

"The Land O'Lakes Statement"

BY DAVID J. O'BRIEN

From *Boston College Magazine*, Winter 1998, by permission.

On October 11, 1962, 2,500 Roman Catholic bishops and leaders of religious orders processed into St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome to launch the ecumenical council, Vatican II. Their intentions were modest: to help Pope John XXIII renew the Church, to return to the sources of faith while taking responsibility for the challenges facing the entire human family. But almost in spite of themselves these men began a revolution whose meaning is still emerging from local churches around the world.

Less than two years after the council had drawn to a close, in July 1967 a small group of Roman Catholics--26 men, almost all priests and educators--gathered at Chicago's O'Hare Airport and boarded a chartered plane bound for a conference center in Land O'Lakes, Wisconsin, which was owned by Notre Dame University. Their goal, like that of the bishops before them, was on the surface simple: to discuss ways Catholic universities might join in the renewal of the Church sparked by Vatican II.

But, also like the bishops before them, the Wisconsin group began a revolution they could not have foretold. As the Church would be permanently changed by Vatican II, North America's Catholic universities would be forever changed by the meeting and resultant statement that became known simple as "Land O'Lakes."

The group's host was Theodore M. Hesburgh, CSC, the dynamic young president of Notre Dame. Since taking charge of Notre Dame in 1952 Hesburgh had become a national leader, moving in the highest circles of education, business, philanthropy and government. Graceful, charismatic and eloquent, he made the case for Catholic higher education in the language of American civic idealism, summoning Catholics to exert themselves for the good of Church and country. He made it clear that Notre Dame's goal was academic excellence and that intellectual seriousness must be a corollary goal for the American Church.



Hesburgh issued the invitation to Land O'Lakes in his role as president of the International Federation of Catholic Universities (IFCU). The federation had called for four regional reports to be developed on "The Nature and Mission of the Catholic University in the Modern World." For the North American report, Hesburgh and Monsignor Louis A. Vachon, rector of Laval University in Quebec, had decided to bring together top educators to produce a document for further discussion on campuses. Then, all four reports would be discussed at a 1968 IFCU meeting in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The group that assembled at Land O'Lakes included many of the most influential leaders of North American Catholic university life: presidents of universities and officials of religious orders, a few laymen, and a couple of bishops, including Archbishop Paul Hallinan of Atlanta, a young U.S. historian who was considered among the bright lights of the Church. Among the laymen attending was *The New York Times* religion reporter and former *Commonweal* editor John Cogley, perhaps the country's best-known Catholic intellectual.

The group included no women, despite the fact that women's colleges accounted for a majority of Catholic institutions of higher education. The stated focus of the discussion was universities--research institutions--of which none were run by women's religious orders. The distinction was artificial, however, because the institutions represented at Land O'Lakes devoted almost all of their resources to undergraduate instruction, not research.

Also notably absent was William Joseph McDonald, rector of The Catholic University of America--the one U.S. university under direct Church control. A critic of the reform movement, McDonald sent a dean, Roy Deferrari, in his stead. Later, McDonald would be the only president of a North American Catholic university to dissent publicly from the Land O'Lakes report.

AGE OF AMBITION

The impetus that led to Land O'Lakes arose from Vatican II and from the deep currents of social change on matters of race, poverty and war stirring U.S. society. But it arose especially from a sense of expansive liberation on Catholic campuses as immigrant, working-class Catholics released their young to become, as Michael Novak's 1964 book phrased it, "a new



generation, American and Catholic."

Between 1945 and 1965 the U.S. Catholic population almost doubled. White collars replaced blue as World War II veterans went to college, took middle class jobs and moved to the suburbs. Church attendance and financial contributions reached all-time highs; so did religious vocations. By 1960, 4.5 million U.S. students attended Catholic elementary and secondary schools; enrollment at Catholic colleges and universities rose from 162,000 in 1940 to 400,000 in 1967. In the U.S. Church, the tide of change--progressive, Americanizing and Americanist--was strong, positive and seemingly irreversible.

