

“Collegium and the Intellectual's Vocation to Serve”

BY THOMAS LANDY

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Six years ago, after I'd first aired the idea of organizing summer workshops to engage new faculty in conversation about the mission of Catholic higher education, a small group of faculty and administrators from around the country gathered at Fairfield University to work out the program in detail. As we talked about how we could introduce faculty to the issues and concerns of Catholic higher education, I emphasized how important it was not only to attend to those Structural and institutional issues, but also to provide an experience that would challenge and nurture faculty to grow in their own sense of vocation. I wanted to find a way to put the best of our tradition's spiritual and intellectual resources to work for Collegium participants, confident that if we succeeded in that, we'd have accomplished something truly beneficial to them and their institutions.

As we discussed the basic goal, a laywoman whom I admire a great deal was the first of several people to sound a note of caution. She suggested that the idea of nurturing vocation was right on track--and added that as a church we hadn't been very good at helping people figure out what it means to be a Christian in the workplace--but she was concerned about using the word "vocation." "For my generation, and for most of us here," she said, "vocation only means what priests and nuns have, not what lay people have. Language like that just gets in the way. Keep it as our goal, but avoid the word."

A few years later, when Collegium had finally become a reality, a graduate student participating in our first program recounted the difficulty she'd had bridging the gap between the world of her work and her community of belief. Her academic colleagues had no interest in talking about the relevance or implications of faith commitments; her fellow Catholics, including the university chaplain, treated her work--the activity to which she devoted most of her time--as only marginally connected to her faith. Feeling as if she were



living in two worlds, she had even once abandoned her studies to work for a prominent social service agency, where integration of faith and work seemed natural. But after a year academics drew her back. Near the end of the week at Collegium, she recounted how the mentors and participants she had met had finally helped her lay claim to what she was really looking for all along her own vocation as a teacher and researcher.

Collegium helped this participant (and others) to name what had been a nameless hunger--a deep need to acknowledge and sustain a vocational identity. An inner sense of vocation, perhaps not fully articulated as such, is precisely what draws teachers and researchers into academia. It is that sense that nourishes us in our best moments. We sense that we are for some reason meant to do what we are doing, that our work is of inherent value to others and to us, not merely a way of passing the days or collecting a check. The origin of that sense of purpose lies outside of ourselves--it is not merely an invention of our own selves--yet is intimately connected to who we are as individuals, to our own particular gifts, talents, and sources of contentment.

For religious people, the notion of vocation is inherently tied up with our relationship with God and the belief that the same God who creates us with talents and opportunities has great hopes that we might put these to use for the benefit of the rest of creation. A God who gives us so much, we believe, does so in an extraordinary act of hope. For a good many people who aren't sure where they stand religiously, desire for some sense of purpose runs just as deep within.

Too often, though, and in too many ways, we get the message that we should settle for less. Some of us can at times be prone to an individualism that suggests that our work and goals are their own justification, and lose track of the nature of vocation as service. More often, I think, given the vagaries of graduate school, the job market, peer review, committee work, and a publish or perish environment, we can easily lose track of our own inner motivation and voice, and end up doing what we do out of some vague sense of obligation. Both of these ways of proceeding can be deadening, and the results can show in our teaching, our writing, and our very selves. Because vocation fundamentally connects who we are with



who we are meant to be for others, sustaining or nurturing it requires a lot of conversation and sharing with others. It requires some painstaking work to build the kind of community on campus that will allow such conversation.

Vocation and the Whole Person

Almost all of our Jesuit institutions speak somewhere in their mission statement or admissions brochures about the goal of educating the whole person. Accomplishing that depends most of all on a faculty that has discovered and realized its own wholeness, its own vocation.

Collegium was born, as I indicated earlier, out of a desire to work with faculty and to nourish their own sense of vocation, out of the conviction that unless we did so, Catholic higher education could not achieve its purpose. The idea for Collegium came to me at the end of my first semester teaching at Fairfield, when I was a Jesuit scholastic. I had the surprising--even, at times, disorienting experience of teaching at the same institution where I'd done my undergraduate work, and was even assigned to live and serve as an advisor in the same dormitory I'd lived in as a freshman. (Happily, with the advent of co-ed dorms and an increased drinking age, the dorm had calmed down a great deal in the intervening decade.) Returning to the scene of my college experiences gave me constant cause to consider what it was that had been so great about my college years, and what I could learn from them for my own work as a teacher. It also gave me pause to look at how much was changing at Fairfield, as at other Jesuit schools.

