

CATHOLIC IDENTITY: EMERGING CONSENSUS

Transcript of address by
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Twenty-eight years and two weeks ago, about two dozen distinguished Catholic educators, bishops, and religious leaders gathered at Land O'Lakes, Wisconsin, and issued a statement declaring that "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."

The Catholic university, the statement continued, "must have a true autonomy and academic freedom," but it must also be an institution where "Catholicism is perceptibly present and effectively operative."

No book on Catholic higher education, indeed no history of American Catholicism, is complete without reference to this Magna Carta for modern Catholic higher education. It is there in the record books, so to speak, like the Third Council of Baltimore with its decree on parochial schooling or the founding of The Catholic University of America in 1887.

My thesis today is a simple one: You are attending a gathering that is potentially as important as Land O'Lakes--a gathering that, if you so choose, has every likelihood of entering the history books as signaling a new moment in Catholic higher education, in American Catholicism and, just maybe, in our society's effort to achieve an authentic pluralism.

If this meeting is to be historic, it will not be due to anything that we can cram into the next 67 hours. It will be a landmark because more than 450 educators, many of you presidents--key people in a web of over 200 schools across the United States and by that very fact key people in a church of 56 million members--because you leave here not with a statement, not with all the answers, but with a collective will to focus on a common set of questions.

Land O'Lakes, we should remember, did not just happen at a four-day meeting. It was the crystallization of a process long under way. We can trace it in the title of Philip Gleason's forthcoming history of Catholic

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higher education in the 20th century, "Contending With Modernity," and we can trace it in the subheadings of his closing chapters: "Self-Criticism and the Search for Excellence," "The Splintering of the Scholastic Synthesis," "The Contagion of Liberty," and "The Acceptance of Modernity."

Every step in that process was subject to misrepresentations and exaggerations. Every step elicited fears and accusations. Not all those fears were baseless. No great change comes about without introducing or skirting serious problems, problems that the beneficiaries of that change will eventually have to address.

Nor was that earlier process ever unanimous. It was carried forward by a core of farseeing, risk-taking educators and church leaders. There were only 26 signatories of the Land O'Lakes statement, all male and representing only nine universities.

I believe that a similar process is now taking place. Well over five years ago, I began an investigation that, after many months of interruptions, became a front-page story in *The New York Times*. I began with the intention of reporting on the challenges faced by all sorts of colleges and universities in maintaining a religious identity: Southern Baptist, Baylor and Southern Methodist; Mormon, Brigham Young; and Jewish, Yeshiva; no less than Catholic, Fordham, DePaul or Santa Clara. In the end we limited the story to Catholic schools. That was where the action was, where a whole family of schools seemed to be tottering on the edge of fateful change.

Frankly, what I discovered as I spoke with deans and presidents and faculty members left me stunned.

At the higher levels, there were repeated assurances that the commitment to Catholic identity had in no way weakened, although there was widespread admission that it might be more difficult to implement under current circumstances.

At the faculty level, in some quarters I found frustration and anger at the perceived loss of Catholic identity. Among other faculty members, I found resentment at the very idea that the Catholic identity of their institution meant anything beyond what they considered one or two vestigial theology courses and certain ceremonial flourishes—in other words, meant anything that might actually bear on their own teaching and research.

I found a non-Catholic political scientist wondering why, in view of the richness of Catholic thought and experience in relating God and Caesar, the government department at his Catholic university should be interchangeable with that of any first-rank secular school.

I found faculty members who said that job candidates with Catholic backgrounds or known interests in relating their research to religious or ethical questions would actually be at a disadvantage, because the philosophy department did not want to look too Catholic or the biology department did not want to give the impression of letting religious considerations intrude into strictly scientific decisions.

Above all, I found confusion and euphemism and evasion and a tremendous sense that the subject could not be discussed openly and candidly.

So it came as no surprise to me when I later read a speech in which Father Malloy of Notre Dame warned there was "no guarantee at all" that within the next 50 years most Catholic institutions of higher education would not "shuck off their religious identity as they become more academically sophisticated."

"If it happens," he added, "it will not be by way of a vote, but simply by default."

My 1991 article reported the agitation and debate over this issue already under way, but I may have underestimated what is today obvious. Slowly, steadily, a consensus about this new set of challenges for Catholic higher education has been emerging—by no means among everyone but, as at Land O' Lakes, among a core of thoughtful leaders.

It is noteworthy how many different ways the issue is described: People speak of the Catholic identity or mission or character. They speak of many Catholic institutions being at risk, or threatened, or uncertain, or problematic, or in need of clarification or reassertion, or in danger of becoming purely formal or ritualistic, and so on.

