

Catholic and inclusive – English Catholic universities

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Introduction

This paper discusses how a Catholic university in the early 21st century might develop and implement its mission in a secular climate. The way in which universities develop is strongly influenced by the institutional and cultural environment. This is certainly true of Catholic universities in England. Indeed, the university landscape is somewhat different from that in England even in other parts of the United Kingdom. However, as there are no Catholic universities in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, we will narrow the focus to England.¹ Some of the particular features of the English university system may limit the lessons for other jurisdictions. However, I would suggest that this paper can be a starting point for discussion about the role of Catholic universities in secular societies in a variety of political contexts.

This paper is a reflection, and a starting point for discussion. It is not intended to be strongly rooted in the theoretical literature. There are some obvious allusions to Newman's "The Idea of a University"², but the paper is not intended to be a theoretical academic tract. Some of the specific practical ideas are also context specific – though that does not mean that they are not transferable.

The paper has arisen as a result of significant discussion within St. Mary's University in England about the purpose of a Catholic university. A genuine attempt has been made to move the University in a direction that is authentically Catholic whilst it is inclusive of those who are not Catholics, or, indeed, not believers. The University provides something of great value to non-believers that they could not experience at another institution. Whilst there is certainly a place for Catholic universities that appeal to a narrower range of students who may largely be practising Catholics, we believe that the Catholic Church has something to offer all students, even if they do not realise that the education they are receiving is inspired by the Catholic tradition.

Institutional landscape for university education in England

St. Mary's University, and other similar institutions, are often described as "public"³ universities". This is a misdescription: in England, there are no "public", or state, universities. Universities are private institutions, often with charitable status. Universities in England are regulated and, to some extent, funded by the government. Some universities have a royal charter and others are able to grant degrees by virtue of having taken a series of steps required by the regulator of the university system. Even when it comes to funding, universities are not, in general, funded directly by government. They do receive some funding for research and, in some circumstances, for capital spending or teaching. However, most of their income comes from student

¹ St. Mary's University operates in Scotland but as an English university.

² Newman, J. H. (1959). *The idea of a university*. Garden City, N.Y: Image Books.

³ That is using the word "public" to mean "state" as in the normal US use of the word which itself is problematic. In normal British-English usage, a public institution is not a state institution (for example, as in public schools, public companies and public houses).

fees. These fees are paid to the university and then repaid by the student via a student loan system⁴. Students can attend any regulated institution⁵ and their fees follow the student.

Of course, many English universities have ancient Christian roots. These include Oxford University and the newer, Durham University and King's College, London. However, when it comes to institutions that currently have a clear Christian mission, there are 14 universities in England and one in Wales that are members of the "Cathedrals Group" and that have fully-fledged religious origins and governance.⁶ These universities were established by the Church of England, the Catholic Church or the Methodist Church. Of the 14, three of the Cathedrals Group universities (St. Mary's University in Twickenham, London; Newman University in Birmingham; and Leeds Trinity University) are Catholic and a further one is an inter-denominational university involving both the Church of England and the Catholic Church (Liverpool Hope University). Of the three Catholic universities, St. Mary's University is the oldest and largest.

The English university system combines student autonomy with institutional independence.⁷ It enables students to obtain government-guaranteed loans to attend any institution that is willing to accept them. They can also receive loans for maintenance, implicitly subsidising a decision to leave home to go to university. This, in turn, tends to lead to students seeking a place at what they regard as the "best" university wherever it is in the country. This may be a university which has an environment which matches the student's character. However, in practice, students will often tend to choose the university that is highest up the league tables and which will accept them. League table positions are determined by variables such as success in high school exams, employability, research reputation and spending on staff and infrastructure. Whether a university is a Catholic university is likely to be a relatively minor factor in the decisions taken by most domestic students, though it might be an important factor for some students and in some disciplines. Given that the Catholic hierarchy was not established in England until 1850, and that the first priority was to establish schools and parishes, it is not surprising that Catholic universities in England are relatively young. Indeed, they grew out of the institutions designed to train teachers for the new schools, a programme that did not begin until the 1850s. This means that there is not a tradition of English Catholics attending a Catholic university except for teacher training. This might change over time, especially given the continued waves of migration of Catholics from countries where Catholic universities are more established and given the growth in reputation of Catholic universities.

