

On being a Catholic university in contemporary Papua New Guinea

Abstract

Divine Word University (DWU), as the only Catholic university in Papua New Guinea, contributes uniquely to the Church's higher education mission. Informed by Pope St John Paul II's *Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities*, this paper examines how DWU distinguishes itself as a Catholic university and, in particular, as an expression of the Divine Word charism in the PNG context.

Keywords: Catholic identity, cultural mission, Divine Word University, Papua New Guinea

Introduction

Since the Middle Ages, universities have been integral to the educational mission of the Church. The first European universities were founded by the Church or, as encapsulated by Pope St John Paul II, "born from the heart of the Church" (John Paul II, 1990, n. 1). Now spread across the globe, Catholic universities enrich and make a significant contribution to higher education by being a Christian presence in the sector and, in many instances, opening up university studies to disadvantaged communities.

Divine Word University (DWU), as the only Catholic university in Papua New Guinea (PNG), contributes uniquely to the Church's higher education mission. This paper gives consideration to how DWU distinguishes itself as a Catholic university and, in particular, as an expression of the Divine Word charism in the PNG context.

The essential characteristics of a Catholic university

Pope St John Paul II, who spent part of his priestly ministry at the Catholic University of Lublin in Poland, published a definitive work on Catholic universities, *The Apostolic Constitution of the Supreme Pontiff on Catholic Universities*, in 1990 (John Paul II, 1990). The Apostolic Constitution defines the "essential characteristics" of a Catholic university as:

- Christian inspiration of both individuals and the university community
- reflection upon and, by research, contributing to human knowledge, in light of the Catholic tradition
- faithfulness to the Christian message
- commitment to serving the community.

(John Paul II, 1990, n. 13)

Thus, to the common tasks of higher education, namely teaching, research and service, a Catholic university brings "the inspiration and light of the *Christian*

message” (John Paul II, 1990, n. 14). Elaborating on the nature of a Catholic university, Pope St John Paul II identifies several key elements.

A Catholic university will:

- be “a community of scholars representing various branches of human knowledge”, including theology
- dedicate itself to research, teaching and service “in accordance with its cultural mission”
- undertake its activities informed by “Catholic ideals, principles and attitudes”
- be “linked with the Church ... by reason of an institutional commitment” made by its sponsors
- express its Catholic identity in a mission statement and also in “its structure and its regulations”
- act consistently with its Catholic identity “while the freedom of conscience of each person is to be fully respected”
- have “the autonomy necessary to develop its distinctive identity and pursue its proper mission”
- ensure academic freedom “in research and teaching ... so long as the rights of the individual and of the community are preserved”.

(John Paul II, 1990, Article 2)

The following section profiles DWU against the critical elements for a Catholic university, as specified above.¹

The Catholic identity of Divine Word University

Divine Word University (DWU) was founded and is conducted by the Papua New Guinea Province of the Society of the Divine Word in partnership with the Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit. Through these congregations, DWU establishes its formal relationship with the Catholic Church. DWU was recognised as a “private Catholic university” by the Government of Papua New Guinea in 1996.²

The institution has proclaimed its purpose as: “The mission of the Divine Word University is value-based quality learning and teaching, research and community engagement in a Christian environment”. Significantly, DWU defines the acquisition of knowledge as “the mission of research”, the transmission of knowledge as “the mission of teaching” and the application of knowledge as the “mission of public service” (DWU, 2018, About DWU).

¹ The author has undertaken jointly a similar analysis for Australian Catholic University; see Carpenter, P. G. & McMullen, G. L. (2005). “Born from the heart of the Church”: Implementing the *Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities* at Australian Catholic University. *The Australasian Catholic Record*, 82(4), 409-420.

² Decision of the PNG Government’s National Executive Council on 21 August 1996 (NEC Decision No. 134/96, Meeting No. 34/96).

The University also states:

DWU offers its educational services to those interested in improving themselves intellectually and spiritually so they can become responsible citizens and positively contribute to the development of society. DWU's philosophy of education is rooted in the Catholic tradition and well-articulated in the University Charter.

