

Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

Volume 34 | Issue 1

Article 5

10-1-2008

Are We Still Jesuit? Catholic?

Charles L. Currie, S.J.

Recommended Citation

Currie, S.J., Charles L. (2008) "Are We Still Jesuit? Catholic?," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 34, Article 5.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol34/iss1/5>

ARE WE STILL JESUIT? CATHOLIC?

*A Short History of How
We got to Where We Are*

By Charles L. Currie, S.J.

*Charles L. Currie, S.J. is president of the
AJCU. This article is based on his
keynote address at the twenty-fifth
anniversary of the Bannan Institute at
Santa Clara University, May 2, 2008.*



When I was a student at Fordham University in the late forties to early fifties, no one was asking “Is Fordham still Jesuit and Catholic?” There were too many Jesuits walking around in long, black cassocks, essentially everyone on campus was Catholic, there was a tightly structured curriculum centered on neo-scholastic philosophy — more than 30 credits of it, and a benevolent dictator Jesuit served as dean of students. Today, in a very different world, all too regularly I am asked is _____ still Jesuit? Catholic?



Early Saint Peter's College Jesuits circa 1880. Photo courtesy of Saint Peter's College Archive Department.

Some Historical Notes on the Identity Question

The issue of Jesuit, Catholic identity has a most interesting history, with many of the same questions and themes playing over and over again, with different accents, and in many different contexts. Discussions on just what makes a university Catholic, and how a Catholic university should relate to the church and the local bishop, date long before *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, and indeed go back at least to the University of Paris, where Bishop Tempier censured theses of Thomas Aquinas, only to have wiser heads prevail and canonize him about fifty years later.

More recently, in 1949 we had the beginnings of a gentle and sometimes not so gentle tug of war between the

International Federation of Catholic Universities (IFCU) and the Vatican Congregation on Catholic Education. Under the leadership of Fr. Theodore Hesburgh, C.S.C., President of the University of Notre Dame, and with the support of Pope Paul VI, IFCU evolved into an organization increasingly independent of the congregation, to the chagrin of the congregation and foreshadowing tensions accompanying the development of *Ex corde*. Meeting in Tokyo in 1965, IFCU decided to develop a document on the distinctive character of a Catholic university in the light of the recently published Vatican II document, *The Church in the Modern World*.

As part of this effort, Fr. Hesburgh hosted a meeting at the Notre Dame villa in Wisconsin in 1967, from which resulted the famous (or, to its critics, infamous) *Land O'Lakes Statement: The Nature of the Contemporary Catholic*

University. This statement helped frame the issues that have been the basis for tensions between Church authorities and American Catholic higher education for over 40 years, especially when it insisted that

...the Catholic university must be a university in the full modern sense of the word, with a strong commitment to and concern for academic freedom, and that this institutional autonomy and academic freedom are

essential conditions of life and growth, and indeed of survival for Catholic universities, as for all universities.

Critics of this so-called "Declaration of Independence," often forget the distinguished composition of the group issuing the statement. It included two bishops, two high-ranking monsignors, one of whom is now a cardinal

(Cardinal McCarrick), the superior general of the Congregation of the Holy Cross, the assistant superior general of the Society of Jesus, and the presidents of Notre Dame, Boston College, Fordham, Georgetown and St. Louis. Also forgotten is that of the ten sections of the document, only the first spoke of autonomy and academic freedom. The other nine sections were devoted to how Catholic universities could assure that Catholicism would be "perceptibly present and effectively operative."

Five years later, after years of negotiation between Cardinal Garrone, the prefect of the congregation on Catholic education, and IFCU, the document, *The Catholic University in the Modern World* appeared. The Congregation was reluctant to approve the document because it envisioned "university institutions without statutory bonds linking them to ecclesiastical authorities." This issue of a juridical connection between universities and the Church as essential to a Catholic university would later be a neuralgic issue in the discussions of *Ex corde Ecclesiae*.

Discussions leading to the revision of canon law began soon after, in 1976. For the first time, canon law would contain a section on higher education (canons 808-13), and the debate began about a "canonical mission" for theologians (or "mandate" then *mandatum* as it would later be called). Despite prolonged attempts to eliminate this canon, including a last minute visit to Pope John Paul II, the mandate appeared in the final text, only to be largely ignored, until *Ex corde* would resurrect the issue.

