

“Autonomy and Communion”

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In the decades leading up to the publication of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* in 1990, the Land O’Lakes statement was routinely denounced by critics like the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars and the late George Kelly (*The Battle for the American Church*) as a surrender of the historic mission of Catholic colleges and universities in the United States. What did the document say that so provoked its critics? What does it have to say on this, its 40th anniversary?

An International Conversation

In the summer of 1967, Theodore Hesburgh, C.S.C., who at the time was the president of the University of Notre Dame and first president of the International Federation of Catholic Universities, convoked a meeting of 26 leaders in Catholic higher education at Land O’Lakes, Wisc. The meeting was one of several regional meetings held to prepare material for the I.F.C.U. plenary assembly to take place in Kinshasa in 1968. At the previous I.F.C.U. plenary session in Tokyo in 1965, the delegates had decided to compose a statement on “The Catholic University in the Modern World,” as a response to the Second Vatican Council’s document, “The Church in the Modern World.” The 26 participants at the Land O’Lakes meeting included representatives of nine Catholic universities, several bishops, superiors of religious congregations and one future cardinal. It may be worth noting that it was an all male assembly.

The document the Land O’Lakes participants developed, along with statements from three other regional meetings, constituted the agenda for the 1968 I.F.C.U. plenary session, held in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The delegates in Kinshasa, working with the four regional statements, composed a statement that constituted the position of I.F.C.U., the

international organization of Catholic universities. The statement became part of the agenda at the first international congress of Catholic universities held at the Vatican in 1969.

In November 1972 the Second International Congress of Delegates of Catholic Universities met in Rome and at the conclusion of their meeting issued a lengthier statement on “The Catholic University in the Modern World.” While affirming the important role of all Catholic universities in promoting the dialogue between faith and culture, this 1972 document argued that there was more than one model of a Catholic university. Institutions that were independent of ecclesiastical jurisdiction could also be authentic Catholic universities if they defined their identity and mission as Catholic, committed, for example, to the dialogue between faith and culture.

In 1973 Cardinal Gabriel Garrone, head of the Sacred Congregation of Education, reported the reactions of the congregation to the 1972 document and, in particular, the congregation’s concern about “university institutions without statutory bonds linking them to ecclesiastical authorities.” Cardinal Garrone did not directly reject this claim but noted that it could not mean that “such institutions are removed from those relationships with the ecclesiastical hierarchy which must characterize all Catholic institutions.”

The cardinal’s concerns continued to be at the center of a prolonged dialogue between the international community of Catholic universities and the Vatican that culminated in the publication of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* in 1990. This apostolic constitution on the Catholic university was the result of an extraordinary period of consultation that had begun with the circulation of a first draft in 1985. In its final form, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* recognized that institutions without juridical bonds to ecclesiastical authorities could be authentic Catholic universities but challenged all Catholic institutions to have close working relationships with their bishops.

Sliding Toward Secularization?

In the light of this history it is clear that the Land O’Lakes statement was an early and modest regional contribution to an international conversation that began in 1973 and reached a defining moment in 1990. In the United States, however, conservative critics of

developments in Catholic higher education would often focus their wrath on the Land O'Lakes statement, as well as the activities of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities in support of its claims. Catholic universities that insisted on their institutional autonomy were willing, in the view of such critics, to betray their Catholic heritage in order to be eligible for public funding.

What did the 26 participants at the Land O'Lakes meeting say that so provoked critics who feared that Catholic universities were following the historic example of other American universities that had begun under religious sponsorship but were now thoroughly secular institutions?

Land O'Lakes had declared that "to perform its teaching and research functions effectively the Catholic university must have a true autonomy and academic freedom in the face of authority of whatever kind, lay or clerical, external to the academic community itself. To say this is simply to assert that institutional autonomy and academic freedom are essential conditions of life and growth and indeed of survival for Catholic universities as for all universities."

This claim of institutional autonomy, some critics said, sounded like an echo of the histories of other American universities and their slide toward secularization. These critics ignored or did not take seriously the following words from the Land O'Lakes statement that complement its call for institutional autonomy: "The Catholic university must be an institution, a community of learners or a community of scholars, in which Catholicism is perceptibly present and effectively operative."

Not only did the Land O'Lakes participants believe that Catholic identity, "perceptibly present and effectively operative," could be maintained and promoted in an institution independent of direct ecclesiastical jurisdiction, they also believed that the Catholic university that enjoyed such autonomy could better serve the church: "Every university, Catholic or not, serves as the critical reflective intelligence of its society.... The Catholic university has the added obligation of performing this same service for the Church [and] should carry on a continual examination of all aspects and all activities of the Church and

should objectively evaluate them. The Church would thus have the benefit of continual counsel from Catholic universities.”

Perhaps sensing that some critics might interpret as academic hubris the statement’s description of the Catholic university as “the critical reflective intelligence” of the church, the Land O’Lakes participants recognized that “Catholic universities in the recent past have hardly played this role at all. It may well be one of the most important functions of the Catholic university of the future.”

