

“Collegium and the Futures of Catholic Higher Education”

BY JAMES KELLEY

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Collegium was a June 4-12 summer institute on "Faith and Intellectual Life" held at Fairfield University, a Jesuit university in Connecticut. *Collegium's* subtitle, "Faith and Intellectual Life," was tidier than its ambitions, too abstract for what really happened and not quite accurate. It was not about faith and the intellectual life in general, but the Catholic faith and its relationships to Catholic intellectual life. It was about the institutionalization of these relationships in Catholic colleges and universities, and if and why they might worthily survive. Most important, *Collegium* was not only about faith and the intellectual life, but about the interior life that molds, motivates and sustains both. I had attended numerous academic conferences and a few retreats, but I had never before attended something that tried to be both. At first I found *Collegium* amiably muddled; halfway through I found it courageous; now I think the point of *Collegium* essential for Catholic participation in the renewal of the human spirit the world wants but no longer expects.

***Collegium* Origins**

Before and even during the *Collegium* week, I was never quite sure exactly what it wanted to accomplish. In truth, the institute touched in one way or another on just about every difficult and disputed point in Catholic higher education: survival, identity, mission, relationship to the church, distinctive (if any) contributions to scholarly life and research, academic freedom and the magisterium, women in the church, and the spiritualities (Ignatian, Benedictine, Franciscan, Christian Feminist) of renewal. A thesis proposal as ambitious and diffuse as *Collegium* would not easily pass an alert Ph.D. dissertation



committee. It is worth noting that no official representative of Catholic higher education, no college president, no worried bishop, no ad hoc group of Catholic intellectuals had called for a *Collegium*. Jeanne Knoerle, S.P., said the Lilly Foundation considered its three years' grant (next year at St. John's in Collegeville, Minn., and in 1995 at Loyola-Marymount in Los Angeles) as "risk" money, the kind of initiative Lilly saw as conceptually promising but difficult to realize or evaluate. Its origin was grassroots. Perhaps *Collegium* is something only a younger person, still hearing the siren song of institutionally integrating love of learning and love of God, might think of.

Indeed, *Collegium's* founder and director, Thomas M. Landy, S.J., entered the Jesuits less than seven years ago, in 1986, after completing his B.A. at Fairfield and his M.A. in international relations at the University of Chicago. I thought I discerned the inspiration for *Collegium* in Tom Landy's welcoming remarks when he evoked an undergraduate experience of coherence, integration, commitment and intellectual challenge and wondered whether such integrating experiences would be available for future generations of Catholics. Religious orders can no longer provide colleges and universities they founded with scholars and teachers formed by their integrated vision of education.

Tom Landy quickly added that he had in mind no Catholic "restorationist" project to recapture some mythic golden era of Catholic higher education. It seemed to me that his advisers (among them, Holy Cross historian David O'Brien; Yale professor Bruce Russett; Eva Hooker, C.S.C., an academic vice-president at St. John's, Collegeville, Minn.; Alice Gallin, O.S.U., and *Commonweal* editor Margaret O'Brien Steinfels) contained no such mythmakers. Rather, *Collegium* placed its hopes for Catholic higher education in the continuing power of the renewed spiritualities that motivated its founders. This is one of those rudimentary insights that can and should strike us as both naive and necessary. In the end, I thought the explicit and integrated attention paid to what we might call the "spiritualities of individual and collective renewal" might have been this institute's primary contribution to its participants and its most interesting contribution to the multi-faceted discussion about the fate of Catholic higher education.



Format and Participants

The participants included 33 (7 women) "faculty fellows" who had recently begun teaching at Catholic institutions; 28 (10 women) "graduate fellows" who were completing their Ph.D.'s or holding post-doctorates in either the natural or social sciences or the humanities (only 5 in theology or philosophy) and educated mostly at Ivy, public and private universities (only 6 from Catholic institutions); and 8 "mentors" (representing 8 disciplines and including three women, one non-Catholic professor, one professor from an Ivy League institution and one from the public sector) who facilitated discussions twice daily among a small group of "faculty and graduate fellows."