By 1985, a draft of a *Schema on Higher Education* appeared, and vigorous discussions on what would

become the apostolic constitution, *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, had begun. The first draft led Fr. Hesburgh to note, in a comment as relevant today as it was then, that the draft posed a terrible dilemma for Catholic universities, "to choose between being real universities and being really Catholic, when in fact, they are already both." Significant consultation led to a final version of *Ex corde*, issued in August, 1990. The final document had removed many of the objectionable elements of previous drafts.

"Part I: Identity and Mission" presented a magnanimous vision of the Catholic university which included many of the ideas from Land O'Lakes and The Catholic University in the Modern World. "Part II: General Norms" reflected the concern for control dating back to 1949, and laid the basis for complementary specific ordinances to be developed by local bishops' conferences to fit regional circumstances.

Readers would recognize in *Ex corde* that the characteristics cited for a Catholic university were almost the same as those described in the 1972 document, *The Catholic University in the Modern World*.

Unfortunately, for the next nine years, much of the conversation focused on Part II and the norms developed by the U.S. bishops, especially the requirement of a *mandatum* for theologians. Colleges and universities spent time and energy on the defensive, distracting them from the more important task of trying to realize grand vision of Part I with its magnanimous ideals for a Catholic university in rich dialogue with culture, and the place where the Church does its thinking.

Despite the worst fears of a fierce stand-off between bishops and theologians, and bishops and universities, the past eight years have witnessed mostly good relationships, with the *mandatum* being handled quietly, as both bishops and institutions demonstrated mutual respect and understanding. There has probably been more helpful contact among bishops, theologians and presidents than ever before. Colleges and universities have been able to concentrate on attempts to realize the Catholic identity envisioned by the first part of *Ex corde*.

Meanwhile, Other Challenges

Concurrently with the development of the issue of Catholic identity, Catholic colleges and universities in the United States were undergoing massive and sweeping changes in response to a whole range of pressures and challenges. Let me cite only three.

Monsignor John Tracy Ellis' famous query in 1955, "Where are the Catholic intellectual leaders?" was the most prominent of many voices critical of the quality

The strong presidents behind this progress are often faulted for sacrificing Catholic identity in the urgency to grow and develop.

of Catholic higher education at that time. Despite the pockets of quality that did exist in a number of colleges and universities, these criticisms by and large struck home. They stimulated dramatic efforts to improve the academic and institutional quality of Catholic colleges and universities in the U.S.

A second major stimulus for change was the Second Vatican Council. The Council's document, *Gaudium et Spes*, on the Church in the Modern World, proposed a new ecclesiology moving the church from the serene, lordly mountaintop of certitude and clarity down into the messy valley of human challenges, risks and ambiguities, a move that to this day leaves many uncomfortable, if not openly resistant. In fact, one might say that many of today's tensions and struggles are ecclesiological. The Council also created new opportunities for lay leadership by emphasizing the responsibility identified with one's baptism, and celebrated a new openness to dialogue, ecumenism and diversity. Jesuit campuses responded quickly and enthusiastically to these new emphases.

A third stimulus for change was major growth, encouraged by readily available federal dollars for on-campus construction and for student financial aid. Colleges and universities grew dramatically in size, complexity and diversity.

Responding to all of these challenges and opportunities and more, Catholic, and specifically Jesuit colleges and universities have made dramatic strides in the past 40 years in academic and institutional quality, professionalism, and lay leadership that have led to new respect among their peer institutions. The strong presidents behind this progress are often faulted for sacrificing Catholic identity in the urgency to



The delegates and concelebrants of GC35 enter the Gesu for the mass celebrated by the new superior general, Fr. Adolpho Nicolas, S.J.
©2008 Don Doll, S.J.

grow and develop. In fairness to them, we need to recognize that, without their ambitious vision, Catholic higher education would not be here today, trying to foster that identity.