Those variations reflect, first of all, the wide variety of Catholic Institutions and the corresponding differences in which their concern about Catholic identity is manifest.

A campus like Notre Dame, a kind of island unto itself with an overwhelmingly Catholic student body, differs even from a Georgetown, immersed in the life of the nation's capital and with a much smaller proportion

of Catholic students. And both differ radically from a school like New Rochelle with its multiple campuses and its mix of a traditional college-age, liberal-arts student body with a far greater number of adult degree-seekers, many of them part-time, from minority groups and not Catholic.

Large universities with national aspirations, with extensive graduate programs or with prominent professional schools, confront a very different dynamic than small liberal-arts colleges.

The multiple ways of stating this concern also reflect the sensitivity surrounding it. What are the right words to indicate urgency but not alarmism or panic? To many educators, suggestions that their traditional religious mission was in any way at risk seem to disparage all that they have devoted their lives to and to ignore the very real accomplishments of recent years. Indeed concerns about Catholic identity have not infrequently been advanced with an accusatory edge--as though, who is to blame were a more important question than what can we do--and with a dubious nostalgia for a lost golden age.

No wonder savvy and sensitive educators have groped for tentative language, shied from sweeping and dramatic claims, even at the risk of underplaying the urgency of the problem.

But the new consensus goes beyond this core concern. Let me suggest eight more components of it:

1. You can't go home again. A return to the past is neither desirable nor possible, not in terms of the long-lost homogeneity of students' religious knowledge and background nor in terms of the embarrassing conformity once enforced by fiat.
2. The intellectual and academic environment has changed. Peggy has described some of those changes. They include what has been described as the shift from epistemology to community as foundational for inquiry. In "Exiles From Eden," Mark R. Schwehn, professor of humanities and dean at Valparaiso University, writes: "The answers to basic human questions such as what we know, or how should we live, or in what or whom shall we place our hope have come to depend, for a large number of intellectuals, upon the answer to a prior question, who are we?"

This is another form of the realization, as Alasdair MacIntyre has argued and Peggy mentioned, that all thinking is tradition-based, all inquiry tradition-directed. This in turn has led to the recognition that there is no college or university pure and simple. There are different

kinds of colleges and universities, "beholden to diverse educational traditions," according to David Burrell. The Catholic university and the Enlightenment university may not be exactly the same creature, although a crucial test for either, as Burrell also points out, is the extent to which its tradition is open to free inquiry and does not rule some queries out antecedently.

Last year, Rebecca Blank, a distinguished MIT-trained neoclassical economist from Northwestern, gave several lectures at Notre Dame, mostly dealing with poverty. But the subject of one lecture was how her religious convictions--she is an active member of the United Church of Christ-- affected her work as an economist. Professor Blank began by saying how glad she was to be able to give a lecture at Notre Dame that she couldn't give at Northwestern. Why not? First, she said, because probably no one would come. Second, she said, because if some people did come, they wouldn't know what she was talking about. And third, she said, because her dean would probably drop by to remind her that Northwestern (which, of course, was founded by Methodists) was a secular institution.

3. Catholic identity in institutions of higher education must be manifest in their intellectual life as well as in their liturgical celebration and pastoral services. All Catholic colleges and universities strove to make sure that their academic offerings were comparable to those of secular schools, and as confidence collapsed in the so-called neoscholastic synthesis of the 1940s and '50s, Catholic identity was increasingly associated with campus worship, campus ministry, community service, and the tone and regulation of student life.

In many cases, those responsible for such activities rose to the challenge even as they often had to struggle for respect and resources. But part of today's consensus, I believe, is that this is not enough. As Peggy emphasized, Catholic Christianity is a tradition of the mind as well as the heart and will.

Today's consensus has gone beyond polemical questions like: Is there a Catholic mathematics, a Catholic chemistry, a Catholic accounting, or a Catholic business administration? It recognizes that the rich Catholic intellectual heritage which should be communicated, explored, questioned, revised, and renewed does not pertain in precisely the same way and to the same extent to every field and discipline. But while that heritage could be less obviously relevant to chemistry and accounting than to political theory or literature, even chemistry and mathematics departments,

let alone business administration, might be hospitable to certain philosophical, ethical or cross-disciplinary reflections and conversation that are unlikely to occur elsewhere.

4. Catholic identity must be something that pervades the work and life of a college or university and is not limited to the theology department. It is a tragedy that efforts to implement *Ex corde Ecclesiae* have so misdirected energy and attention to the certification and standing of theology professors. With most Catholic schools requiring no more than two semesters of theology, those courses could meet the severest standards of orthodoxy without guaranteeing any significant grappling with the Catholic heritage if it is not present elsewhere in the curriculum.