At a very basic level, I was concerned about how, with declining numbers of Jesuits, we would shape a whole institution that could fulfill the Jesuit mission of the university; One look at the number of Jesuits at Fairfield and throughout the United States made it clear to me that significant changes were in the offing for Jesuit higher education. While great effort had been made over the years to strengthen religious studies, campus ministry, and service programs, it seemed to me that too little attention had yet been given to finding ways to strengthen the sense of mission among faculty in other disciplines. While education in the



arts, sciences and professions is the primary formal responsibility of our institutions, we seemed to have been in a quandary as to how our religious mission related to academics any more. In short, I felt we were losing the ability to model the kind of integration we spoke about.

The great paradox was that a quarter century after the close of the Second Vatican Council, which called for increasing lay responsibility for the life of the church, few of our schools seemed to have been able to do much in a sustained, systematic way to involve lay faculty in taking a leading role in the religious ministry of the colleges and universities. Management and teaching responsibilities were increasingly in the hands of non Jesuits, but mission still belonged to the Jesuits.

I certainly didn't have all the answers about how to integrate faith and the work of science, social science, humanities, or professional education. But I knew faculty who strove for such integration in ways I found inspiring. I decided that the best place to start was with them. By getting some of them to talk about how they went about it (and even how they still struggle or fail at it) I thought that we could open the door for all the participants, by dint of inspiration and discussion, to work at finding their own ways.

Since 1993, Collegium has sponsored summer programs on Catholicism and intellectual life for faculty and graduate students. Our aim is to invite our participants into the larger conversation about religious identity on campus, to help them see some of what we think is the best of the Catholic intellectual and spiritual tradition, and to give them time to talk together about how they want to shape their own vocations whatever their faith as teachers and researchers at institutions that call themselves Catholic.

Fifty Catholic colleges and universities in the United States and Canada comprise the membership of Collegium. About half of these are Jesuit schools. Each participating institution sends at least one faculty member a year, preferably someone who is untenured or recently tenured, or who might not otherwise find his or her way into the conversation about mission and identity. Member schools have sometimes sent other faculty, including the occasional dean or mission statement committee chair. Occasionally, a senior faculty



member will participate, perhaps out of a desire to gain perspective on his or her developing roles as teacher, scholar, and colleague. For non-Catholic faculty, especially non-tenured ones, the invitation to participate in Collegium can at first seem puzzling or even a cause for worry. I see the invitation most of all as a vote of confidence by the institutions in the faculty member's future there, as an investment in the person, and as an invitation to fuller participation in the conversation about what the institution is and hopes to be.

Each year, we have invited graduate students to participate in the hope that we could inspire some of the best and brightest to consider teaching at Catholic colleges and universities. The graduate fellows come from a wide variety of public and private universities, having competed for fellowships to attend. Given the opportunity to break away from dissertation writing for a time, they bring a great deal of vitality to the conference, as well as a powerful sense of immediacy about direction and purpose. While many of those who are responsible for hiring at Catholic institutions worry that discussion about the religious identity of the institution will scare away the best candidates, our experience has been that there are a great many exceptional candidates who are interested in our schools precisely because of their religious identity.

The groups who come together, then, tend to be fairly diverse in terms of discipline, faith commitment, and reasons for attending. Some come with a great deal of interest in Catholic mission and identity, and some come primarily because the dean asked them to, though they might not be quite sure why. Because participants come with such a variety of needs and goals, Collegium also tries to put an equally great variety of resources at their disposal to meet those needs. Mentors, speakers, spiritual directors, and fellow participants are all there to engage and to be engaged. Together we try to look at Catholicism as both an intellectual and a spiritual tradition, and try to mine the resources it offers us for the benefit of the participants and their institutions.