There were four plenary addresses: Georgetown theologian Monika Rellwig's "The Church as a Learning Church: The Church's Need for Intellectual Reflection"; Boston College theologian Michael Himes's "A Sacramental World View"; Weston School of Theology theologian Brian E. Daley's "Christ and the Catholic University" (see p. 6); Harvard Divinity School professor J. Bryan Hehir's "*Gaudium et Spes*: The Church in the Modern World." Each spoke of an identifiable Catholic intellectual life characterized as critical, Christocentric, sacramental and communitarian. The speakers stayed at least a day to join in the small group and plenary sessions. During these addresses and the commentaries and the discussions that followed, the life of the mind and the life of faith seemed richly interconnected and their sustained dialogue a necessary contribution both for a servant church and for an authentic humanism.

Something More Than an Academic Conference

Collegium had morning and evening prayer, a daily liturgy and even two on-site spiritual directors (Kathleen A. Kanavy of the University of Scranton and Joseph O'Keefe, S.J., of Boston College). Obviously, it aimed deeper than the cognitive and explicitly included an encounter with the Catholic spiritualities that historically grounded those institutions only abstractly conveyed by the lumbering term "Catholic higher education." The sixth day centered entirely and explicitly on "Retreat and Reflection." The schedule read:



"Opportunity to explore one of the major spiritualities operative in Catholic colleges and universities, and to explore a spirituality for participants to build on in the future. Four workshops will be offered, based on Ignatian, Benedictine, Franciscan and Christian Feminist spiritualities." (Here is the place to mention that *Collegium* fellows, and some others, used quite ordinary powers of discernment to locate the nearest bars. The week never felt pious. Evening prayer was scheduled around the N.B.A. finals. This was called "sacramental.")

The five women and four men serving as spiritual directors shaped the retreats around the challenges of integration and discernment in the scholarly life. Virginia Sullivan Finn of Weston entitled her retreat, "How Do I Experience God Within the Context of My Own Intellectual Commitment and Understanding of Faith?" She adopted Ignatian principles of imaginative contemplation to help her group of retreatants discern God's presence in and challenge to their work, teaching and writing. Eileen Currie, M.S.C., entitled her retreat "Listening to My Own Particular Call," and she (as did Jesuit directors Michael Boughton and Joseph O'Keefe) used Ignatian principles of discernment. Vianney Devlin, O.F.M., presented Franciscan spirituality and Eva Hooker the elements of Benedictine spirituality. Jane Redmont and Tom Landy led a group in Christian Feminist spirituality.

Post-*Collegium* Reflections

An important part of Ignatian discernment is wariness about "spurious consolation." Participants received a thick three-ring binder weighing almost three pounds and containing 29 articles about (mostly) Catholic higher education, none of them particularly sanguine. My sociologist's eye was especially drawn to the sobering accounts of the vast Protestant educational enterprises of the last century. Unflinching examination by Protestant authors such as George Marsden and Stanley Hauerwas of how their Christian tradition gradually and voluntarily became "not only entirely peripheral to higher education but in fact came to be seen as absolutely alien to the educational enterprise" offered little solid hope against the likelihood that Catholic colleges and universities might simply take longer to drop any



explicit religious purposes or collective self-understanding.

How much of *Collegium* is wishful thinking? After all, the "graduate fellows" it gathered were not a random sample of even recent Catholic Ph.D.'s or postdoctoral students. They were recruited from about 70 universities through campus ministries. In other words, *Collegium* guaranteed itself an audience likely to be receptive to its arguments for viewing the scholarly and teaching life as a "calling," for the distinctiveness and significance of a Catholic intellectual content and style, and for the continued importance of Catholic higher education. By such recruitment, *Collegium* stacked the odds. Invite them as Catholic intellectuals, and they will interact as Catholic intellectuals.