For the university presidents attending Land O'Lakes, a primary aim was to affirm their universities' Catholic identity in ways that would satisfy Rome while achieving their goal of academic excellence. The Land O'Lakes participants, including Cogley, had no doubt about the value of their growing institutions to the Church and to American society. Yet they well knew the difficulty of conducting first-class programs out of the office of a religious superior or a provincial. In 1965 the budget of the University of Notre Dame was 40 times that of its sponsoring religious order, the Western Province of the Congregation of the Holy Cross, yet academic and financial decisions still needed to be cleared with local or provincial superiors. A new generation of ambitious presidents found themselves frustrated by the parochial preoccupations and haphazard procedures of their religious communities.

Furthermore, students and their families demanded a first-class education, which meant a professionally qualified faculty, lay or religious. These competent academics in turn insisted on academic freedom and shared responsibility for academic policy. By 1967 most Catholic universities had adopted the 1940 statement on academic freedom of the American Association of University Professors. Conflicts still arose, particularly in the field of theology, but without exception leaders such as those gathered at Land O'Lakes had already affirmed contemporary academic practice.

External pressures reinforced that commitment. The G.I. Bill of Rights amounted to a voucher plan for higher education; the federal government would pay tuition at the college of the student's choice. By 1967 federal tuition support was an essential component of all



private higher education, and with it came accountability. Courts and public officials required evidence of academic integrity and quality from accrediting agencies composed of academic professionals. Yet Vatican authorities made persistent, at times embarrassing, demands for control over governance and theological teaching. Hesburgh himself experienced intervention from Rome early in his presidency when pressure on his religious order forced Notre Dame's press to withdraw from circulation a book with a paper written by the controversial Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray. Just a few years before Land O'Lakes, Roman officials tried to nullify Hesburgh's election as president of the IFCU. And during and after the Vatican Council, there were a number of well-publicized disputes about academic freedom; conflicts once handled quietly by provincials and bishops now involved lay faculty, external academic authorities and the press.

The background to this conflict was the Church's longstanding fight against "modernity," against the critical rationality of the Enlightenment, the historicism of much contemporary philosophy, and the scientific, specialized, culture of the modern university. In the 19th century, the Church stood against "progress, liberalism, and modern civilization," to use the terms of Pius IX's *Syllabus of Errors*. In 1905 the Church condemned the heresy of modernism, which Rome defined as a too uncritical tendency to reinterpret faith and its meaning in terms of modern scholarship. Thus the idea of seeking knowledge by the standards of the modern university violated deep commitments of pre-Vatican II Catholicism.

The growth of Catholic colleges and universities, the favorable American Catholic experience of religious freedom and diversity, and the dramatic movement of ethnic Catholics into the middle class helped erode the social foundations of this countercultural ideal of Catholic intellectual life. For the new generation of vigorous, optimistic presidents who led the major institutions, the time had come to modernize governance, finances and administration, and to reform relations with Church authorities in order to achieve academic respectability and influence.

Vatican II gave the reformers what they needed from the Church. The ecumenical



council boldly affirmed the autonomy of the human sciences, the primacy of conscience in religious matters, the need for ecumenical dialogue with non-Catholics and the importance of lay participation and leadership in church and society. All this appeared to provide theological support for the drive of U.S. academic leaders to raise their institutions to another level of excellence.

The men who gathered at Land O'Lakes in the summer of 1967 were Vatican II Catholics. They believed passionately in the potential of Catholic higher education, and they were determined to carry out reforms needed to reach that potential. Land O'Lakes provided them with an opportunity to meet, to discover that they shared a common vision and to give voice to a message.

FIRST THINGS

Three central issues faced the participants in the Wisconsin seminar: relations with ecclesiastical authorities, academic freedom and its occasional absence, and the seriousness of their academic commitment. Were their universities first of all Catholic, carrying on university work on the basis of that identity? Or were they first of all universities, organizing research and teaching like other universities, then adding other dimensions to that work because they were Catholic? On these questions consensus was complete, indicating that the direction of reform was well established before the conference articulated it.