5. The future of Catholic identity will ultimately rest in the hands of the laity and in the hands of the faculty. By the year 2001, it is estimated that there will be an average of 14 Jesuits working on each of that order's campuses. Sponsoring religious orders, especially when enlivened by a vision, can yet wield a tremendous influence, but unless a campus exhibits a willingness rare in late 20th-century academia to submit to an authoritarian style, no vision can be implemented and perpetuated without the assent and support of a majority of faculty members. "The Catholicity of our institutions," Father Malloy has said, "will in the end be determined by the faculty."

6. The question of Catholic identity is therefore inescapably linked to hiring policies. This is a point of enormous delicacy but also of enormous importance.

George Marsden, whose history of the secularization of the nation's Protestant colleges and universities is required reading for anyone seriously interested in this question, has put the matter unflinchingly:

"Once a church-related institution adopts the policy that it will hire simply 'the best qualified candidates,' it is simply a matter of time until its faculty will have an ideological profile essentially like that of the faculty at every other mainstream university. The first loyalties of faculty members will be to the national cultures of their professions rather than to any local or ecclesiastical traditions. Faculty members become essentially interchangeable parts in a standardized national system.

"At first," Marsden continues, schools "can count on some continuity with their traditions based on informal ties and self-selection of those congenial to their heritage. Within a generation, however, there is bound to be a shift, and since departmental faculties typically have virtual autonomy

in hiring, it becomes impossible to reverse the trend and the church tradition becomes vestigial."

For a long time I thought that what Marsden so bluntly points out was the great unmentionable. Nothing else was as likely to provoke heated charges of discrimination or of violations of religious or academic freedom as the suggestion that the religious factor, whether in terms of personal commitment or in terms of scholarly interests in research and teaching, should play some part in hiring decisions.

Are you going to check baptismal certificates, monitor Mass attendance, banish wavering or lapsed Catholics, exclude non-Catholics or make them second-class campus citizens? Are not religious convictions, outside of theology, extraneous to responsible scholarship? Are not schools in danger of violating equal opportunity statutes, losing federal funds, or being subject to civil suits for discrimination?

I do not take those concerns and protests lightly, even if they can often be, as I found, reflexive rather than reflective, and sometimes showing unseemly haste to acquiesce in questionable interpretations of the law. And let me be clear: So far there is no consensus about how to respond to these concerns. Where there is consensus is that the hiring question, no matter how explosive, must be faced.

There is also consensus that this is not an either / or situation, that a wide range of choices regarding "religious heritage as a factor in hiring" exists between the total banishment of religious considerations or the diplomatic, "Here's our mission statement. Are you comfortable with it?" to the confessional-oath policies of some evangelical schools.

"The puzzle," writes Marsden, "is how to hold the middle ground. How is it possible, short of reverting to repressive strictures of earlier days, to maintain a vital religious presence, including an intellectual presence, in a modern university? Is there any way to retain the balance of being a university that is both Catholic and open to many other points of view?"

Having recognized the problem, the next most important step in this whole process toward a new era may be for a group like ACCU to organize a systematic and authoritative review of the options, one conducted, say, by a blue-ribbon committee whose members' scholarly credentials and parallel commitments to both Catholic identity and the academic are impeccable.

But those observations already indicate a seventh point of the consensus.

7. Catholic identity must embrace scholars of other faiths and of no faith not simply as admissible presences in Catholic higher education but as essential to its purposes. It is clear that in many cases Protestants, Jews, adherents of other religions, and agnostics and atheists may bring critical scholarly insight and good will to the Catholic campus mission for beyond what many Catholics offer.

8. The whole process of clarifying and strengthening Catholic identity can be easily undermined by the intervention of nonacademic ecclesiastical authorities. Catholic identity simply cannot be imposed or assured by fiat. It must be implanted by persuasion and sustained, ultimately, by love. If that cause is associated with nonacademic control over academic matters, the effort is half-lost before it has begun.

Let me summarize what I believe constitutes today's consensus. At its core is the realization that sustaining and revivifying Catholic identity is chief among Catholic higher education's challenges for the near future and has already inspired an outpouring of positive initiatives, from campus-based and national discussions to the establishment of a host of new institutes and programs.

Around this core, eight points:

First, there is no return to an imagined golden age.

Second, a changed intellectual context, with a growing appreciation of community, tradition, diversity and multiculturalism, offers opportunities to explain the intellectual and educational integrity of Catholic higher education to the academic world.