A number of vocal critics see the end result as “Catholic lite” or not Catholic at all. George Marsden (*The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief*), James Burtchaell (*The Dying of the Light: the Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches*), and Philip Gleason (*Contending with Modernity*) see us at various stages along the same road that led to the secularization of many Protestant institutions. Most recently, Melanie Morey and John Piderit (*Catholic Higher Education: A Culture in Crisis*) register their doubts about our future because our lay leaders lack the extensive formation in a tradition that prepared clergy and religious to lead Catholic institutions. David O’Brien (*From the Heart of the American Church*) and Alice Gallin, OSU, are more sanguine observers, seeing many opportunities for a vigorous, engaged Catholic identity and mission to transform not only the American Church but American higher education. Michael Buckley, S.J., (*The Catholic University as Promise and Project*) David Hollenbach, S.J., (“Is Tolerance Enough? The Catholic University and the Common Good,” *Conversations*, Spring, 1998), and, most recently, Scott Appleby, in his February 2008 address to the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, all strike a more positive response to the identity question.

The Jesuit Dimension

Jesuit colleges and universities were very much part of the same realities and pressures affecting their peer Catholic institutions. Encouraged by canon lawyer, Fr. John McGrath, and influenced by Vatican II’s insistence on the important role of lay leadership, Jesuit communities took the major step of incorporating separately from the college or university and turning over institutional control to a predominately lay board. This step was taken with no little angst on the part of those who saw this as too readily handing over a precious asset for which they had given their lives.

In 1969, in the midst of the separate incorporation discussions, Jesuits and their colleagues gathered at Regis in Denver for discussions on Jesuit identity, many of which are still relevant today.

Not only the institutions, but also Jesuit provincials were concerned about identity in the midst of change. In 1974-75, the inaugural project (Project One) of the newly-established Jesuit Conference of Provincials was

an attempt to develop a national rationale for Jesuit higher education. After long and widespread consultation that seemed to be going nowhere, the effort was abandoned in favor of a letter from the American Provincials, entitled *The Jesuit Mission in Higher Education*, and individual Jesuit communities were encouraged to develop rationales in collaboration with their lay colleagues. These rationales can be seen as the predecessors of today’s institutional mission statements.

The 32nd General Congregation of the Jesuits in 1975 created a major new agenda for Jesuit colleges and universities when, in its Decree 4, it stated that “The mission of the Society of Jesus today is the service of faith, of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement,” emphasizing that every Jesuit and every Jesuit institution had to be committed to a faith that does justice, a commitment that has been re-stated and clarified in each succeeding General Congregation.

Beginning in the eighties, there were various efforts to explore questions of our Jesuit, Catholic identity, including a meeting on Jesuit-lay collaboration at Creighton University in 1988. *Assembly 1989: Jesuit Ministry in Higher Education* at Georgetown brought together the largest ever group of Jesuits and colleagues engaged in higher education, with Fr. Kolvenbach deliv-



ering the keynote address. This very successful assembly led not only to the National Seminar on Jesuit Higher Education and its publication, *Conversations*, but to subsequent gatherings of campus representatives engaged in "identity and mission" activities.

One of the great influences on contemporary Jesuit colleges and universities was the brutal murder of six Jesuits and their two co-workers at the Universidad Centroamericana, the UCA in El Salvador on November 16, 1989. This was an attack on Jesuits and on a Jesuit university committed to what Fr. Ignacio Ellacuria, the rector and main target of the assassins, called a "new kind of university" reflecting the Jesuit commitment to a faith that does justice and, deeply committed to the "national reality" of poverty and oppression. This commitment was made as a university, engaged in teaching, research and "social projection." Evidence of the impact on our campuses of what happened not only in campus memorials, but more importantly, in the ways in which that event has influenced how our universities educate students and engage society.