With Robert Henle, academic vice president of St. Louis University, serving as a sort of recording secretary, the Land O'Lakes document took shape, establishing in its opening sentences the operative terms of the debate: "The Catholic university today must be a university in the full modern sense of the word, with a strong commitment to and concern for academic excellence. To perform its teaching and research function 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 for survival for Catholic universities as for all universities."



Sixty years earlier, Protestant universities had faced a similar conflict. As historian George Marsden observes in his widely discussed book *The Soul of the American University*, Protestant church leaders valued the new methods of scientific inquiry and saw religion increasingly as a matter of personal conviction. Eventually they acquiesced in the removal of theology from the university to the seminary. As a result, Marsden argues, religion lost its once dominant place in American intellectual life.

Later critics charged that Catholic academic reformers were following a similar path. But in fact the Land O'Lakes drafters took a very different position from that of their earlier Protestant counterparts. Instead of shunting theology to the seminary, the Catholic reformers insisted that it not only belonged on campus but that theology provided the defining element of Catholic university identity. "The Catholic university," they wrote, "must be an institution, a community of learners or a community of scholars, in which Catholicism is perceptibly present and effectively operative." Catholicism was to be made "perceptibly present and effectively operative," they contended, "first of all and distinctively by the presence of a group of scholars in all branches of theology." Indeed, they insisted that "theological disciplines are essential to the integrity of any university," and, because they were also "a high priority for the Catholic university," their presence and support constituted a "double obligation of a Catholic university."

Critics also accused the Land O'Lakes reformers of distancing their universities from the Church, but that clearly was not the reformers' intention. Although they insisted on autonomy, they stressed the service rendered to the Church by the university. In the spirit of Vatican II renewal and reform, the men at Land O'Lakes argued that a Catholic university should "examine and evaluate all aspects of the Church" and provide the Church with "continual counsel." In the past, they said, universities had "hardly played this role at all" but now it was to be among their "most important functions." In research, the drafters concluded, universities should give preference to questions of great human urgency and Christian concern. Undergraduate education should be open, with no "forbidden books," and should emphasize "ultimate questions," show concern for the "full human and spiritual



development of the student," and pay attention to the "pressing problems of our era, e.g. civil rights, international development and peace, poverty, etc."

From the start, Land O'Lakes was controversial, but the argument was not primarily about ideas. Controversy instead grew heated because the statement provided a rationale for bold institutional reform. Hesburgh and Paul Reinert, SJ, of St. Louis University--indeed an entire generation of academic leaders and the religious communities to which they belonged--came to believe that their colleges and universities could best serve God and God's people by seeking excellence in teaching and research under new, independent governance structures in which religious leaders shared responsibility with laypeople. As Hesburgh would comment in an interview years later, while others were debating about Catholic identity he and his colleagues at Notre Dame were arranging to give away the university. By the time the group met at Land O'Lakes, Hesburgh and Reinert were already using lay advisory bodies, and each had enlisted influential friends to provide new leadership for his institution. Later that year, Notre Dame and St. Louis University incorporated separately from their sponsoring religious orders. University corporations assumed ownership of the universities, run by independent boards of trustees, which were composed jointly of lay people and members of the sponsoring order. By 1972 almost all U.S. Catholic colleges and universities had taken similar steps.

TUG O' WAR

With a push from university public-affairs offices, the Land O'Lakes manifesto received considerable attention in the secular and religious press. The presidents saw to it that the text was discussed by their faculty, as it provided a useful authority to justify the changes taking place on individual campuses. And the document fulfilled its immediate purpose when Hesburgh, Reinert and others from Land O'Lakes (including two laymen who by then chaired the boards of trustees at Notre Dame and St. Louis) helped draft the IFCU's report to the Vatican at a meeting in Kinshasa the following year.