Third, the issue is one of intellectual life, of focus in research and teaching as well of student affairs, campus worship and ministry, and community service.

Fourth, the issue is far broader than the place and character of theology in the school.

Fifth, the issue ultimately will be decided by the attitudes of lay people and of faculty.

Sixth, the place in hiring of religious commitment and religious interests and competencies—in research and teaching must be confronted, and clear, meaningful policies developed.

Seventh, such policies must include, not exclude, non-Catholic scholars.

And eighth, infringements of academic autonomy by church authorities will be counterproductive.

At this point I hear someone asking: If we're agreed on so much, what's the big problem? In fact, I see not one big problem but four middle-sized obstacles. Some already have been suggested in my remarks.

The first, for example, is the defensiveness, the suspicion, the leaping to conclusions, the feeling of being under attack that can be stirred by these discussions or by even the most tentative proposal to make an institution's Catholic mission a significant factor in the hiring or tenure process. Fortunately, an increasing number of you are showing that a calm, open, participatory approach, untainted by the threat of premature or imposed solutions and more concerned about creating the future than defending the past, can create the atmosphere essential to a viable discussion.

The second obstacle is something that journalistic noses become quick to detect. Being a proper Boy Scout, I will simply describe it as the SD factor, for self-deception. Other, more rowdy types might want to initial it differently.

I sensed SD factor when I found in conversations about hiring that the impressive official version differed radically from what actually happened in the trenches. What but SD explained the official devotion to Catholic identity that was accompanied by promotional brochures and catalogs, by ads in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, by fund-raising campaigns in which all reference to *Catholic* had been either entirely eliminated, reduced to the minimum or duly obscured behind a word like *Jesuit*. Sometimes I was reminded of men who slip off their wedding rings when they go on business trips.

Less difficult to discuss but harder to confront are the entrenched power and national cultures of the academic disciplines and professions to which George Marsden referred. You know better than I the extent to which the disciplines, not the particular schools, define what is to be considered excellence, organize the subcategories of fields, and control the real loyalties, aspirations and career paths of faculty.

It is not only the problem of the job candidate in economics who is deterred by her discipline from developing a subspecialty in economics and theology or even cultivating an interest in interdisciplinary conversation of that sort. It is also the problem of the economics department members who feel that their own reputations vis-a-vis their discipline's standards (and therefore their marketability) might be tainted by actively recruiting someone with a theological interest. There is a conflict here that must be acknowledged and confronted head-on.

Finally, there also is a similar conflict with secular academia over academic freedom. I am in firm agreement with the Land O'Lakes statement's affirmation of excellence, autonomy, and academic freedom, as well as an effectively operative Catholic presence.

Unfortunately, there are notions of academic freedom widespread in the United States that, practically speaking, hold these defining aims to be incompatible. Historians have not missed the anti-religious--and I might add, anti-Catholic--strain that has run through both the academy's formal and informal understandings of academic freedom. George Bernard Shaw quipped that a Catholic university was a contradiction in terms, while John Henry Newman argued at length why a secular university was a contradiction in terms because it excluded from its scope a central set of questions and area of knowledge. We know which view is more popular, the sound bite or the argument.

I am not suggesting that Catholic educators work themselves into a lather of victimization over this fact. They simply need to recognize that in their world serious misunderstanding and, yes, even bigotry still sometimes operate--and to be prepared to name and challenge it when necessary.

Different images come to my mind when I try to sum up this gathering. A launching pad. A frontier. A mountain valley. They all suggest a point reached with difficulty but now the staging area for a departure into new, uncharted territory.

You need to overcome the doubts, anxieties, nagging uncertainties that beset anyone daring to attempt something new. There is, after all, a world out there of people, many of whom we respect, absolutely convinced that there are no other alternatives in higher education except narrow

institutions of indoctrination and the religious featurelessness of most college and university life. To defy that conventional wisdom, to explore the unexplored, you need to know the direction you want to travel, but you also must be willing to move forward without a fully filled-in map, without all the answers, without, in your case, a new synthesis, a grand educational theory or a guaranteed route through all the tangles of academic freedom, faculty fears, and a church struggling with pluralism.

You need to go forward together. Over 200 schools have a much better chance of accomplishing collectively what would be a very risky expedition for one or two or a dozen isolated institutions.

American Catholicism's array of colleges and universities, absolutely unparalleled in the world, was not created without risk taking and readiness to venture something new. Make this gathering worthy of that history. Make it the moment where it becomes obvious that, through your creativity, enlivened by God's spirit, there can be something new under the sun in higher education.