This all puts Catholic universities in a rather different position in England from their counterparts in other countries. In many traditionally Catholic countries, most universities are funded and controlled by the government but Catholic universities do not receive direct funding. A Catholic university must therefore distinguish itself from its state counterparts in order to attract students who pay full fees. At the same time, the Catholic universities in such countries, are free from government budget

⁴ Some would argue that the student loan system is closer to a graduate tax than a pure loans system.

⁵ There is a slightly different system for higher education institutions that do not have degree awarding powers.

⁶ See: <https://www.cathedralsgroup.ac.uk/>

⁷ See Willetts D. (2017), *A University Education*, Oxford University Press, especially sections one and two.

constraints and bureaucracy. When Catholic universities are competing in this environment, their charism and pastoral care for students can also be a unique selling point. Catholic universities in such systems can develop their distinctive character, but large segments of the population are unable to access them or choose not to because of the cost. It could be argued, though this would require a longer discourse, that the Catholic social teaching principles of solidarity (state-guaranteed loans to pay student fees) and subsidiarity (considerable institutional and student autonomy) are well reflected in the English university system.⁸

It is worth noting in passing that, although there is some opposition to autonomous Catholic schools receiving funding from the state on the same basis as secular schools, there is relatively little opposition to Christian universities being funded in a non-discriminatory way in England. There have been some voices raised.⁹ The arguments of secularists are, however, incoherent and misunderstand the whole university landscape. Universities in England are diverse and independent. To argue that Catholic universities should not receive state funding is, in effect, to suggest that a student in receipt of a government loan should be able to enrol at any university other than one that has a Catholic foundation and governance. The student could enrol at an arts university, a university of political economy (such as the London School of Economics), a secular university, but not a Catholic university. The state would be discriminating against Catholic universities in such a way that would have no parallel within our higher education system. As the regulator puts it: A university needs to “demonstrate to us that it meets threshold requirements relating to teaching quality, student protection, student support, financial sustainability, sound governance and management, and more.”¹⁰ It would be strange to add “and not be Catholic” to this list of conditions!

Given this context, it is not surprising that a high proportion of students at St. Mary’s University are not Catholic. Students come to the University for a variety of reasons. Some may come because they are Catholic, but many will be attracted to St. Mary’s University because it is the best institution they can access for the subject they wish to study. At the same time, any Catholic who wishes to attend St. Mary’s University from within the United Kingdom, should not face a funding barrier. Funding is offered by the state on exactly the same basis as for all other universities.

St. Mary’s as an institution

There are a number of similarities between the histories of the universities that make up the Cathedrals Group, though St. Mary’s University is by far the oldest of the three Catholic universities. St. Mary’s was founded in 1850 to train teachers to work in schools established by the Catholic Poor Schools Committee.¹¹ The schools that were being established across London educated the growing number of Catholics, many of whom were destitute refugees from the famine in Ireland. The concept of what we now

⁸ Catholic social teaching makes a similar argument when it comes to schooling (see *Gravissimum educationis*, especially paragraph 6).

⁹ See: <https://www.secularism.org.uk/opinion/2021/06/the-expansion-of-catholic-influence-at-st-marys-university-threatens-academic-freedom>

¹⁰ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/9edafae6-d307-4545-b520-87373e441bcf/registration-media-explainer-july-2018.pdf>

¹¹ See Bogle J. (2020), *Simmaries – The History of St. Mary’s University Twickenham*, Gracewing.

call “inclusion” has been part of St. Mary’s mission from the start. Students have been able to study for degrees at St. Mary’s since 1975. St. Mary’s then gradually evolved and expanded the number of degree courses it offered until, in 2006, it was given the power to award its own degrees. It now has a very wide portfolio of degree subjects at undergraduate and postgraduate level and a large number of partnerships with other Catholic and with non-Catholic universities. In 2014, St. Mary’s was granted full university status and, in 2021, given the power to award research degrees thus becoming, in every respect, a fully-fledged and independent university.

