

Can a Catholic College Exist Today?

Challenges to Religious Identity in the Midst of Pluralism

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In mid-July, 46 new college and university presidents spent a week at Harvard University's New Presidents Seminar. Despite the diversity of institutions represented, we explored many common challenges—financial constraints, legal issues, fundraising, curriculum reform and the like. While walking through Harvard Yard reflecting on these challenges, I was struck by the Harvard seal, which had once included the motto *Pro Christo et Ecclesia*. The removal of these words from the seal almost a century ago was symptomatic of Harvard's efforts to shed its religious heritage. As I contemplated these words, *For Christ and for church*, it became quite clear that one of the most significant and important challenges facing any president of a Catholic college or university is maintaining and enhancing the religious identity and mission of the institution in the midst of the pluralism that exists on every Catholic campus in the United States.

Catholic colleges and universities are at an important crossroad, a place where they have never been before. The shape of Catholic higher education is a picture that is being painted, in part by the different ways in which institutions of Catholic higher education express their Catholicity. Some express it with a progressive approach focusing on service and issues of peace and justice, others with a traditional approach focusing on reviving the Catholic intellectual tradition. Is one form of expression better than another? This is essentially a subjective question. But this expression of Catholic identity should be based in honesty. If an institution claims to be Catholic, then it should be so in more than name; its religious heritage should not be used merely as a marketing tool or to convince benefactors to part with their money. The identity of the institution should be the very lifeblood of everything that takes place there—impacting everything from curriculum to hires, programs to policies, and resource allocation to strategic decisions.

The challenges currently facing Catholic higher education can be traced to the late 1960s when profound structural changes impacted the religious orientation of Catholic institutions. While Catholic institutions became stronger academically—by imitating their secular counterparts—they paid little or no attention to hiring faculty with a commitment to and understanding of the religious mission of the institution; the sole focus was

on academic credentials. The Catholic intellectual tradition, with its emphasis on the compatibility of faith and reason, became less prominent and, in many cases, lost. Equally important was the shift in student demographics as fewer Catholic students attended Catholic institutions. At some Catholic colleges, less than half the student body is Catholic. Add to this the trend toward secularism, individualism and the advocacy of a values-free education that does not acknowledge objective truth—especially moral truth—and Catholic institutions are left pondering how they can remain faithful to their religious heritage in meaningful and concrete ways.

As Catholic institutions struggle with the tensions that exist between faithfulness to their religious identity and the exchange of ideas that one expects at a college or university, they also hear Pope John Paul II in *Ex corde ecclesiae* reminding them that these institutions must be places where “Catholicism is vitally present and operative.”

Catholic institutions have an obligation to engage the Catholic intellectual tradition. Throughout its history, the church has been involved in virtually every kind of human endeavor which has led to a particular worldview through which one understands the world and its problems. Catholicism has played a role in the formation of culture, while at the same time fashioning a critique of the world. Through the rigorous study of such thinkers as Augustine, Aquinas, Dante, Catherine of Siena, Flannery O'Connor and other Catholic intellectuals, students and faculty, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, will come into contact with the rich intellectual and spiritual tradition of the Catholic Church without being coerced into practice. It becomes a way of looking at the world from a particular perspective, no different than introducing students to feminist or Marxist thought, thereby broadening their horizons. Similarly, the Catholic intellectual tradition highlights the compatibility of faith and reason, a hallmark of Catholic institutions of higher education. It is imperative that Catholic institutions of higher education counter the notion that faith is necessarily the enemy of reason and vice versa. In a world that is increasingly marked by fundamentalism, Catholic institutions provide society with a great service through their emphasis on faith and reason.

Of equal importance, the curriculum at Catholic colleges and universities must provide students with the opportunity to encounter the magisterial teachings of the church in a way that is faithful. While academic discussion is expected, there is a difference between

discourse and debate and the wholesale rejection, even denigration, of Catholic teaching which often occurs on Catholic campuses. For example, on some Catholic campuses, the church's teaching on birth control or the ordination of women has been dismissed as outdated thinking. Students and faculty should show the same level of respect toward Catholic teaching as is expected toward other faith traditions.

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing Catholic institutions occurs in areas that touch upon the church's moral teachings. The church's stance on abortion, homosexuality, contraception, premarital sex and embryonic stem-cell research clearly stands in opposition to that of secular society. This countercultural stance, which is solidly founded on the church's understanding of the dignity of the human person, must also be reflected in the life of the college or university. John Paul II made clear in *Ex corde ecclesiae* that Catholic institutions of higher education must have "the courage to speak uncomfortable truths which do not please public opinion, but which are necessary to safeguard the authentic good of society." What does this mean in practical terms?

- Catholic colleges cannot condone or endorse behavior that is contrary to the church's moral teachings.
- Catholic colleges cannot permit the existence of a pro-choice group or speaker on campus, though some

do. Health services cannot refer a student to an abortion clinic nor distribute condoms.

- While it is important for students to engage in classroom discussions about embryonic stem-cell research, actual research cannot be permitted in the lab of a Catholic college given the church's understanding of the human person.
- Regarding homosexuality, all men and women are created in the image of God and thus deserve respect because of the basic human dignity we all share. Therefore, on a Catholic campus it is not uncommon or inconsistent to have support groups for gay students since this is a concrete expression of the church's call for respect. This does not mean that we endorse or advocate this lifestyle or behavior. Gay student organizations must operate within the parameters of church teachings by not sponsoring any activities that promote a homosexual lifestyle or same-sex marriage as legitimate lifestyles.

Articulating a clear and authentic vision remains an ongoing but essential challenge for Catholic institutions of higher education. And while students, faculty and staff of these institutions may become increasingly diverse in the years ahead, by choosing to become members of the community they are implicitly accepting the religious identity of the institution and the reality of what that means for themselves and the institution's mission. If this is uncomfortable, a Catholic institution

may not be appropriate for these individuals. Catholic institutions must never apologize for being Catholic or for being genuinely committed to the church and its teachings. Expressions of Catholicism should be embraced and celebrated. Catholic institutions should be proud of what they are, should proclaim what they are and should invite the entire community to contribute toward meaningful expressions of that identity. Not to do this will result in the obsolescence symbolized by the words gone from Harvard's seal. Our challenge is to nurture those principles upon which the Catholic college and university rests so that these institutions can ensure, as John Paul II wrote in *Ex corde ecclesiae*, "a Christian presence in the university world confronting the great problems of society and culture ..."

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