

“A Vocation for Catholic Higher Education?”

BY STEPHEN POPE

Published in *Commonweal* (March 28, 1997). © 1997 Commonweal Foundation, reprinted with permission. For Subscriptions, www.commonwealmagazine.org

Tuition, room, and board for many Catholic universities runs on average between \$20,000 and \$25,000 per year. The cost of tuition continues to rise faster than both income and inflation. Add transportation, books, fees, and other miscellaneous expenses, and the total cost of a four-year bachelor's degree often tops the \$100,000 mark at the most prestigious schools. About 60 percent of students at all private four-year institutions receive some form of financial aid, and about half of all students are forced to borrow to meet expenses. The steep debt incurred over the course of four years typically requires many times that number of years of repayment. Given this expense, many fear that in the years to come only the most affluent may be able to afford a Catholic college education.

This cost should be placed in the context of the growing income inequality between the rich and poor in our society. On June 19, 1996, the United States Census Bureau reported that since 1968 the average income of households in the bottom 20 percent of earners rose a mere 0.8 percent (from \$7,702 to \$7,762) while the average income of the top 20 percent of earners rose a staggering 44 percent (from \$73,754 to \$105,945). The economic value of a college degree continues to rise as the widening income gap between those with and those without a degree demonstrates. College, more than ever, is a long-term financial investment that, on average, pays substantial economic dividends. But the rising cost of this education, coupled with the economic benefits that it yields, raises questions about the relation of Catholic universities to the poor and less affluent.

Add to this combination of the escalating costs of education and the rising income inequality



in our society, the danger of increasingly isolating college students from the poor and making them less sensitive to poor people's proper worth and rightful claims. Catholic higher education should not become simply one more familiar route for the recycling of the upper middle class, in essence no different from other private universities. Catholic universities cannot simply be places where well-to-do students receive a good education in order to assume their place in the next generation of corporate and professional elites. How does education of the relatively affluent (and sometimes the absolutely rich) relate to concern for those on the other end of the social and economic spectrum?

Two theologians, Jon Sobrino and John Henry Newman, have something to say about the inevitable tensions underlying this question. According to Jon Sobrino of San Salvador's Central American University, compassion must have the central place in the life of the Catholic university. College students and universities themselves must learn to embrace the "preferential option for the poor." Sobrino argues that if the Catholic university is to exist in a world of massive suffering and not function simply as an "ivory tower," it must be committed to the poor. Far from paternalistic philanthropy, the preferential option entails solidarity-identifying with the poor, being converted by them, and participating in movements for their empowerment. If the Catholic university does not actively side with the poor in appropriate ways, it will tacitly side with the status quo and reinforce present structures of injustice, oppression, and exclusion.

The university is a place where students and faculty search for the truth, make discoveries, and communicate findings and insights to the wider world. Sobrino believes that speaking the truth is the best remedy for social injustice. Above all, knowledge must be put at the service of the poor. Only in this way is the Catholic university's true catholicity affirmed-that is, its openness to the worth of all people and not just the economic elite.

The Catholic university cannot therefore be understood in Sobrino's analysis as the scene of "value-free," politically neutral intellectual activity. It should be conceived Christocentrically-



in light of the Cross and as an expression of Jesus' uncompromising love for the poor.

Sobrino poses to the Catholic university the question:

"What can we do to take the crucified people down from their crosses?" Whereas knowledge has all too frequently been used to support oppression, it ought now to be put at the service of the poor and for the eradication of their suffering. Not only theology and philosophy, but also political science, sociology, and other disciplines can be taught in a way that gives centrality to the needs of the poor.

Perhaps the strongest challenge to Sobrino's position is found in John Henry Newman's *The Idea of a University*. In his fifth discourse, Newman examined the question of the utility value of a college education (something a lot of undergraduates wonder about during final exams week). Human beings naturally desire to know and the principal virtue of the university lies in its service of this need rather than any other. In contrast to even the most learned and intellectually demanding training in the professions and business, liberal education in the true sense of the term is not intended to serve what is beyond itself. This is not to say that it is a good thing for college graduates to be driving cabs or bartending, only that the most important feature of college is how it expands the mind, not the wallet. It is both true and good that higher education and knowledge also provide career opportunities and financial advantages, but these benefits are not the primary object of education.

But what about compassion? Newman regarded knowledge as valuable in itself whether or not its discovery is either justified directly by utility or, by implication, motivated by compassion. "Knowledge is one thing, virtue is another; good sense is not conscience, refinement is not humility, nor is largess and justness of view faith. ...Liberal education makes not the Christian, not the Catholic, but the gentleman." By "gentleman" Newman meant not a polite person with refined sensibilities, but rather one who has a "philosophic habit of mind" and "a cultivated intellect, a delicate taste, a candid, equitable, dispassionate mind, a noble and courteous bearing in the conduct of life..., the connatural qualities of a



large knowledge." This "enlargement of mind" continues to be a powerful antidote to bigotry, apathy, and social myopia.

Though a creature of his time, Newman provides a helpful corrective to the danger of an exclusive focus on what Sobrino sees as central, compassion. Insisting that the search for knowledge be motivated primarily by compassion amounts to a drastic elimination of one of the most fundamental features of what makes us human. The university ought to be a place where students come to greater understanding of things, worth knowing for their own sakes, a place where the love of learning is not supplanted by other objectives, however legitimate in themselves, and where knowledge is not instrumentalized to other values.

Yet, upholding the intrinsic value of the "enlargement of mind" need edging the place of educated Catholic. Catholic higher education includes not only intellectual development, but also the further cultivation of those traits that are characteristically Catholic and Christian, including love of God and love of neighbor. If this is true, then we need to recognize that the well-spoken and prosperous professional who makes substantial financial contributions to university development funds but is utterly indifferent to the suffering of the poor should not be taken as a model graduate of a Catholic university. Catholic universities have certainly generated those who fit this image, but we ought to recognize this for what it is—a university's success in financial and social terms but not an exemplar of its core ideals. Sobrino is fundamentally correct on this score. The credibility of the Catholic university lies neither in its endowment, nor in its graduation rate, nor in the power and status of its alumni, but in whether its graduates are genuinely concerned about "taking the crucified people down from their crosses."

Most people will agree that to graduate from a Catholic university and somehow not to have significantly enhanced one's ability to think more deeply about the world, one's nature, and one's identity is have "missed the point" of college. We should regard compassion in an



analogous way, recognizing that to graduate from a Catholic college without a more developed awareness of the needs of the poor and one's own social responsibility to them is also really to have "missed the point." Institutions of higher education that are at once true universities and genuinely Catholic must be characterized in terms of both an "enlargement of heart" and an "enlargement of mind."

Stephen Pope is an associate professor in the department of theology at Boston College.

