

Excerpted from: *The Catholic Intellectual Tradition: A Conversation at Boston College*

*A 2,000-year-long conversation*

For Christians, the dialogue between faith and culture is as old as their earliest efforts to articulate what it means to be a distinctive faith community. The first Christians—drawn together by their faith in the uniqueness and universal significance of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth—were members of Jewish communities living in a Roman political system and influenced by a linguistic and intellectual culture that was largely Greek in origin. As the Christian “way” moved beyond these Jewish communities, attracted Gentile converts, and spread across the Roman world and beyond, a Christian intellectual tradition or, better, a constellation of traditions developed, which were the product of a continuous dialogue between faith and cultures. With the fragmentation of the Christian churches, especially in the 15th and 16th centuries, the Catholic intellectual tradition in the West developed its own characteristics. Since the medieval period, one of its principal venues has been the university, which arose “*ex corde ecclesiae*,” from the heart of the Church.

This dialogue between faith and culture reflects two essential characteristics of the Christian, and especially the Catholic, understanding of human experience: faith necessarily seeks understanding, and all intellectual inquiry leads eventually to questions of ultimacy that invite faith responses. Thus, reason has been intrinsic to the life of the Catholic Church, which sees the search for truth as a manifestation of the Creator: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...all was created through the Word” (John 1:1 and 3). The Greek for “word”—*logos*—has a second meaning: reason. For the Catholic, thinking is part of believing, and the Catholic view sees no conflict among faith, knowledge, and reason; it looks to how they illuminate one another.