"Reforging Catholic Identity"

BY JOHN LANGAN

Published in *Commonweal* (April 21, 2000). © 2000 Commonweal Foundation, reprinted with permission. For Subscriptions, www.commonwealmagazine.org

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Strengthening and renewing the Catholic identity of Catholic colleges and universities is a critical concern on many Catholic campuses. Reflection and planning on the topic have become more focused as the number of religious men and women teaching in them has declined and as an earlier generation of Catholic scholars and teachers, largely trained in Catholic colleges and graduate schools, retires. Priests and religious have been replaced by a younger generation that includes far more women and is drawn from a wide range of religious traditions. In many cases before arriving at Saint Mary's or Loyola, they have no more experience with Catholic education than with Tibetan Buddhism. In theology, they are more likely to be recruited from Yale and Chicago; in philosophy, from Brown and Pittsburgh; and in other disciplines, from better graduate schools across the country, for which sympathy for the Catholic tradition is usually minimal.

Concern about the increasingly secular character of Catholic colleges and universities is felt within the sponsoring religious communities, by alumni and parents, in diocesan offices, and at the Vatican. Efforts to deal with this concern in a realistic and effective way are part of the regular agenda of boards of directors and councils of deans. Every college president today understands that the refashioning of Catholic identity in a way that will be effective in a new social and demographic context is an essential part of his or her work.

The concern over Catholic identity shows up in many different areas: the content of theology and philosophy courses, the behavior tolerated or forbidden in residence halls, the interpretation and fulfillment of the academic and religious commitment to social justice and community service, the choice of candidates for honorary degrees, the sorts of speakers who

appear on campus, and relationships with church authorities. But as nearly everyone acknowledges, the heart of the matter lies with the faculty and in particular with the priorities the faculty brings to the task of choosing and hiring its own members. Can a university which has no effective Catholic presence in its faculty truly be a Catholic university? Can a university which gives religious considerations a central place in its hiring process retain credibility in the contemporary academic world? Can it cope with legal challenges to doing so? What place will a priority for Catholics leave for non-Catholic members of the faculty, many of whom have served, often with distinction, for long periods of time and who understandably resist any hint of second-class status?

One possibility, considered at the highest levels of the church, is to require that the majority of the faculty as well as of the administration and the board of trustees should be "faithful Catholics." This allows for some pluralism at the margins, and it offers a definite answer to the question of how the Catholic identity of the institution is to be maintained, namely, by recruiting Catholics. It also implies the long-term control of the institution will remain in Catholic hands and that this can be done without affronting the majority of the university community, who will themselves be Catholic.

But who are faithful Catholics? Tests of orthodoxy and religious practice will be asked which will deter many promising faculty candidates. The ultimate assessment of the candidate's suitability will be made by persons whose primary agenda is not academic. Many, probably most, faculty members will conclude that such an approach is an affront to the American academic tradition, that it is simply incompatible with the pursuit of excellence in American higher education. Indeed, many Catholic faculty members will judge that it is also an affront to a Catholic understanding of the university. So it seems clear that on this question of maintaining a Catholic faculty, American Catholic universities have arrived at a point of crisis.

Two things should be noted about this crisis. In the first place, it is an internally generated one arising out of the successful development of U.S. Catholic universities over the last two generations. During the twenty years after the Second World War, American

Catholic colleges and universities, along with all other areas of higher education, grew in response to the G.I. Bill. They achieved a size and complexity which required serious professionalization. This reduced the contribution of the founding religious community or diocese to a small percentage of both the faculty and the budget. After 1965, American Catholicism became more assimilated to the American mainstream, less dependent on European intellectual models, more conscious of itself as sharing in the political and cultural life of the dominant world power, less responsive to discipline from Rome and appeals to tradition. Many emblems of Catholic distinctiveness were jettisoned. Institutions experienced both pressures and satisfactions in conforming to dominant American models and practices.

In this new phase of their history, Catholic colleges and universities found that the massive expansion of public higher education did not put them out of business. They could do well even when competing against institutions that had greater financial resources and that charged their students considerably less. By offering something distinctive, which could range from a smaller, less impersonal setting to the continuing presence of religious symbols and practices, they could attract people unsatisfied by public higher education or who were neither financially nor socially comfortable in entering elite private higher education.

In more recent decades, as the academic job market got tighter, positions at Catholic institutions became more attractive. Doctoral graduates from secular campuses might not have much sympathy with or understanding of the Catholic faith, but they needed jobs, and they came to appreciate the scale and the order of the Catholic educational world. These people often developed into fine teachers and scholars and contributed significantly to the improved academic standing of Catholic institutions.

