*Roe* America is no longer adequate, not least for Catholic colleges and universities. What is needed is a radical orientation toward a fundamental universal communion, precisely given the reality that the powerful intuition of the unity and common destiny of nations has begun to break into our consciousness. Such reorientation—ultimately a contemplation of divine mystery—is an expression of an expansive love of humanity which alone gives meaning to the love of one’s nation, family, and self. The healing of wounds and repair of social divisions constitute not the triumph of one nation’s history over and against another, but the creative transformation of the world as a whole. The issue of abortion and reproductive health challenges us, as a global community, to confront our deepest fears, anxieties, and

of the Cross, *Collected Works*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991), 657–672.

⁶ Hans de Wit, Andrés Bernasconi, Visnja Car, Fiona Hunter, Michael James, and Daniela Véliz, *Identity and Internationalization in Catholic Universities: Exploring Institutional Pathways in Context* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), xii–xiii.

⁷ “About Catholic Higher Ed,” *Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities*, www.accunet.org/Catholic-Higher-Ed-FAQs#International.

⁸ Andrés Bernasconi, Hans de Wit, and Daniela Véliz-Calderón, *Catholic Universities: Identity and Internationalization, A Pilot Project*, CIHE Perspectives, vol. 3 (Chestnut Hill, MA: Boston College Center for International Higher Education, 2016), 6.

desires and offers us an opportunity to grow in the hidden face of our burdened past, imagined future, and often unbearable present. The issue concerns the nature of life, its being and becoming. For this very reason, it is leading us to a better and fuller understanding of the world, as an expression of the One who created it. To be truly realized, reasoned reflection and civil dialogue on the topic must be guided by an ever-maturing faith and absolute openness to truth that embrace the totality of life that is the world. It is a profound personal and moral act in conformity with the pure act of God, who is love and towards whom all things converge.

Catholic higher education plays a crucial role in the formation of persons called to be bearers of such living unity. Deeply indebted to Chinese classical texts, such as *Daxue* and *Xueji*, I am convinced that at the heart of higher education is moral education with virtue, solidarity, and sanctity as its final end. Striving to form a community of life and learning, Catholic colleges and universities must remain open to all that is given, so that by cultivating the moral growth of an individual—any individual—they participate in the creative transformation of the world. **M**

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