A fairly thick set of readings, along with the input of several distinguished speakers, helps provide the intellectual framework. The speakers, usually theologians or historians, help introduce the group to a variety of compelling aspects of the Catholic imagination. They also



strive to make the case, through a variety of different examples, that the church's mission in the world depends very much on its ability to foster the work of the intellectual and to use it wisely. A church which understands itself as universal and very much a part of the world needs the reflection of intellectuals to learn from and speak to the many cultures it engages, and to help it reflect on how to absorb new knowledge and insights. Without its tradition of intellectual engagement, whatever its failings, the church (from the hierarchy to our students) would never have had the resources to adapt to change or to bring what it knows from its own tradition to a changing world.

A group of eight mentors, drawn from a wide variety of disciplines, plays a central role in the week's proceedings. Mentors help with the "translation" process, leading the group to explore what real bearing some of these theological ideas have on their work as geologists, political scientists, law professors, or what have you. Their job, most of all, is to speak from their own experience of shaping a successful intellectual vocation, by sharing the events, decisions, and even happenstance that led them to embrace academic life and to develop a vocation as they have. They also discuss the difficult ties they have encountered, including failures or limits they don't quite know how to overcome.

Mentors also lead small group discussions that give participants a chance to talk about their own aspirations, successes, and fears. That kind of sharing and discussion about who we are, where we come from, and what we want is probably one of the most important qualities of the program. It is crucial for any kind of vocational discernment, and is something that participants engage in throughout the week. Groups organized along disciplinary boundaries (for example, scientists., social scientists, humanities scholars) wrestle with the implications, challenges, and limitations of some of the dominant ideas of Christian thought and the contemporary academy as they relate directly to their field. By the end of the week, discussion has ranged from methodology (no, there is no such thing as Catholic physics) to ethics, teaching, governance, ecclesiastical oversight, approaches to textual criticism, responsibility to students, peers, and the community, and much more.

Each year we also invite a well-known author to read from new and old works, allowing



him or her to become a mentor of another soft in the process. At Loyola Marymount last year, Ron Hansen, author of *Mariette in Ecstasy*, offered a preview of his new novel, *Atticus*, and talked about how his own spirituality and writing intertwine. At Colledgeville in 1994, the Minnesota accent of Jon Hassler brought to life a variety of his characters as they struggled over faith and the meaning of their lives.

Whether in the small or large groups during the day, or late in the evening over a few beers, the simple presence of so many interesting faculty participants makes for one of the best resources for learning. Participants have taken good advantage of that, and even managed in the process to build enduring friendships.

Jim Kelley of Fordham, a former mentor in the program, commented in *America* magazine a few years ago about what an unlikely combination of things we try to do. The work can often be intense. (Notre Dame philosopher Al Plantinga, no slouch when it comes to work, once remarked on the fourth day of a program how much he'd enjoyed his first month there.) But we strive at the same time to leave plenty of time for reflection and relaxation. What seems like too much to accomplish for too many kinds of people in a single week works remarkably well, Kelley suggested, as much as anything because it creates the kind of collegial yet challenging environment most of us really would like to have in our work.

Who Belongs and How We Talk About It

Still, the challenges of the work are many, and there are a lot of misunderstandings that have to be overcome before the work of bringing non-Catholic faculty into the center of the conversation on Catholic institutional identity can succeed.

Language and belonging are two of the key issues. For many of the participants who are not Catholic, belonging is a particularly significant issue. Non-Catholic faculty, on hearing about efforts to strengthen Catholic identity, often wonder if the effort will marginalize them or reduce them to second-tier status. Even simply hearing Catholics or other Christians talk about their own faith can lead other faculty to feel left out and uncomfortable. That sense is



easily exacerbated when the conversation is framed in language that is foreign to the newcomer, especially when that language is theological. Use of particularistic religious language always has the potential to create an insider/outsider dynamic.

Despite this difficulty, after four years of conferences, I'm convinced that failure to engage the language and imagery of the Catholic tradition as richly and clearly as possible would amount to selling us all short--Catholics and non-Catholics alike. As in my opening example on the word vocation, we can too easily underestimate the power of the Catholic legacy. Not all of that legacy will translate well, but somehow we have to test the power of the words, ideas and beliefs that we hold most important, and use them consciously and with due sensitivity. If we cannot or do not bring them into our public conversation in a meaningful way, then there's probably very little value that Catholicism as such can add to the university's main work anyway.