They also came to feel at home in the individual institutions in which they worked, even though they usually remained on the secular side in the culture wars. They tended to share the values of academic liberalism, to accept abortion as both a woman's right and a personal tragedy, to support gay rights, and to be religiously reticent, regardless of their personal

beliefs and backgrounds. They could sense collegiality and even affection in their relationships with committed Catholics and members of religious orders, with whom they could also have vigorous disagreements. As a result, they came to be more comfortable with Sisters of Mercy or Jesuits, Religious of the Sacred Heart or Benedictines, than with Catholics in general, or with what they often referred to with aversion and anxiety as "The Church." The Catholic university for them, and for many of those who work in it, has become a marbled reality, both secular and Catholic.

Today the project of turning around this history and trying to make a Catholic university more Catholic is bound to strike most of these academics negatively: as regressive, ungrateful, demeaning, threatening, intrusive, or unjust. The tensions created by such a project are, I want to emphasize, an internal result of the development of Catholic universities and colleges over the last fifty years. They are not created by Rome or by the norms intended to implement *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. They would need to be addressed even if that document had never been written.

But it is not only the faculty that might react anxiously. There is a wider civic culture in which Catholic colleges and universities are embedded. The typical school is located in a city or in a region where it has become a focus of accomplishment and aspiration. It draws young men and women from inner-city schools and middle-income suburbs, from farms and country towns. Historically, it has drawn students from a diversity of religious backgrounds, though the majority have been Catholic. Among its benefactors are Jews, Protestants, and nonbelievers who appreciate the work that the college has done for them, their family, their employees, their neighbors, and their city. The college forms an important part of the life of the civic community. The civic culture expects the Catholic college to exemplify the diversity of American society in a distinctively Catholic mode, and to show that it has internalized the American traditions of academic freedom and open controversy. Given these expectations, it is very likely that a sustained effort to impose Catholic uniformity will not be persuasive to the larger civic community, and that such an effort will damage the college as a locus of civic cooperation and estranges it from important constituencies.

But doesn't the value of pluralism point in two different directions? On the one side, it pushes in the direction of more secularization. Indeed secular universities commonly pride themselves on being bastions of pluralism, diversity, tolerance, and support for nonconformity. (An outside observer may well harbor serious doubts about this, given the high degree of uniformity which actually marks their behavior and attitudes, and the recent pressures for political correctness which have led various universities to restrict certain forms of speech.) On the other side, institutions need to be pluralistic and tolerant in different ways; a distinct good is accomplished when a major moral and religious tradition as exemplified, for instance, in Catholicism or in Methodism or in Judaism, plays a constitutive role in the identity of a university.

A religious college or university has to maintain free and open discussion of the major ideas and issues of what is our common, though divided, world. It has to provide a pedagogy which will open up for a new generations of young people the depth of these issues and raise the possibility of a commitment to transcendent goods. If it is faithful to its mission, it can then offer a wider range of considerations, opportunities, and exemplary experiences than the secular university, precisely because it has the freedom to include the religious dimension of human life in central parts of the educational process. A Catholic college or university should be pressing its students, both male and female, to think about the meaning of the lives of Dorothy Day and Mother Theresa as well as Eleanor Roosevelt, Edith Wharton, Margaret Thatcher, Marilyn Monroe, and Hannah Arendt. But a view that equates pluralism with secularism and which assumes that the protections of pluralism requires the marginalization of religion is bound to miss this kind of enriching diversity.

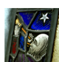
If neither comprehensive secularization nor an effort to establish a permanent Catholic majority on the faculty is an appropriate or feasible response, what can be done about the crisis of Catholic identity? The essential task which the faculty has to carry on with regard to Catholic identity is to present the Catholic intellectual tradition, and to extend it by academic processes of interpretation, criticism, and creative development. This, of course, is not a task for each and every faculty member.

Rather, it falls on the faculty taken as a whole. What the university needs to sustain is a core body of scholars who are knowledgeable about the Catholic tradition, who pursue their various disciplines in a way that puts contemporary questions to the tradition, and who turn to the tradition for light on contemporary problems. One expects to find a number of such scholars and teachers in the theology and philosophy departments; but one also hope for a good Dante scholar, a sociologist of religion who can look at Catholicism as a global phenomenon, an economist who knows how to interpret Catholic social teaching, a political theorist who argues within natural-law categories, a historian of the Iberian peninsula who thinks carefully about the Inquisition and the role of missionaries in colonization, a chemist who reflects on environmental problems in the light of religious values.