As noted above, the University is regulated by the government and receives students who are in receipt of government finance, but it is an independent institution. The University is established as a Catholic university and this is reflected in its governance¹². The Vice Chancellor of the University has to be a practising Catholic and the Archbishop of Westminster and the Catholic Education Service of England and Wales play a particular role in the governance of the University. The chair of governors is required to be a bishop.

The objects of the University are:

- To advance education, in such manner as befits a Catholic foundation, by: the provision, development and conduct of a Catholic institution of higher education
- The provision of training and continuing professional development for teachers in both religious and secular schools, with special provision for those intending to teach in Catholic and other Christian schools

As well as long-standing work in Catholic teacher training St. Mary’s University serves the Church by providing education to those in ordained ministry or in the process of formation. In some cases, this education will be informal (for example, priests may choose to undertake PhD study). However, we also have a number of formal activities in this area. These include the Mater Ecclesiae College in which 40 students are enrolled studying for a dual award (pontifical and secular) and are preparing for the priesthood or for entry to a religious congregation.

Because of its history and the institutional context described above, the student body at St. Mary’s University is diverse. The proportion of Catholics is probably between 15 and 20 per cent – somewhat above the proportion of Catholics in the population of England and a little above that in the population of London. We do not know how many students come to St. Mary’s because it is a Catholic university or because it teaches subjects that it would not teach if it were not a Catholic university. Whilst we do not have reliable data for staff either, we believe that the proportion of Catholics is, again, somewhat above that in England as a whole. If St. Mary’s were not an inclusive university, it would not be anything like the size it is – it would be a different type of institution. At the same time, we would contend that, if St. Mary’s were not a Catholic university, it would not provide the same quality and character of education to its diverse student body. Whether students are fully aware of it or not, St. Mary’s Catholic mission infuses what we offer to students.

¹² See the articles of association of St. Mary’s University: www.stmarys.ac.uk/about/corporate-information/docs/2016-sep-articles-of-association.pdf

How do the Catholic and Anglican Christian denominations understand a Christian university education?

Because St. Mary's is a Catholic university, its identity and academic strategy is shaped by the principles that are laid down by the Catholic Church. Also interesting, and relevant in the English context, is a paper that the Anglican universities within the Cathedrals group have developed on the character of Anglican Christian universities.¹³ The Catholic Church in England and Wales has not, as yet, published a similar paper, though there is guidance from the Vatican, of course.

At the launch of "Global Compact on Education" in May 2020, Pope Francis outlined some of his thinking. The Compact was especially pertinent for an inclusive Catholic university because he was addressing all people of goodwill, not just Catholics:

This meeting will rekindle our dedication for and with young people, renewing our passion for a more open and inclusive education, including patient listening, constructive dialogue and better mutual understanding. Never before has there been such need to unite our efforts in a broad educational alliance, to form mature individuals capable of overcoming division and antagonism, and to restore the fabric of relationships for the sake of a more fraternal humanity.¹⁴

The global compact asks us to ensure that the human person is placed at the centre of education and that we educate our students to be of service to others. This is illustrated by a specific Biblical example. Pope Francis stated that educating our students should involve:

bending over those in need and stretching out a hand to them, without calculation, without fear, but with tenderness and understanding, just as Jesus knelt to wash the Apostles' feet. Serving means working beside the neediest of people, establishing with them first and foremost human relationships of closeness and bonds of solidarity.

These statements are especially helpful for a university which has a Catholic mission in a secular society and which has a particular mission to include students who may not otherwise be able to access university. The students, and their development and formation, should be the focus of the university.

The academic mission of the University also reflects *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*¹⁵, published in 1990 by Pope St. John Paul II. This states the origin and purpose of the University at the very beginning:

Born from the heart of the Church, a Catholic University is located in that course of tradition which may be traced back to the very origin of the University as an institution. It has always been recognized as an incomparable centre of

¹³ *Faith in Higher Education – A Church of England, Vision*, The Church of England Education Office, 2017: https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/10929%C3%A2%C2%80%C2%A2Faith%20in%20Higher%20Education%20Report_Web.pdf

¹⁴ <https://www.educationglobalcompact.org/en/the-invite-of-pope-francis/>

¹⁵ https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_15081990_ex-corde-ecclesiae.html

creativity and dissemination of knowledge for the good of humanity. By vocation, the *Universitas magistrorum et scholarium* is dedicated to research, to teaching and to the education of students who freely associate with their teachers in a common love of knowledge.