Later in 1968 a group of delegates from 23 countries met with Vatican officials to hammer out a statement they thought would settle things for years to come. The resulting



document, "The Catholic University in the Modern World," which was approved by Rome, showed the influence of the Land O'Lakes text, especially in its recognition of the need for academic freedom and a degree of university autonomy. But it contained ambiguities, especially regarding the challenge of maintaining "institutional autonomy and academic freedom" at the same time as making Catholicism "perceptibly present and effectively operative" on campuses. The tension between autonomy and identity would create a tug of war that has continued through *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Higher Education. *Ex Corde* was published in 1990 after five years of consultation between the Vatican and U.S. Church and university leaders, and the debate about how it is to be implemented continues, with tension centering on its proposal that those teaching Catholic theology secure a mandate to do so from "competent ecclesiastical authority." Ever since Land O' Lakes, university leaders have consistently rejected such interventions into their academic decision making.

In 1967, at Catholic colleges and universities, some faculty and alumni welcomed the prospect of separate incorporation, but others regarded the Land O'Lakes statement as a significant surrender of Catholic doctrine and discipline. At Catholic University, where separate incorporation was not considered, Rector McDonald immediately repudiated the text and attempted without success to persuade his delegate, Dean Deferrari, to withdraw his signature. In conservative sectors of the Church, Land O'Lakes became an enduring symbol of post-conciliar liberalism, which, the critics claimed, had simply given up the Church's struggle against materialism and Enlightenment rationality, against what Hesburgh called "the onslaught of secularism." Hesburgh found these charges and Rome's constant complaints frustrating, especially since he believed that he and his colleagues spoke for the vast majority of American Catholic intellectuals and theologians.

Nevertheless, over the years, as the enthusiasm for Vatican II renewal ebbed, anxieties about Catholic distinctiveness intensified. Critics such as James Tunstead Burtchaell of Notre Dame, Peter Steinfels of *The New York Times*, and Michael Buckley, SJ, of Boston College affirmed the drive for academic excellence but questioned what they saw as the



erosion of substantive Catholic commitment. Such critical voices became louder, more influential and, to some listeners, more persuasive, even at Notre Dame.

In some ways the critics were right; the Land O'Lakes group did want to reverse the Church's intellectual course. Philip Gleason, the most distinguished historian of American Catholic higher education, has described the document as "a declaration of independence from the hierarchy and a symbolic turning point," which made clear that the Church's "cold war with modernity" was over. Once, Catholic educators had challenged modernity; now they accepted it.

Hesburgh certainly saw it that way. He argued that during the Reformation and the French Revolution secular governments had taken control of the great Catholic universities of the Middle ages, leaving the Church intellectually destitute when it confronted modernity in the 19th century. Confined to seminaries, "an outdated, repetitive and uncreative theology" dominated the Church until a new theology emerging from European universities helped lay the groundwork for Vatican II, he said. The Church in the United States could re-create real Catholic universities, but only if Catholics took modern intellectual life seriously. For too long Catholic universities had been Catholic first, universities second. Now they would have to reverse the emphasis. "The Church does not have to enter this world" of university life, Hesburgh admitted, "but, if it wishes to do so, it must follow the established university rules of freedom and autonomy." Theology would have to make its way as an academic discipline under the same conditions of freedom as other disciplines. It would not automatically be acknowledged as dominant but could exert an influence on other disciplines only through dialogue. Among those in agreement with Hesburgh at Land O'Lakes was Boston College President Michael Walsh, SJ. He too welcomed "the lessening of ecclesiastical control" over university life. "The founding fathers" of Catholic higher education in the United States, Walsh argued, "sought primarily and directly the growth in faith and morals" of their students and "only secondarily did they aim at growth in learning." In contrast, he said, "The Catholic university today seeks growth in learning as its immediate goal." Catholic influence on learning would have to be exerted "not through constraint but



through commitment, not through laws and edicts, but through the convictions and professional dedication of [the university's] members and friends." The Catholic university, Walsh said, *might* exert this influence by means of its institutional commitment, its support for Catholic theology, its encouragement of dialogue between "the sacred and the secular" and its deliberate formation of an active, worshipping community.