Relationships? Yes. Jurisdiction? No.

The importance of institutional autonomy that so provoked critics of the Land O’Lakes statement in the United States was, of course, the central nerve in the international dialogue between Catholic universities and the Vatican that began with the response of Cardinal Garrone in 1973. In the decades that followed, the response of many Catholic universities to Cardinal Garrone’s legitimate concerns could be summed up perhaps as “Relationships? Yes. Jurisdiction? No.” Canonists spoke of institutions that were “really Catholic,” even if they were not under the jurisdiction of canon law. The relationship of such institutions to the church was better described as one of “communion rather than incorporation.”

While never directly denying such claims, the response of Rome inevitably arose from a different center of gravity. Pope John Paul II spoke from such a perspective in his address to representatives of Catholic higher education in New Orleans, during his visit to the United States in 1987. After recognizing the contributions made by the diverse network of Catholic colleges and universities in the United States, the pope reminded his audience that “the bishops of the church, as *doctores et magistri fidei*, should be seen not as external agents but as participating in the life of the Catholic university in its privileged role as protagonist in the encounter between faith and science and between revealed truth and culture.”

When *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* was published in 1990 after five years of consultation, including an international congress held in the Vatican in 1989, it explicitly recognized the legitimacy of a Catholic university that would not be under the jurisdiction of ecclesiastical authorities but nonetheless would recognize the value and necessity of close working relationships with the

hierarchy, particularly their local bishops. “A Catholic university, as Catholic, is linked with the Church either through a formal, constitutive and statutory bond, or by reason of an institutional commitment on the part of those responsible for it” (Article I of the General Norms). “Even when they do not enter directly into the internal governance of the university, bishops ‘should be seen not as external agents but as participants in the life of the Catholic university’” (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, No. 28).

Laicization, Not Secularization

The call of the Land O’Lakes statement in 1967 for institutional autonomy was part of this broader international conversation within the church. In the United States in particular, it offered a rationale for important changes taking place in the governance structures of many Catholic institutions of higher education. In the late 1960’s control of several of the most prominent Catholic universities passed from the religious orders that had founded and sponsored them to independent boards of trustees composed mainly of lay men and women. This change in governance continued through the 1970’s and became the general norm for nearly all of the more than 200 members of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities. It would be the commitment of these lay leaders to the Catholic identity and mission of their institutions that would link those institutions to the church, as confirmed by the words of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* in 1990.

Those suspicious of such a transfer of control would frequently complain that it was motivated primarily by a desire to be eligible for public funding. As “private institutions serving the public good,” Catholic institutions did (and do) have a legitimate claim on public support. More important, however, colleges and universities had become more complex institutions, while the members of the sponsoring religious bodies were becoming fewer and older. The experience, wisdom and professional competence of lay trustees became more and more essential to the very survival of these institutions, as well as to their continued growth. Furthermore, the increased role given to lay trustees represented a recognition of the call of the Second Vatican Council to engage lay men and women in roles of leadership in the church.

Forty years later, the success of Catholic colleges and universities in keeping Catholicism “perceptibly present and effectively operative,” in the words of Land O’Lakes, remains a challenge. Unfortunately, more public attention seems to be given to the boundaries that Catholic institutions should observe than to the positive initiatives they should undertake. Much less public attention is given to the more fundamental, and perhaps more elusive, question of whether the Catholic intellectual and religious tradition engages the scholars and students that make up the academic community. An institution’s commitment to its Catholic identity and mission should be measured by its success in advancing “the encounter between faith and science and between revealed truth and culture” that John Paul II proposed at New Orleans in 1987 and that *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* defined as a fundamental mission of the Catholic university in 1990.

A particularly neuralgic issue is the tension that can arise between the teaching authority of the bishops and the academic freedom of Catholic theologians. This tension can be a creative one, if the distinct but complementary roles of bishops and theologians are properly understood and respected. As is the case with other academic disciplines, erroneous theological positions are often corrected by the criticism of other theologians. Still, it may be necessary on occasion for church authorities to issue a forthright statement that a particular theological position is inconsistent with authentic Catholic tradition. Such statements that clarify doctrine without sanctioning individuals do not compromise institutional autonomy or academic freedom.

A Model for the Future?

Finally, 40 years ago, the claim of the Land O’Lakes statement that the Catholic university should be “the critical reflective intelligence” of the church may have seemed a bit presumptuous even to those who authored the statement. Does the claim take on new currency today in the wake of the sexual abuse scandal that has so divided and discouraged the American Catholic community? In the city at the center of the scandal, Boston College has sponsored a program that looks to propose models for the church of the future. More broadly, however, the experience of American Catholic universities in engaging committed

lay leaders at every level of the institution may be instructive for the future of the church in the United States. Could a dominant clerical culture find needed reform and renewal by engaging the talents and dedication of lay Catholics more fully in the life of the church at every level? Is it already happening in at least some parishes and dioceses in the United States? Are these presumptuous questions? Perhaps. But anniversaries should prompt us to look forward as well as back.