Of course, few universities would do other than claim that they agree with these sentiments (after the first few words). However, the document continues (7):

a Catholic University is called in a particular way to respond to this need: its Christian inspiration enables it to include the moral, spiritual and religious dimension in its research, and to evaluate the attainments of science and technology in the perspective of the totality of the human person.

The same would apply to teaching of course and, in a university with an applied focus, by developing such a philosophy in teaching, we can prepare students for the world of work.

Ex Corde Ecclesiae goes on to say:

In a word, being both a University and Catholic, it must be both a community of scholars representing various branches of human knowledge, and an academic institution in which Catholicism is vitally present and operative. (14)

Ex Corde Ecclesiae also stresses the importance of inter-disciplinarity:

While each discipline is taught systematically and according to its own methods, interdisciplinary studies, assisted by a careful and thorough study of philosophy and theology, enable students to acquire an organic vision of reality and to develop a continuing desire for intellectual progress. (20)

We could perhaps sum up this philosophy as follows. The Church believes that all knowledge comes from a single source and should be understood as a unified whole. This means that the light of faith has *something* to add to all disciplines. However, the integrity of different disciplines should be recognised and the mission of the Church in the world benefits from excellence in all academic and vocational areas of education, each of which has something special and distinctive to contribute to the whole.

One example of this approach is given in the Vatican 2018 letter *Oeconomicae et pecuniariae quaestiones (Considerations for an ethical discernment regarding some aspects of the present economic-financial system)*¹⁶ in which it was stated:

In this regard, it is particularly desirable that institutions such as universities and business schools both foresee and provide, as a fundamental and not merely supplementary element of their curricula of studies, a formational dimension that educates the students to understand economics and finance in the light of a vision of the totality of the human person and avoids a reductionism that sees

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https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20180106_oeconomicae-et-pecuniariae_en.html

only some dimensions of the person. An ethics is needed to design such formation (sic). (10)¹⁷

As is noted above, the Anglican Church has produced *Faith in Higher Education – a Church of England Vision*. This goes more deeply into the practical implications of being a Christian university in an English context than any Catholic document that is available, though with a different theological emphasis. Some of the points in that document are worth noting. The document describes the nature of knowledge and the virtues that are required for acquiring knowledge properly understood:

Higher education is about seeking and celebrating wisdom, which is multifaceted knowledge pursued and used well. This requires the development of character, of personal and institutional virtues such as self-discipline, honesty, humility, respect for evidence and for the understanding of others.

In a statement that seems compatible with Pope Francis's talk at the launch of the Global Compact, the Anglican document noted that:

Institutions of higher education should therefore be communities which are deeply humane. Humane not only in their concern for all aspects of human wellbeing, but humane in their treatment of each person distinctively involved in the common enterprise. They will recognise that we are not mere 'brains in vats', but embodied souls with physical and spiritual needs.

In a world in which we seem to have forgotten how to debate and argue with respect, it is suggested that:

Far from being oppressive, this optimistic theocentrism means that higher education should value contestation within and between disciplines, since there is something worth arguing about. It also means that academics can offer genuine expertise with humble confidence.

St. Mary's University remains one of the smallest universities in England; the other Catholic universities are even smaller. Whilst there is pressure on all universities to grow in order to take advantages of economies of scale, *Faith in Higher Education*, suggests an anthropological reason why we might resist this process:

Embodied beings are only capable of close relationships with a limited number of people. Because the quality of a community will depend on the frequency, length and nature of the interactions which take place within it, there are natural limits to the size and stability of real communities. Higher education institutions should take seriously our natural limits as persons called for a particular time to a particular place. This has wide-ranging implications for administrative organisation, and physical and virtual infrastructure. Units and programmes of study and research, and expectations of staff and students should all contribute towards sustaining community.