Using the language and images of the Catholic intellectual and spiritual tradition requires sensitivity and willingness to listen to the language of other traditions, as well as a great deal of willingness to explain and clarify. The best thing, perhaps, about framing the discussion in such terms is not only that it respects the conversation partners as real equals, but also that it helps them to know in the clearest terms who Catholics think they are. If we're lucky, in cases where we Catholics fail to live up to what we aspire to be, our colleagues can hold that image back up to us and help us regain our bearings.

In all the conversations I've had about Collegium and its work, discussion about focusing on Catholic identity has proven to be both the most contentious and the most engaging topic of all. During most of my years in Jesuit education, first as a high-school and college student, and later as a teacher, discussion about the special mission and identity of the institutions has always been Jesuit-centered. Though often reduced to stock phrases like "excellence," or "men and women for others," the mission and charism of the Society of Jesus established the paradigm "Catholic" was implicit in the mix, but certainly less often explicitly articulated. "Jesuit" was undoubtedly an easier word to use: it seemed to signal that we could have the best of Catholicism without having to worry as much about academic



freedom and independence

While Collegium looks at many of the spiritualities of the religious communities that founded most of our Catholic colleges and universities, its focus has always been primarily by necessity and desire on Catholic (rather than Jesuit) identity in colleges and universities. From the time I first conceived of Collegium; I wanted it to be a national program that included not only Jesuit schools; but a wide variety of other Catholic institutions, all of which seemed to be facing the same difficulties I saw at the Jesuit schools. By including other types of institutions in the mix--Benedictine, Francis can, Holy Cross, Vincentian, Dominican, diocesan, and others--also knew that we could better understand Catholicism's diversity.

Well--received as Collegium has been, I've been reminded more than a few times along the way how much fear can be generated by framing the conversation in terms of Catholic identity. Before we ever sponsored any programs, I was startled to hear that people whom I had never met felt sure that they knew what our hidden ecclesial agenda was. Given the contemporary state of church affairs and the continuing debate over Roman and episcopal control over Catholic colleges and universities, I knew that the decision could raise some difficulties, but I also felt that it would open more windows than it closed, since "Catholic" is more pluralistic than "Jesuit." "Jesuit" was never separable from "Catholic," especially not in Ignatius' mind.

In light of the variety of institutions, the only way to frame the program was in terms of Catholic identity. More importantly, though, I believed--and still believe--that Catholicism as a faith tradition and community of inquiry has far more to offer than we often take the time to see. To give one example, the sacramentality that pervades Catholicism the belief that all things in creation somehow mediate God's presence to us is a wonderful starting point for developing a spirituality of the intellectual life.

Even the difficult issues about authority which are inevitable when we talk about Catholic identity can help us to raise questions about to what or whom any of us is accountable in our work. While many thinkers have argued that the best way for an



intellectual to fill his role is to distance himself from the world, my sense is that exactly the opposite is true.¹ We are given the resources and the personal gifts that we have precisely so that we can be of service. Being of service inevitably means holding ourselves accountable to others for what we do. In small group settings and elsewhere, Collegium participants spend time discussing the implications of accountability, whether it be to church, colleagues, a tradition, or the local community.

All of this discussion about authority, language, and belonging turns out to be hard work--work that is too often avoided or manipulated rather than richly engaged. I continue to think that the choice to focus discussion on Catholic identity has been one of the best decisions Collegium could have made, not least because it brings out into the open the fears that really do accompany the prospect of a serious embrace of religious identity. It gives us a chance to face them squarely. Some fears turn out to be better placed than others, but they all need to be heard and acknowledged before the conversation can go very far. Some of us need to talk about our own fears that the religious identity of the institution is being lost, and others need to talk about their fear that religious identity would mean their own marginalization.

In trying to model a good campus conversation about all this, we emphasize the need to get to know what is most important to people and to take each other's concerns seriously. No less importantly, from my perspective, we try to go out of our way to be hospitable and to allay some of the fears about exclusion by showing people they're welcome, by eating well together, and taking time to socialize. This helps build the trust needed to work together on hard issues, as much as it is its own reward.