In any given university, one is unlikely to find all these people; but one needs a certain number of them, a "critical mass," who will talk with each other, read papers, refer students back and forth, and sustain a broad interdisciplinary conversation that meets the university's responsibility for presenting the Catholic tradition to its students. These faculty need not be organized in a particular program. Their task is to work as scholars and teachers in a university, not as professors in a seminary or in a program of religious formation. They make Catholicism effectively present both as object of study and as a vital concern of scholars.

This core faculty of scholars and teachers who maintain the Catholic identity of the university need not be Catholic themselves. The crucial criterion is intellectual interest and competence in matters that form part of the Catholic tradition.

The administration, however, has to play an active role in the development of such a faculty core. Its task is not to supplant the judgment of the faculty but to raise critical questions about the criteria and the conclusions of faculty processes of deliberation. Its job is to underscore that the Catholic contribution to the educational process is not confined solely to the theology department. It must remind members of all departments that (1) the contribution to matters of Catholic concern should be identified as one of the considerations to be weighed for some of the positions which become open; and (2) that a department



should understand that giving serious weight to this consideration is one of the consequences of its place in a Catholic institution.

The administration must see to it that Catholic themes and issues are well covered in the offerings and programs of the college as a whole. At the same time, the administration should recognize that it is not appropriate to insist on a contribution to Catholic intellectual life as a criterion for faculty positions across the board. Many faculty members, including highly distinguished scholars, will lack the training and the inclination to make such a contribution. Even if they are committed Catholics, they may well judge, as they look at their areas of competence and interest, that attempting to make such a contribution is not the best use of their talents or their research opportunities.

One can draw a parallel here with the administration's desire that each department in a college of liberal arts be able to contribute to the liberal education of undergraduates in addition to training future scientists and professional personas. An administration should be justifiably concerned if no one in its science department can address such issues as the environmental impact of science, the conflicts between scientific and humanistic accounts of the human person, the social responsibility of scientists, the implications for various sciences for epistemology. But it would be foolish for an administration to lay down competence in these matters as a universal or general requirement.

Where would such a proposal for a faculty core of scholars and teachers concerned about Catholic issues leave non-Catholic members of the faculty? Clearly, proposals which threaten the academic freedom of non-Catholic professors are not acceptable. But a proposal which aims at recruiting faculty who will engage with Catholic issues in an academic and scholarly way without imposing additional requirements on other faculty members does not curtail their academic freedom. The faculty will not lose its share of power in the hiring process, which will continue to be a matter of negotiation between faculty and administration. The faculty's share in the governance of the university, which is a widely variable factor, is not diminished by a commitment of the Catholic college or university to provide a Catholic education.

Another concern, not so easily addressed, is whether this sort of proposal will produce something like a two-tier division in the faculty. This could happen in two ways. The first is by treating those faculty members who are seen as contributing to the Catholic identity of the school in a highly favorable way which discriminates against other members, Catholic and non-Catholic, who are not so involved. Here the administration needs to be consistent and fair in the ways in which it applies standards of evaluation and in the ways in which it distributes benefits and opportunities. This is not an easy thing for an administration to achieve in any case, for decisions about tenure and promotion often involve incommensurable factors and confidential considerations. But the administration of a Catholic university must make strenuous efforts to meet high standards of justice and fairness in its treatment of faculty members.

The second way in which such a proposal could be profoundly divisive and destructive would be for an administration to hire candidates for the purpose of maintaining Catholic identity who are consistently or conspicuously less well qualified than their colleagues. Such a means of implementing and maintaining a Catholic identity would damage the credibility of the project and of the administration, and would harm the careers of well qualified scholars and teachers who were identified with it.

Non-Catholic faculty are not to be regarded as second-class citizens or hired hands or guests who live on the sufferance of those who rightfully belong. The best language of our dealings in this area is probably the language of family or of citizenship or of ownership. Partnership recognizes the distinctiveness and the autonomy of the partners and is compatible with insistence on the fulfillment of contractual obligations. It avoids paternalism and allows for real differences about values and ends, even while it provides a framework for people to work together for shared goals and to work separately when that seems best.

Finally, administrators, donors, parents, alumni, and church authorities need to bear in mind that working to develop Catholic intellectual and academic life is not a shared priority of all faculty members, and that those who do not share this priority are members of the university community in good standing and very often are significant contributors to its

growth and well-being. Their work for the university and for their students is something that should be highly valued and appropriately rewarded. But it should not be taken as constituting the whole reality of a Catholic university, which must exist and flourish in the overlapping worlds of free and disciplined inquiry, on the one hand, and religious commitment which seeks further understanding, on the other.

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