¹⁷ See, Booth, P. M. (2020), Ethics in Economics: Lessons and Themes for Further Development from *Oeconomicae et pecuniariae quaestiones*. *Journal of Catholic Social Thought*, 17 (2). for a discussion of this document, including its educational aspects applied to business teaching.

This can be a hard message to apply if, in practice, there is a trade-off between size and profitability and, therefore, between size and funds for investment in campus infrastructure. But the reality of the limitations of our God-given human nature do provide an anthropological justification for a university to remain small if it is to be a genuine community.¹⁸

How does St. Mary's express its own mission as a Catholic university?

St. Mary's University draws on the various publications discussed above to express its own vision of how it can promote the Church's mission through higher education. This is done through various documents which have a different purpose and standing. These documents have been discussed widely within the University. The purpose of this section is not to suggest an ideal nor to promote the specific approach of St. Mary's University. It is designed to demonstrate how a Catholic university operating in a broadly secular culture with a diverse student base might express its mission.

The Catholic mission of the University and its relationship to teaching and learning were expressed in a document published in 2016 called "Vision 2025". Specifically, it was stated:

[The Mission] derives from the philosophy of Blessed John Henry, Cardinal Newman, the architect of the modern understanding of a university. His idea of a university was built on inter-disciplinary education, virtues and values, with an emphasis on the formation of each individual enriched by insights from the Catholic intellectual tradition. This ethos will continue to be built into our curriculum, our style of teaching and our approach to learning which will emphasise student engagement and participation more than formal lectures.¹⁹

This paragraph reflects many of the points made in the above sections. In the English institutional environment, any Catholic university is likely to be a diverse community. At the same time, a Catholic university should have a distinctive approach to education that is widely respected and regarded as important by people who are not Catholics within the university community. Following the financial crisis, for example, there was much criticism of the "siloing" of disciplines and the absence of ethics and values in business education²⁰. The same is true in discussions of education in the area of healthcare.

Also, in Vision 2025, there were more specific statements about how St. Mary's University sees the development of the student experience:

- We want to create the best possible conditions for our students and staff to develop into independent problem solvers and ethical leaders.

¹⁸ It happens that St. Mary's University has some of the highest student satisfaction ratings in the country. This could be because of its size, because it genuinely does emphasise those characteristics discussed in the documents mentioned in this section or for other reasons. However, it is a fact worth noting.

¹⁹ Vision 2025 is no longer available on the University website.

²⁰ See footnotes 15 and 16.

- [Students] will demonstrate St Mary's values in their daily lives, generously caring for and contributing to the community, and bringing an ethical approach to all that they do.
- We will deliver this through a distinctive St Mary's approach that develops a broad and balanced education embracing formation of the whole character.

St. Mary's University has also adopted the four values of: generosity of spirit, respect, excellence and inclusiveness which are designed to be expressed in language that can be accepted by people of any or no faith. The University expects those values to be reflected in the behaviour of all staff and students. These values reflect the fact that the University wants all students and staff to benefit from its Catholic mission but in a way that does not assume that they are Catholic, Christian or, indeed, believers.

The University's Curriculum Framework is related to Vision 2025 at several points and indicates the qualities that we would like to see in our graduates. The Curriculum Framework provides a template which all undergraduate degrees are expected to follow. The Curriculum Framework states:

A central message of Newman's Idea of a University, is that the 'soul' of a University can be measured in the mark it leaves on its students, and that universities can develop students in ways that go beyond the limits of academic ability. In other words, they can influence or 'shape' the character and values of students through inclusive ideals and practices. If, as Newman argued, the soul of a University can be seen in the mark it leaves on its students, it is important that we share, as a community, a common understanding of the 'mark' St Mary's should have on its students – in terms of the 'qualities' we wish our students to acquire and demonstrate after leaving us.

The qualities mentioned in the Framework are: empathy; courage; generosity; curiosity; humility; and inclusivity. These can be linked to the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude. The cardinal virtues play an important role in Catholic thinking in that they are accessible by the intellect alone, including by people of no faith. They are a suitable focus for a Catholic university working in a relatively secular environment. These virtues and values, whilst being linked to intellectual pursuits, are important for leadership and the development of character more generally. It is therefore appropriate that they are developed in a Catholic university. They would also seem to be closely aligned to Pope Francis's thinking expressed in the Global Compact on Education whilst being compatible with the other Church documents that have been discussed.

