



The Congregation of Saint Basil

Basilian Fathers

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ELEMENTS OF THE BASILIAN CONTRIBUTION TO CATHOLIC HIGHER EDUCATION IN NORTH AMERICA

The Basilian contribution to Catholic education, at both the secondary and tertiary levels, has been profoundly impacted by local context. This is particularly true in regards to the universities and colleges that we have served in North America over the last one hundred and sixty years. The history of Catholic higher education in Canada and the United States has evolved according to the respective realities of the Church in both those countries. As a result, Basilians have served within the context of federated and affiliated Catholic universities and colleges in Canada, and within the context of independent and private Catholic universities and colleges in the United States. One cannot speak, therefore, of a single Basilian contribution to Catholic higher education in North America, but one can describe elements observable in these different contexts that tend to be evident in the colleges and universities that have been and are served by our Congregation. No one of these elements is unique to Basilian-sponsored Catholic higher education, but taken together they constitute the outlines of a distinct tradition.

1. Consecrated to the Cause of Truth

The foundational principal of every Basilian-sponsored college or university is that it is distinctively Catholic in identity and mission. According to this principal, we would not speak of a “Basilian” university or college, but of a Catholic university or college sponsored by the Basilian Fathers. With this fundamental premise, the Church’s magisterial teaching on Catholic higher education, particularly the Apostolic Constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, must be the lodestar for students, faculty, and staff as well as for those charged with overseeing governance and policy. Consequently, the defining characteristics of any Basilian-sponsored college or university are (i) the Christian inspiration of individuals and of the community; (ii) reflection upon knowledge in light of the Catholic faith; (iii) fidelity to the Christian message as it comes to us through the Church; and (iv) commitment to service. (ECE 13).

Basilian sponsored colleges and universities educate their students from within the intellectual tradition of St. Thomas Aquinas and Blessed John Henry Newman, grounded in the conviction that religious faith and culture are mutually illuminating. This dialogue between faith and culture has been encouraged in different ways in our Congregation: In Canada, federated and affiliated colleges serve as communities of faith where students can evaluate what they learn in a variety of disciplines throughout the University in the light of Christian humanism. In the U.S., the core curriculum of Catholic philosophy and theology is the indispensable component in guiding students into the integration of human and revealed knowledge. In both cases, Basilians have remained committed to exploring with students how their academic disciplines reveal the encounter between the human and the divine. This exploration is aided by the realization that the most difficult questions we face are often best approached through an interaction between these two levels of knowledge.

Consecrated to the cause of truth, Basilian-sponsored colleges and universities have always attached great importance to teaching the liberal arts with creativity and academic discipline, with accompanying respect for the integrated scholarship of teaching and research. Our Congregation has not been without its share of internationally renowned scholars, and such academic entities as the Pontifical Institute for Medieval Studies and the Centre for Thomistic Studies have earned worldwide recognition in their own right.

2. Intellectual Freedom

In the late nineteenth century, the Basilian Fathers made a fundamental decision that would not only impact our contribution to Catholic higher education, but would actually shape Canadian higher education for the next hundred years and beyond. First through affiliation, and then through federation, the Catholic students of St. Michael’s College would be permitted to matriculate into the avowedly secular University of Toronto. Soon, other Christian colleges in Ontario followed St. Michael’s into federation, and what followed was the development of a form of university polity that is still evident today across Canada.