(DWU, 2018, About DWU and DWU Charter)

The DWU governing body, ensuring its autonomy, is the University Council which consists of twelve external members and the President of the University. The Council is charged with ensuring that the University realises its objectives which, in a proposed revision of the DWU Act, have been defined as “the provision of university education within the context of the Christian faith, Catholic values and the University Charter” and “the provision of an excellent standard of scholarship and research; learning and teaching; globally competitive professionals and industry-ready graduates; new knowledge and technologies for the improvement of the quality of life; and pastoral care for its students and engagement with its community”.³

The Catholic identity of the University is evident in “its structures and its regulations” – for example, this commitment is seen in:

- DWU's core values of academic excellence, community engagement/service, diversity, hospitality, integrity, learning for life, respect and social responsibility
- its outreach through five campuses located throughout the country in Madang, Port Moresby, Rabaul, Tabubil and Wewak
- the University's openness “to everyone, regardless of race, creed, colour or gender, who shares its vision to serve society through its teaching and research in a Christian environment (DWU, 2018, About DWU)
- areas of study “selected for their long-term benefit to Papua New Guinea” and where “Christian ethical values and individual growth are integral to the courses” (DWU, 2018, About DWU)
- the work of the Student Services department which is focused on “developing a holistic person with sound moral and ethical values by ensuring that students' physical, social and spiritual lives and experiences are enhanced” (DWU, 2018, Student Services)
- members of the founding congregations participating in the life and governance of the University
- the liturgical life of the University and opportunities for student and staff formation
- staff appointment, performance and promotions policies reflecting DWU's values.

³ Objectives and Functions of the University in the proposed revisions to the DWU Act of Parliament, as agreed at the March 2016 meeting of the DWU Council.

DWU has Faculties of Arts and Social Sciences, Business and Informatics, Education, and Medical and Health Sciences, encompassing the various branches of knowledge, including theology. Scholars in these disciplines engage in teaching and learning, including flexible learning enabling remote students to access higher education. The University is developing its profile in both research and community engagement. It is committed to academic freedom and the common good. Its Charter emphasises “freedom of inquiry as indispensable for attaining truth ... [and] respect for truth as the primary concern of the academic community” (DWU, 2018, DWU Charter).

The above consideration of the nature of DWU against the necessary elements for a Catholic university indicates that Divine Word University has a demonstrable Catholic identity. Further, in line with its commitment to become a first-rate Catholic university, DWU continues to review and refine its development as a “vibrant Christian intellectual community” and as a national higher education provider of excellence in PNG (DWU, 2018, About DWU).

In moving now to consider DWU’s “cultural mission” (John Paul II, 1990, Article 2), this would seem to have two key dimensions, namely its Divine Word focus and the PNG context. These overlays are considered in turn below.

Realising the Divine Word charism

The founders of the University, the PNG Province of the Society of the Divine Word in partnership with the Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit, dedicated the institution to the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity – the Divine Word. The Society of the Divine Word (SVD) General Chapter of 2000 states:

Our characteristic dimensions invite us to deepen our experience of the Divine Word in multiple ways. We get to know the Biblical Word whose story is told in scriptures. We proclaim the Animating Word who calls everyone to share in mission. We commit ourselves to the Prophetic Word who announces peace, justice and the transformation of all creation. We share the Communicating Word who seeks only to be poured out in self-giving love.

(SVD, 2018, p. 5)

How is this defining charism (i.e. the Divine Word gift to the Church and the world) enacted in the ministry of Divine Word University?

The name of the congregation, the Society of the Divine Word, as articulated by its founder, St Arnold Janssen SVD, and similarly the name of the University, commits them to continuing the mission of Jesus, the Divine Word. In DWU, the mission of Jesus has a university. The members of the University must discern and realise his mission for higher education in contemporary PNG (SVD, 2018, p. 25). The DWU Charter, written in 1977, established the Divine Word-inspired education philosophy of this University (DWU, 2018, DWU Charter).