Still, to those with assigned or self-delegated responsibilities for the future of Catholic higher education, the self-selection of the sample suggests something important. *Collegium* shows there are certifiably promising young scholars--this group had their Ph.D.'s from U.C.L.A., Cornell, Yale, Harvard, State Universities such as Ohio, Iowa and Kansas, as well as from Notre Dame, Georgetown, Boston College and Fordham--strongly attracted to the Catholic ideal of a mutual enrichment of faith and knowledge sought not merely individually but collectively.

Are these among the brightest and the best? Impossible to tell. Each was recommended by her or his thesis director, but there was no required academic ranking. But there's more than one relevant question here, both for applicants and for Catholic institutions. Is it self-evident that "best" should be defined by a purely monochromatic view of measured competence in an academic discipline? How narrow are the beams of the brightest? Do university and college officials talk about the Catholic traditions of the intellectual life and its Christocentric, sacramental and communitarian characteristics? Do university officials and department heads actively seek applicants with ideals that match their university's mission statements?

My own sidelines guess is that administrators of major Catholic universities are often merely "realistic" in their appraisal of just how many young scholars there are who, with encouragement, might wish to transform their careers into a calling within the Catholic



intellectual tradition. I'm willing to think we might be surprised. After all, showing such an interest, by either administrators or scholars, is most often a cause for suspicion. It seems "unprofessional," the last liberal sacrilege. I was not at all surprised when a Harvard postdoctoral reported that none of the Catholic institutions he applied to seemed even remotely interested in whether he had any attachment to their institutional mission. In fact, there was no talk of any "mission." A postdoctoral researcher from the U.C.L.A. School of Medicine told a similar story. She contrasted her recruitment experiences at Catholic colleges with one at a Lutheran liberal arts college where she was explicitly asked how her career goals matched the college's mission statement. No graduate fellow offered a counter-example from Catholic higher education--a candidate being invited to discuss her or his career goals in terms of the institution's mission, including its religious dimensions. Undoubtedly, there are numerous such counter-examples, but I noticed that none of the mentors was able to cite any in departments other than theology and philosophy.

Notre Dame philosopher Alvin Plantinga, who is not a Catholic, thought that a lingering "inferiority complex" made it hard for Catholic academics, still trying to prove they belong, to view Catholic identity as a specifically worthy institutional context for higher learning. Thus they unimaginatively continue to assess their institutional achievements in terms of how far short they fall from, say, the standards of Princeton. In an article entitled "On Christian Scholarship," Professor Plantinga writes: "Princeton is in an important way a *failed* project. ... Hence we can't take Princeton as a model; instead, we must try to learn from its mistakes." After the experience of *Collegium*, Professor Plantinga's statement no longer struck me simply as evangelical chutzpah. I admit, the sentence remains amusing. But it no longer seems absurd.

The *Collegium* schedule for June 6 contained this lovely aspiration: "The discussion is not meant in any way to be comprehensive or conclusive but to be *compelling*. That is, to open participants' minds to see what *might be naturally Catholic about the intellectual life*" (emphasis added). If the Catholic tradition is right in its shaky but constant affirmations about the mutuality of faith and reason, about the interrelationships between the "learning"



and the "teaching" church, about the church's role as servant to culture and society, and about the intellectual life as a "calling," then we should expect that these interlocked affirmations, clearly and invitingly expressed, will evoke tentative but generous responses from those on the threshold of their academic lives. Why not act as though we believe what we claim is the core of our tradition?

Although I might have doubted it beforehand, it seems no fatal failure that *Collegium* produced no formulas or specific strategies for the worthy survival of Catholic higher education. More pragmatic types will work on that as best and as circumspectly as they can. Instead, promoting dialogue and spiritual discernment, *Collegium* shamelessly went after the hearts and minds of young intellectuals. It sought to persuade them that the classic Catholic concerns of sacramentality, Christocentrism and the communitarian had a profound cognitive relevance to the life of the mind and that the Ignatian, Benedictine, Franciscan and Christian Feminist spiritualities could still motivate, mold and sustain such a personally and collectively committed scholarly life. At least from June 4 to June 12, I thought I felt and saw the power of this idealism about the intellectual life and the life of faith. Invite them and they will come.

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