Vision 2030 deals with the mission more briefly than Vision 2025. Once again it refers to Newman's idea of a University: "Our aims in Vision 2030 are an expression of our Catholic ethos and, in particular, St. John Henry Newman's idea that higher education should be about developing the whole person and that all knowledge is interconnected."²¹ Again, this is a commitment to student-centred learning and a recognition of the coherence of knowledge which, according to Catholic beliefs, comes from one source. Vision 2030 also restates our mission as: "an inclusive Catholic

²¹ *Our Vision 2030 – The Future of St. Mary's*, St. Mary's University, 2021, page 1.

university seeking to develop the whole person and empower our community to have a positive impact on the world”.²²

Whilst the University is inclusive, the Catholic mission provides a point of difference from other universities. As in much of the Catholic education sector, inside and outside the UK, there is no contradiction between being inclusive and being distinctive. The distinctive Catholic view of higher education may mark St. Mary’s University as being different from a sector where utilitarian values are often paramount. However, it is an ancient perspective which is widely respected, including by people of no faith. As Vision 2030 puts it: “Rooted in our Catholic Foundation, with the value of the human person at its heart, our values set us apart, shape our behaviour and inform all our decisions in a university that responds to the demands of today.”²³

In terms of its articulation of the practical aspirations of the University, Vision 2030 commits the University to ensure that “each student, whatever their background, can achieve their potential”²⁴ and that we “make sure that students themselves help shape life at St Mary’s...Ensuring [that] students are partners in all we do” and that: “Students will be encouraged to participate fully in University life.”²⁵ These resonate with the Catholic Church’s own teaching, as well as with the Anglican document on higher education discussed above in areas such as ensuring free association between teachers and students and the focus of a university education being the student.

The mission and the curriculum – some examples

There are a number of ways in which the special character and mission of St. Mary’s University, operating in its particular institutional context, are already reflected in the curriculum, programme provision and research. The mission is also reflected in an extensive programme of public events, often with Catholic charities, think tanks or dioceses as well as with other faith groups. The University offers Masters programmes in Catholic School Leadership; Catholic Social Teaching; Theology; and Bio-ethics and Medical Law alongside programmes that are not so explicitly faith-based but are very much connected to the social mission of the Church – such as Masters programmes in Human Trafficking, Migration and Organised Crime; and in Education, International Development and Social Justice. There are also modules that involve the teaching business ethics in a virtue ethics framework as well as a wide range of partnerships with leading Catholic universities. Recently, the Mater Ecclesiae College has been established which teaches and confers pontifical degrees.

These programmes and activities are designed to be of service to particular groups of students or “stakeholders” in the University or, especially in the case of research, they are the kind of activities that ought to take place within any Catholic university. However, a theme of this article is the institutional context which leads English Catholic universities to be diverse communities. An important challenge, for the English Catholic university is how to promote something of the Catholic ethos in the wider

²² *Vision 2030*, page 6.

²³ *Vision 2030*, page 9.

²⁴ *Vision 2030*, page 12.

²⁵ *Vision 2030*, pages 12 and 13.

curriculum that is studied by a diverse student body. In designing those aspects of the curriculum, two premises are assumed. The first is that, even if those attending our programmes do not fully appreciate the reasons, the Catholic approach to education has something to offer everybody – Catholics, non-Catholic Christians, non-Christian believers and non-believers. Secondly, following the Catholic way of thinking about education, all knowledge comes from God and therefore coheres.

The paper will finish with three examples of curriculum development which are designed to implement our philosophy in such a way that all students are able to benefit from higher learning within a Catholic institution.

The undergraduate curriculum framework requires that all students are able to study a module in *Responsible Leadership in the 21st Century*. The focus of the module is the development of character and the exercise of the virtues. It is, by nature, an inter-disciplinary module and has the objective of equipping “students with basic aptitudes for understanding responsible leadership and the tools available for their development into being responsible leaders”. The specification states that the module “draws on sources and developments rooted in the Catholic tradition, in a way which will be of relevance to any St Mary’s student, inclusive of all backgrounds”.