Collegium might well have focused instead on vaguer language and avoided too many particularly Catholic topics, but my own sense is that this would do a disservice to faculty if we really want them to be full participants in the conversation. In most areas of science, to borrow an example, it is precisely because I don't know enough about the primary ideas or language of the field that I can't be much of a serious participant in their discussion, can't even really credibly challenge them. Collegium tries to find ways--through talks,



presentations, readings, and small-group discussions--to let people understand better who we are and what we're talking about. There and elsewhere, we need to strive to make our language public and accessible, at least by way of explanation of terms, which is not always an easy task for any intellectual. Collegium has had its successes and failures at this, but all in all the experience tells me that it is definitely worth trying.

1. For a recent restatement of the case of the distanced intellectual, see Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Pantheon, 1994). For an eloquent perspective on the necessity of the intellectual's involvement in the world, see Michael Walzer, *The Company of Critics* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

Collegium as Ignatian Discernment

One of the most important things Collegium has achieved, I feel quite certain, is to have helped people perceive more broadly what Catholic means--to see it as an evolving, pluralistic tradition, whose qualities and inner contradictions are not always easy to grasp. The more one looks, of course, the more one can see how varied the scope of Catholic intellectual life has been. The men and women who serve as our mentors in Catholic intellectual history--whether obscure or famous--prove the church's capacity to change and grow, to learn and teach, and to be of service to the world. Fundamentally, I believe that the vocation of the Catholic intellectual, and the Catholic (and Jesuit) college or university entails all of these things. But what it means specifically for each person or institution is something that I can't determine for them, and to which I'd do a disservice if I sought too narrow a definition.

Our mentors all serve in some way to show others how the work may be done, but none of our participants has exactly the same talents or call. In the end, each of us must take the time to find the specific call--as teachers in this or that field, with these or those talents and shortcomings and hopes. The moments in the church's intellectual history that strike me as really interesting and important came about when creative people did precisely that--found their specific calling, used their talents to do something new. This could entail helping the



church learn its way through perplexing times--whether to adapt to new cultures or new discoveries--or finding ways to put what is in our tradition to use in service to the rest of the world. I'd like to see a Catholic intellectual life capable of being highly creative and faithful to our tradition. This hope gives Collegium the particular form and structure it has, a form that borrows a great deal from Ignatian spirituality. For all the focus on Catholic intellectual tradition, and the opportunities we provide participants to engage other Catholic spiritual traditions, Collegium is also at heart an exercise in Ignatian spirituality.

I've sometimes heard it said that we have abandoned our intellectual mission and the emphasis on faith and reason for the "softer" focus on spirituality. More than we usually think, however, putting Ignatian spirituality to work may be one of the best tools we have for nurturing the Catholic intellectual life of the campus.

The Ignatian connection is perhaps obvious to many readers already because of the emphasis we place on discernment of vocation, which is the core purpose of Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises. The attention we place on encouraging each individual to look at his or her own experiences and hopes and desires draws from the Exercises as well. In the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius cautions the director never to presume that he or she knows what it is that the directee ought to discern in favor of. Ignatius trusted that God had different things in store for each person, and that those things would be revealed in the heart of each person. The Exercises were a means to help people get in touch with that. They presumed the freedom of the retreatant to seek for whatever God had in store, with the trust that this is where he or she would ultimately find abiding joy. The presumption runs akin to Frederick Buechner's aphorism that vocation is the place where our hearts, deep desires encounter the world's deep needs. The Exercises also presume the freedom of the director to let the retreatant be led wherever God will lead. The spiritual director's role is to listen and help, but not to get in the way.

I try to make Collegium work very much along this line. While Collegium makes an effort to share ideas about what other institutions are doing to foster their Catholic identity, we also want people to find the sort of vocation that we could never simply hand to them. It



is based on a trust that, given the chance, the Holy Spirit will work where she will, Letting that happen is probably one of the best things we can accomplish, and when it happens, it is extraordinarily gratifying.

Without Clear Answers

My favorite image for both the church and the life of the intellectual comes from the story, in Exodus, of the pilgrim people plugging their way through the desert to find the promised land. They bring some knowledge with them, and turn their backs too often on what they know to be true, but in the end keep looking. I've often wondered if Collegium has not at times failed to give people as many clear and simple answers about Catholic identity as they might need. I've certainly sensed the desire for that, both on the part of Catholic and non-Catholic faculty alike. On the other hand, I know that what we're really engaged in has to be a conversation, a process, a dynamic journey.