In its particular articulation of the Divine Word charism, the DWU mission focuses on “dialogue and partnership ... in the life and work of the University”, learning and teaching and research excellence, “harnessing the power of information and communication technologies for knowledge creation, knowledge sharing and for sustainable development practices”, and “the development of moral and ethical behaviour in public, private and professional life based on Christian values” (DWU, 2018, President’s Desk). In this regard it brings a Christian perspective to the common tasks of contemporary higher education.

In the words of DWU President Professor Cecilia Nembou, DWU seeks to be:

an academic community in search of truth, with a religiously oriented and socially conscious environment as the setting for the learning experience. It draws on the charism of St Arnold Janssen SVD, in its emphasis on mission, service and growing together in faith and learning. DWU serves the nation by placing emphasis on the spirituality of work, self-reliance and service. DWU aims at full and inclusive human development.

(DWU, 2018, President’s Desk)

Importantly, the lay collaborators of the founding congregations must continue to be assisted to understand and animate the Divine Word charism in their roles of governance, leadership, teaching, research and service. Similarly, this charism should inform the holistic development of each generation of DWU students. The charism is most likely to influence students when they experience its dynamism modelled by staff. Ultimately, the impact of the charism will be DWU graduates bringing its essence into their personal and professional lives.

Realising the mission in contemporary PNG

Mission defines the area of legitimate operation for an institution and a mission statement expresses why the entity has been created. In the case of the Church, mission pertains to a particular work or works undertaken by a Catholic agency as a ministry of the Church. For DWU, this is the ministry of Catholic higher education in PNG.

In articulating a Catholic university’s mission of service, the Apostolic Constitution states:

Every Catholic University feels responsible to contribute concretely to the progress of the society within which it works: for example it will be capable of searching for ways to make university education accessible to all those who are able to benefit from it, especially the poor or members of minority groups who customarily have been deprived of it. A Catholic University also has the responsibility, to the degree that it is able, to help to promote the development of the emerging nations.

(John Paul II, 1990, n. 34)

How does DWU “contribute concretely” to PNG’s progress?

The University has set itself a major goal, namely to “be an authentic model for national unity in Papua New Guinea because the Christian philosophy that all ... are equal as sons and daughters of God is, perhaps, the only philosophy which can unite the diverse cultures of Papua New Guinea” (DWU, 2018, DWU Charter). Significantly, as articulated in the *Constitution of the Independent State of Papua New Guinea*, PNG identifies itself as a Christian country: “We, the People of Papua New Guinea ... pledge ourselves to guard and pass on to those who come after us our noble traditions and the Christian principles that are ours now”.

Aligning these shared Christian principles, the DWU Charter states:

As a Christian institution, it shall serve national objectives simultaneously with Church purposes. The Church's broad philosophy of education, based on its broad view of the nature of man, causes the Church's expectations of the institution to cater to the total human development of every individual involved with the institute. No conflict is seen between national goals and church expectations.

(DWU, 2018, DWU Charter)

As noted above, DWU was established in 1996 under an Act of the National Parliament. In relation to the University’s national role, the DWU Act requires it “to provide facilities for higher education throughout Papua New Guinea” including by the provision of teaching, learning and research resources, onshore and offshore collaborations with strategic educational partners, and student and staff interchange (DWU, 2018, DWU Act).

Towards its national capacity-building role, the DWU Charter states that students will “learn what real freedom is, and the responsibilities that follow along with real freedom ... [and] to respect the beliefs and values of their fellow students”. The University will be “open to all who have an interest in what it is doing. It is open to government officials as well as church officials, to parents of the students, to local community leaders. It is open to cultural values and to national values. It is open to Papua New Guinea cultures”. In particular, it is committed to providing educational opportunities to women. Further, its curriculum will include “all those aspects of Papua New Guinea culture which Christ Himself would value, support and enrich ... it will be very adaptable to the needs of the people. It will serve the country through its relevance”. DWU seeks to place in PNG society graduates steeped in the “Christian way of life [which] puts emphasis on the value of work, on self-reliance and on service” (DWU, 2018, DWU Charter) and “who will make a personal positive contribution to the growth of a nation” (DWU, 2018, About DWU).