The twenty-fifth anniversary of the Jesuit commitment to a faith that does justice was celebrated at Santa Clara in October 2000, with Fr. Kolvenbach's memorable address raising the commitment to a new level of seri-

ousness and clarity. This particular address has had an almost unprecedented impact on our institutions, leading to a commitment to educate for solidarity in a globalizing world

Mission and Identity Activity

The Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities (AJCU) has conducted three surveys (in 1997, 2004 and 2008) of mission and identity activity on our campuses. Frs. Joseph Appleyard and Howard Gray published an article reviewing this activity in the Fall 2000 issue of *Conversations*. A reading of the AJCU reports, the Appleyard-Gray article, the discussions at the annual meetings of mission and identity coordinators, and the Hayworth and Barry article in this issue of *Conversations* shows an obvious and significant development in the sophistication and effectiveness of this activity on each of our 28 campuses.

The intent of all these efforts is to develop a critical mass, a sufficient number of effective people, strategically placed and capable of influencing the institution, who

Below: Undated photo of the New York Province Jesuits, courtesy of Saint Peter's College Archives.





Murmuratio, or 'murmuring' after a mass by Francis de Melo, S.J., Bombay provincial. Murmuring is the unique procedure in which, without promoting a candidate, the delegates consult one another only one at a time to ask what they may know about leading Jesuits who might be a good general.

©2008 Don Doll, S.J.

are committed to the identity and mission of the college or university.

In addition to the programs tailored for individual campuses, a number of collaborative efforts are underway. They include the Heartland-Delta Conferences and Faculty Conversations, the Western Conversations, and the recently inaugurated Eastern Conversations. The AJCU-sponsored Leadership Development Seminar, now entering its sixth year, has enrolled nearly 200 leaders and potential leaders currently working in AJCU schools

in a program meant to develop women and men committed to mission-driven, effective leadership. A new Heartland-Delta Colleagues Program is being developed to offer an in-depth experience of mission through four

components: the development of a cohort; an experience of the Spiritual Exercises; an immersion experience; and an online course on the history and spirituality of Jesuit higher education.

All of this activity reflects a seriousness about foster-

ing the Jesuit, Catholic dimension of our colleges and universities that runs counter to the charges that, deliberately or through inattention, we have lost or are losing our identity. Of course, not only our critics, but we ourselves can ask whether all of this is enough now and into the future. Considering the reality that more and more of our new faculty and staff arrive on our campuses with little or no experience of "Jesuit" or "Catholic," and that many of our lay colleagues most familiar with these traditions are retiring, we clearly have a formidable task ahead. The pessimism of a Marsden or Burtchaell seems excessive, but their fears provide a healthy antidote to naïve optimism that everything will work out just fine.

Some Hard Questions

Throughout the long history of concern for our Jesuit, Catholic identity, a number of questions persist. Let me try to deal briefly with just a few of them.

How can/should we relate "Identity" and "Mission"?

Our identity is who we are; our mission is what we do. Some of our colleagues prefer to talk more about "mis-

*We are trying to
create something that
never existed.*

sion" than about "identity," noting that while they do not or cannot share our Jesuit, Catholic identity, they happily share the mission which resonates with their own identity. Identity can be seen as something static, closed and even coercive. Mission can be seen as more dynamic, open and inviting. Appleyard and Gray point out that both terms are objectionable if they suggest exclusion, while both are acceptable if they suggest there are many forms of identity and many ways to contribute to the mission that can embody the spirit of Jesuit education. Our campuses are increasingly sensitive to this, e.g., by expressing identity and mission in operational ways that relate to the experiences of women and men of different faith traditions and background.

What do we mean by "Catholic" and Jesuit"

Clearly, there are different understandings about what it means to be a Catholic college or university today. I had mentioned earlier that this can be related to different ecclesiologies or understandings of (and comfort levels with) Church. At one extreme is a Church kept relatively pure and unsullied by limiting interaction with the "secularizing" influences of the world around it. At the other extreme is a church so deeply embedded in the surrounding culture as to be almost indistinguishable from it.

Most of us live somewhere in between, being comfortable with the healthy, if challenging interaction with our surrounding culture that *Ex corde* describes as the role of the Catholic university:

(a Catholic university) is... a primary and privileged place for a fruitful dialogue between the Gospel and culture... A faith that places itself at the margin of what is human, of what is therefore culture, would be a faith unfaithful to the fullness of what the Word of God manifests and reveals, a decapitated faith, worse still, a faith in the process of self-annihilation. (#44)

There is not the same polarity in talking about "Jesuit" as there is about "Catholic," but there are differences about what is truly "Jesuit" or "Ignatian," what the recent congregations really meant, whether we have gone too far with our pursuit of a faith that does justice, especially in a Jesuit academic setting, and whether we have sold the "family business" in a bargain sale.