This decision was motivated by a three-fold conviction which at the time was not without controversy, even within our Congregation: that the faith of Catholic students would be strengthened by the encounter with other worldviews if it was carefully nurtured and protected by Basilian tutors; that the secular University might benefit from the a Catholic influence; and that the

inevitable philosophical and theological differences that would become plain to Catholic students encountering other intellectual traditions would ultimately enhance their undergraduate education. It might be argued that this visionary approach, born out of a peculiarly Canadian outlook, anticipated by a century the teaching of *Ex corde ecclesiae* that the “Catholic University must become more attentive to the cultures of the world of today, and to the various cultural traditions existing within the Church in a way that will promote a continuous and profitable dialogue between the Gospel and modern society.” (ECE 45)

The historic evolution of federated and affiliated Catholic colleges and universities in Canada has had an impact on Basilian higher education on both sides of the border. Basilians teaching at the University of St. Thomas and St. John Fisher College were as conscious as their Canadian-based confrères of the Basilian tradition of encouraging students to critically examine and explore ideas and traditions that might stand in contrast to their own—a tradition of encouraging intellectual freedom—always accompanied by the expectation that they would deepen their understanding and commitment to the truth of any proposition if they understood why it was challenged by other schools of thought. Encouraging students to freely explore different intellectual cultures, while being mentored by professors schooled in Christian wisdom, is entirely consistent with St. Basil’s exhortation to students who sought to explore Hellenistic philosophy and literature in the fourth century: they should “imitate the bees which do not go to every flower neither do they take pollen from wherever they go, but only what is needed. We too, if we are sensible, should benefit from all things relating to our faith and which are connected to the truth, and reject the rest as needless.” (*Address to young men on the right use of Greek Literature*, IV)

3. The Pastoral Welfare of Every Student

In the same way that the Basilian contribution to Catholic higher education has been shaped by local context, so it has been shaped by the diverse and storied personalities of individual Basilians. In many cases, the Basilians who have made the greatest impact on the lives of students have been those who have been able to convey a sincere interest in every dimension of their students’ lives: their intellectual development, to be sure, but an equally sincere interest in their spiritual, social and moral education, as well. At the heart of these relationships is the truth that every student comes to the university with his or her own dreams and aspirations, and with the hope, oftentimes more of an intuitive sense than a well-developed conviction, that these dreams and aspirations might flourish within a Catholic community. The best Basilian educators see each student as an individual with a unique personal history, and will always be interested in how a student’s undergraduate or graduate study is impacted by the circumstances of his or her life. This is a pastoral approach to Catholic higher education, and it occurs most often outside of the lecture hall, wherever students are found on campus, and frequently during meetings with campus ministers or during professors’ office hours. Faculty and staff who serve at Basilian sponsored universities and colleges will cherish these opportunities for mentoring, rarely seeing them as infringements on their valuable time.

4. Educating for Justice

The first work of Basilians in North America involved the education of students marginalized by economic and social circumstances. While initially concerned with the provision of basic secondary education to poor immigrants, it soon became apparent that social inequalities could only be addressed by educating marginalized students to assume roles of responsibility in the professions and in the Church. Consequently, our Congregation has always possessed an awareness of the need to educate the poor, on the one hand; and of the need to educate men and women to bring about justice for the poor, on the other. While we have tended to focus on the former in Latin America and the latter in North America, we can see examples of both in Canada, the U.S., Mexico and Colombia. As a Congregation with an historical dedication to the education of seminarians, and a contemporary mission to broader undergraduate and graduate education, Basilians encourage students to see their careers as vocations to serve the common good while at the same time realizing that higher education is a privilege that brings with it a responsibility to the poor and powerless.

This education for justice in Basilian sponsored colleges and universities in North America tends to focus on three priorities: First, ensuring that students are knowledgeable about the fundamentals of Catholic Social Teaching through revelation, reason, tradition and experience. This occurs through curriculum offerings and through extra-curricular lectures and seminars focussing on critical themes including the sanctity of human life and the dignity of every human person; the call to family, community and participation; rights and responsibilities; peace and the responsibility to protect; the option for the poor and vulnerable; the dignity of workers and the rights of workers; solidarity; and care for God’s creation. Second, promoting community based service learning programs that include community service and guided reflection. And third, ensuring that scholarship and bursary programs focus on the educational needs of the economically and socially disadvantaged.

Wherever Basilians serve today they engage in collaborative ministry, dedicated to teaching, and being taught, goodness, disciple and knowledge.