Walsh's use of the word *might* indicated that these were opportunities, not achievements. If these goals of Catholic renewal were ignored, or were pursued with less than deliberation, "these other trends [would] reduce the visible Catholic presence to the status of a Newman club and the Catholic university will be no more."

HOW CATHOLIC?

In the three decades since Land O'Lakes, Catholic higher education has prospered in the United States. There are fewer schools, mostly as a result of the closing of smaller colleges founded to educate members of religious communities. At the remaining schools, though, enrollment has risen steadily. The quality of administration and services at Catholic colleges has improved dramatically; finances are stable, and a few schools have begun to build substantial endowments. It is hard to measure educational quality because Catholic universities have resisted collective research, but anecdotal testimony suggests improvements in undergraduate education as well as continuing efforts to establish graduate programs of the first rank. So most observers would conclude that the objective of academic excellence, so central to the vision of the Land O'Lakes reformers, has, at the very least, been pursued with energy and dedication.

Nevertheless, debate about Land O'Lakes has persisted, centering on three issues: academic freedom, institutional autonomy and Catholic presence.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s conflicts over academic freedom drew the most attention. Almost always these conflicts took place in departments of theology and philosophy, where specifically Catholic issues seemed to be at stake. In other fields there has been little question of the legitimate need for academic freedom. On theological matters, universities that remained under the direct sponsorship of a diocese were especially



vulnerable. The Catholic University of America, which is controlled by the U.S. bishops and whose theological faculties operate under a Vatican charter, was beset by a series of challenges to academic freedom. When CU denied tenure to controversial moral theologian Charles Curran in 1966, faculty and students staged a campus strike, forcing the university to retain and tenure him. But in 1988 the university reversed course, dismissing Curran and signaling that academic freedom remained a significant problem in the field of theology. Through *Ex Corde*, Rome has insisted that anyone teaching Catholic theology must hold a Church mandate to do so. The vast majority of American university leaders believe that they cannot accept this arrangement without surrendering their claim to university status.

Thus academic freedom for theologians touches on the related question of institutional autonomy. Rome, and some U.S. bishops, understandably argue that an institution cannot be Catholic if it is not in some juridical way accountable to Church authorities--to the local bishop and the Vatican. On the other side, serious academic leaders have insisted since long before Land O' Lakes that no university can remain an authentic university if its decisions are not made independently. Despite 30 years of conferences and meetings around the globe, this deadlock remains unbroken.

Still, until recently, American Catholic university leaders have enjoyed a close, mutually supportive working relationship with the majority of U.S. bishops. Regular communication, mutual respect and trust, and dialogue about unresolved questions are regarded by most bishops and presidents as adequate to ensure the continued prosperity and fidelity of Catholic colleges and universities. On matters of academic freedom and institutional autonomy, differences persist, but they are limited.

The question of Catholic presence is another matter. Historian Gleason argues that Catholic educators "want their institutions to remain Catholic but . . . they are no longer sure what remaining Catholic means." Such worries are not confined to suspicious ecclesiastical bureaucrats but are increasingly heard among Catholic higher education's most understanding supporters. A consensus is emerging that the *Catholic* aspect of the mission of Catholic colleges and universities requires more deliberate attention. Some proposals include



a closer working relationship with Catholic agencies and apostolic movements, deliberate projects to support Catholic scholarship and the dialogue between faith and culture, and Catholic studies programs and centers to support Catholic intellectual life in areas other than theology. These are all the kind of efforts that Michael Walsh insisted were indispensable.

ORTHODOXY V. PIETY

So, what has Land O'Lakes meant for the American Church?

First, it provided a formula--academic freedom, institutional autonomy and Catholic presence, especially through Catholic theology--under which U.S. Catholic colleges and universities have prospered.