A faculty member who participated last year told me that when I had spoken at his school the year before, he was frustrated with my inability to give a simple; linear answer that could be shared by all his colleagues about what the vocation to Catholic intellectual life meant. Nor, he said, did I give a simple answer about what a Collegium workshop could be expected to do for all its participants. After eight days with US, he told me that he now understood why it was not easy to encapsulate the experience, and wondered how he would go home and tell others in any simple fashion. The fact is, if we do our job, people will be able to go home having discovered not only a thing or two about Catholic identity and each other, but also with a renewed sense of vocation, knowing something about themselves and what they want to do that I never could have predicted.

The doctoral mentor of one of our graduate student fellows recently recounted the conversation they had a few days after the summer program. The graduate student, a Protestant at an Ivy League school, had little prior exposure to Catholicism. She recounted what she learned at the various talks, what friends she had made, and what the retreat day was like for her. But she still had a little trouble putting it all together in a way that seemed



convincing and cohesive. When the mentor finally coaxed out a hesitant response, it ran something like this: "Being among the Catholics in the group was hard to sort out. They agreed on a lot less at times than I expected, and debated over points a lot. In the day time, in discussion, they'd disagree even sharply over all sorts of things. Then they'd eat dinner together like old friends. At night over a few beers, the conversation might turn even more animated, with no more agreement than before. The next morning they'd all go to Mass or morning prayer together, as if their disagreements about women in the church; politics, or church authority all meant nothing. "

"That's exactly it! You've got it!" replied the mentor. "That's just who we are." I'm not quite sure if the response was immediately helpful to the grad student, much as it spoke to our diversity and our Eucharistic and communalist faith. We don't all come to quick agreement, and we really don't expect to. But we keep plugging together and working at it.

Collegium does aim, of course, to help people gain some clarity and focus, though I suspect that for many participants, the observations that provide real insight take a long time to understand fully. Our approach to discernment and the intellectual life doesn't mean that participants come away with all the answers, They may more often come away knowing a little more about what the conversation about Catholic (and Jesuit) identity means, and more able to grasp the language in which the conversation is framed. What they may come away with, most of all, is a clearer sense of their own vocation, and some few hints about how they can make that vocation come to life in the institutions where they work.

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RECOMMENDED READING: A SELECTION FROM THE READINGS DISTRIBUTED TO COLLEGIUM PARTICIPANTS

Perhaps the best starting point for an examination of where Catholic intellectual life ought to be going today is *Gaudium et Spes*, the central document on The Church in the Modern World from Vatican II.



Philip Gleason, "In Search of Unity: American Catholic Thought 1920-1960," *The Catholic Historical Review* 75 (April, 1979): 185-205; and "American Catholic Higher Education 1940-1990: The Ideological Context" in George Marsden and Bradley Longfield, eds., *The Secularization of the Academy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). These contribute to a discussion about where Catholic intellectual life has been in this century, and what it means to shape it in the present day.

Andrew Greeley, "The Catholic Imagination and the Catholic University," *Current Issues in Catholic Higher Education*; vol. 12, no.1, pp. 36-40. Shows how Catholicism's sacramental, analogical imagination helps to overcome such dichotomies.

George Marsden, "The Soul of the American University," *First Things* 18 (Dec. 1991): 23-28. An excellent summary of some of the central arguments that appeared in his recent book of the same title (Oxford, 1994). Marsden examines the secularization of Protestant colleges and universities in America over the last one hundred years. (See the review of Marsden in this issue of *Conversations*.)

Walter J. Ong, SJ., "Yeast: a Parable for Catholic Higher Education," *America* 162 (7 April, 1990): 347-363. One of the most hopeful prognoses for how Catholic identity can be made real in the life of the college or university.

William Shea; "Dual Loyalties in Catholic Theology," *Commonweal* 116 (17 Nov. 1992): pp. 9-14. While Shea's focus is on theology, his argument encapsulates the dilemma faced by many intellectuals in disciplines wherein very different types of texts are regarded as sacred.