The University recognises the pluralistic nature of PNG society with its “many sub-cultures, a variety of races and a variety of religions”. DWU’s Charter highlights that this calls for “a pluralism in [PNG’s] educational institutions” and DWU serves the nation by diversifying higher education options (DWU, 2018, DWU Charter).

In the various ways articulated above in relation to its “cultural mission” in PNG, DWU is responding actively to Pope St John Paul II’s challenge “to become an ever more effective instrument of cultural progress for individuals as well as for society” (John Paul II, 1990, n. 32). Its achievements in this regard were recognised in DWU’s 2018 Quality Assessment by the Department of Higher Education, Research, Science and Technology.

For example, the Quality Assessment report noted that:

- “the choice of academic disciplines critical to the nation’s future, coupled with a strong commitment to the ethical transformation of its students, makes it clear that DWU is consciously progressing its mission in the service of PNG”
- “the institution works hard to minimise its cost to students in order to deliver on its mission to make tertiary education as freely available as possible”
- “the Panel commends the University for its friendly and supportive campus environment, its commitment to service, having an integrity of purpose, and its ‘can-do’ attitude in its approach to delivering higher education within PNG”.

(DHERST, 2018, pp. 13, 18 and 30, respectively)

Conclusion

In a reflection on the University of Notre Dame Australia in 2015, then Vice-Chancellor Professor Celia Hammond emphasised that “being a ‘Catholic university’ will never be a completed project” (Hammond, 2015). Thus, in the context of contemporary PNG, DWU must continue to strive for excellence, responding prophetically to the “the signs of the times”, “interpreting them in the light of the Gospel” (Paul VI, 1965, n. 4) and keeping its Divine Word charism vibrant. In relation to this never-ending ‘project’, Professor Hammond continued: “Rather than find this despairing, it is an inspiration for us to continue to reflect, continue to renew, continue to search for new and better ways to offer higher education in the light of faith in Jesus Christ and His Church” (Hammond, 2015).

The 2018 Quality Assessment of DWU, noted above, included meetings with staff and students. Its report noted “the capability, the passion and the dedication of the great majority of the staff ... interviewed. Many of them spoke with sincerity of their belief in the mission of the University” and that the students “spoke with passion about the life-changing nature of their experience at DWU” (DHERST, 2018, p. 4). Students and staff are the heart of a university and these findings augur well for the future of Divine Word University, if such staff and student engagement with the mission can be sustained. As Pope St John Paul notes: “The responsibility for maintaining and strengthening the Catholic identity of the university rests primarily with the university itself” (John Paul II, 1990, Article 4).

Importantly for DWU, in considering its future, he concludes the Apostolic Constitution as follows:

... my encouragement and my trust go with you in your weighty daily task that becomes ever more important, more urgent and necessary on behalf of evangelisation for the future of culture and of all cultures. The Church and the world have great need of your witness and of your capable, free, and responsible contribution.

(John Paul II, 1990, Conclusion)

May Divine Word University flourish in its mission of research, mission of teaching and mission of service in contemporary Papua New Guinea.

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Author**Professor Gabrielle McMullen BSc (Hons) PhD (Monash) AM FRACI**

Following postdoctoral research in Germany, Professor McMullen joined the Faculty of Medicine at Monash University and also became Dean of its Catholic residence, Mannix College, in 1981. She was then Rector of Australian Catholic University's (ACU) Ballarat campus from 1995-2000 and its Pro- and Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) until February 2011. From 2011-2017 she was a Trustee of Mary Aikenhead Ministries. Aside from her academic work, Professor McMullen's community contributions have encompassed membership of education, health, theology and community service boards. Her current roles include chair of the Australian Catholic Council for Pastoral Research and of Diocese of Sale Catholic Education Ltd, member of the Divine Word University Council, of the University of Divinity Council and of the Missionary Sisters of Service Stewardship Council, Trustee of the Opening the Doors Foundation and President of the Australian Association of von Humboldt Fellows.

Gabrielle McMullen <GMcmullen@divinity.edu.au>

Gabrielle McMullen AM FRACI