Second, Land O'Lakes pointed the way to a particularly American style of Catholicism, one that recognizes corporate institutional responsibilities--all Catholics are responsible for their churches, after all--but grounds those responsibilities in the free decisions of persons and organizations. If one thing is clear, it is that in a free and pluralistic society such as the United States, faith must make its way by means of persuasion: people will make up their own minds. One factor in that process of voluntary commitment is reasonable discussion. The Land O'Lakes leaders saw how important it was to enable lay Catholics to think through their faith in light of the best modern knowledge, and the leaders hoped that such educated and freely committed Catholics someday would make a Christian difference in the world. That vision, and the realism about freedom that informed it, still sustains the Catholic academic enterprise.

Third, Land O'Lakes was quite clearly an event dominated by the ideas of liberal Catholicism, ideas that enjoyed remarkable support at Vatican II. The fate of Catholic higher education as it has developed since Land O'Lakes is joined very closely to the fate of liberal Catholicism. It is clear now, three decades after the Wisconsin seminar, that there are other options.

One stance, Catholic restorationism, would reemphasize the Catholic side of the Catholic university. It would draw heavily on traditional Catholic intellectual resources that some feel have been ignored, and it would point Catholics toward a countercultural



opposition to modern society. Without rejecting ecumenism or social responsibility, advocates of this position wish to recover a sense of Catholic distinctiveness perhaps blurred by liberal reforms. Another stance is a new spirit of evangelical Catholicism, formed less on traditional teachings and sacraments than on personal Christian conversion and scriptural piety, centered on the person of Jesus and organized in small, fairly intimate communities. This is an evangelical Christian impulse deeply rooted in a culture of freedom, an impulse that complicates efforts to sustain doctrinal coherence and ecclesiastical discipline.

These two alternatives to liberal Catholicism's historic mediation of faith and culture differ in their understanding of the Church, and they speak different theological languages, but they share a common opposition to contemporary culture. Both care for the Church's integrity; the one with a focus on doctrine, the other on personal commitment. Neither group is comfortable with Catholic higher education as it has developed since Land O'Lakes. The one group worries about orthodoxy; the other about commitment. Restorationists decry secularization; evangelicals denounce an "academic captivity" of the faith.

As the Land O'Lakes reformers saw it, America's Catholic colleges and universities are schools first of all, not churches, so Catholic orthodoxy and scriptural piety should not control the intellectual life. In this conviction the reformers reflect the lived reality of modern middle-class life: people are professionals, judged by professional criteria; they are citizens, subject to civic responsibility; and they must find in their faith sources of meaning and value for their lives at work and in the public square. Unless one wishes to settle for a dualism that leaves religion confined to either private life or a separatist subculture, there is no substitute for continuing dialogue between faith and culture. That is what Hesburgh meant when he said that the reformed Catholic university was more Catholic, not less, than the Catholic university of the pre-Land O'Lakes era.

The architects of the Catholic academic revolution believed their universities should play a critical role in the life of the Church. They believed their universities should welcome religious strangers and accept the possibility that God can be encountered in unexpected places, even outside the Catholic subculture. They accepted the need to articulate faith and



its meanings in language accessible to non Catholics. They believed that their institutions should help form Catholics as competent citizens who share their communities and the world with others. The Land O'Lakes leaders wanted to make sure that the languages of Christianity remained vital and available, but they also wanted to be sure that Christians could talk of important matters with non Christians, in part because they agreed with Pope John XXIII that all people share responsibility for human history. Shared responsibility means that the future is still to be determined. Thirty years ago Catholic educators trusted laypeople enough to welcome them as the faculty, staff, trustees, benefactors and friends who now constitute those schools. The meanings of Land O'Lakes, like the meanings of Vatican II, are properly contested. Their future depends, as it should, on the people who devote themselves to the service of both Church and Catholic universities.

David J. O'Brien is the author of *Catholic Higher Education at the Crossroads: Prospects and Projects* (University of Santa Clara Press, 1995).