The curriculum framework also offers students the option to take a module titled: *An Inter-disciplinary Encounter with the Sacred*. This module provides an understanding of the fundamentals of different disciplines and explores the presence of the divine in those disciplines. The module aims include the promotion of an inter-disciplinary understanding of knowledge. Students are therefore encouraged to explore key principles in disciplines other than their own and to create connections between the disciplines. This enables students to deepen their understanding of how knowledge coheres, ultimately coming from God. The subjects studied include architecture, art, bioethics, ecology, economics and business, mathematics, music physics, politics, psychology, and spirituality and religion.

Thirdly, the University is embedding “service learning” into its curriculum following the lead of many other Catholic universities. There is an academic literature on service learning that relates it to Catholic social thought and Catholic educational practice, though it is, of course, practised outside the Catholic sphere.²⁶

Service learning involves students undertaking some form of voluntary activity and relating this to a programme of study, assessment and learning outcomes. The description of service learning cited in Lavery and Hackett (2008, page 1), which also has an excellent discussion of the idea in the context of Catholic social teaching documents, is especially helpful: “Service-learning is a teaching method which

²⁶ See, for example, Brigham, Erin, “See, Judge, Act: Catholic Social Teaching and Service Learning” (2018). *2018 USF Faculty and Staff Books*. 8. https://repository.usfca.edu/faculty_books_2018/8. Tian, Q., & Noel, T. (2020). Service-Learning in Catholic Higher Education and Alternative Approaches Facing the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 23 (1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.2302142020> and Lavery, S. D., & Hackett, C. (2008). Christian service learning in Catholic schools. *Journal of Religious Education*, 56 (3), 18-24.

combines community service with academic instruction as it focuses on critical, reflective thinking and civic responsibility. Service-learning programs involve students in organised community service that addresses local needs, whilst developing their academic skills, sense of civic responsibility and commitment to the community". It might be added that service learning should relate the voluntary activity to the taught modules of the programme. Service learning should also help students grow spiritually and help students who are not believers have a glimpse of the social mission of the Catholic Church, perhaps helping them to understand the Church better.

Service learning is the kind of activity that should be done within a Catholic university, but it also should have wide appeal to all people of goodwill. There are no other universities in the UK, of which we are aware, that currently explicitly promote service learning in a coherent and consistent fashion.

As part of the development of service learning, the University has recently launched an MA in Social Justice and Public Service. One-third of the credits on this degree are available for a substantial service-learning component that involves 150 hours of service for a UK charity. The module is being adapted for and adopted on a number of other masters programmes, including the MA in Education, International Development and Social Justice; MA in Catholic Social Teaching; MA in Charity Management; and MA in Bioethics and Medical Law. Students on many of these programmes will already be undertaking community service and a service-learning module will be more suitable for them than a traditional research dissertation.

Conclusion

Catholic universities across the world are embedded in different cultural contexts as well as in different public-policy environments. In the UK, our Catholic universities have developed in relatively recent times because of the focus of the Church on basic education and the development of parishes following emancipation. At the same time, they have the benefit of a non-discriminatory environment when it comes to funding. All sources of government funding, much of it directed through students, that are available to students of other universities are also available to students of Catholic universities in Britain. Catholic universities are part of a pluralistic system of independent higher education institutions.

This combination of circumstances has led to a situation where Catholic universities have a distinct mission but where they also have a diverse student body. St. Mary's University (the author's experience of which is the focus of this article) has many teaching and research programmes that promote its Catholic mission explicitly and effectively. These include the Mater Ecclesiae College which has Pontifical degree awarding powers. However, the University has also developed an approach which allows it to offer something of the Catholic vision of education to a wider student body most of whom are not Catholic, and many of whom follow no religion at all. The University does that particularly through the way in which it teaches business ethics, through service learning and through the development of modules that give students the opportunity to understand the coherence of all knowledge. This is all very much in the spirit of the Global Compact on Education promoted by Pope Francis.