Can we be "Jesuit" without Jesuits, or at least without many of them?

The reality is clear. At least in the short term, we are running out of Jesuits. Morey and Piderit point out one obvious consequence of this: we are losing those who have embodied the stories and traditions of our colleges and universities. Are we replacing them with women and men who can keep those stories and traditions alive?

Not only our critics, but we ourselves can ask whether all of this is enough now and into the future.

I happen to think that we are fortunate to have for this task, a spirituality developed by a layman for lay women and men. Ignatian spirituality resonates not only with lay colleagues, but also with life on our campuses, with its world-affirming emphasis on seeking God in all things, its restless and magnanimous pursuit of the *magis*, its special concern for the individual person, its focus on Christ as the contagious model for our adulthood, its commitment to partnerships, and its linking faith with the pursuit of justice. Because this vision will be necessary to keep alive the Jesuit or Ignatian identity in our schools, it is especially encouraging to see the increasing numbers of colleagues participating in the *Spiritual Exercises*, the basis of that vision.

Is seriousness about identity and mission really compatible with the reality and demands of today's academy?

Denise Carmody notes that, for Catholic colleagues, discussions of identity may raise fears of litmus tests for orthodoxy, a loss of academic rigor, and estrangement from the broader academy. The discussion may conjure up visions of hierarchical interference and the demise of academic freedom, but, when successful, the discussion can lead to the conscious appropriation of who we are. Our colleagues who are skeptical about, if not opposed to, identity and mission activities, can stimulate us to make sure such activities are not excuses for failing to meet the highest standards of the academy, but rather are opportunities to energize what we do.

Looking to the Future

Monika Hellwig would often point out that we are not trying to recover something that has been lost, some neatly packaged, precisely described and circumscribed identity. Rather, we are trying to create something that has never existed: a Jesuit, Catholic identity combining Ignatian spirituality, the Catholic intellectual tradition and Catholic social teaching, all forged with diverse colleagues, in a pluralistic, postmodern university setting, while facing all of the challenges of a globalizing world.

The magnanimous vision of the first part of *Ex corde* reflects this world view, as does Pope Benedict's recent address to Catholic educators, when he emphasized that Catholic identity for universities is not a question of

statistics nor a question of orthodoxy; rather colleges and universities are privileged places for a dynamic dialogue between faith and reason, Gospel and culture, with the dialogue reaching out to embrace the whole world, especially the world of the poor and disadvantaged. The recent Jesuit general congregation and the words of our new superior general echo the same message.

All the excellent activity to foster our Jesuit, Catholic identity and mission on our campuses, including a vibrant campus ministry, is not enough unless these efforts are part of a larger coordinated effort to make Catholic intellectual life and Catholic social teaching “perceptibly present and effectively operative” in our colleges and universities.

It is encouraging to see the development of Catholic Studies programs of various kinds on more than half of our campuses, more and more faculty research and teaching that reflect a Jesuit, Catholic identity in the selection of research topics and curricular content, in student living and learning communities, and in the ever increasing immersion experiences, not only for students, but for faculty, administrators and trustees. In the spirit of the *magis*, there is always more we can and need to do.

Peter Steinfels adds a note of caution:

Ultimately, there is in fact no panacea, no silver bullet, no once-and-for-all solution to ensure the Catholic identity of Catholic higher education. Episcopally credentialed theologians, new institutes, programs in Catholic studies, inner-city service projects, peace and justice programs, faculty retreats, faculty seminars, student retreats, ethics across the curriculum, special chairs, prestigious lecture series – no one thing will do it, but rather a constant alertness to opportunities, initiatives on many fronts, with some successes, some failures, no quitting.

No Quitting

For those who ask “Are we still Jesuit and Catholic?” we can respond that we are indeed trying mightily to realize the promise of being Jesuit and Catholic in a globalizing world.

To those critics who reject our vision for their own different vision, we can insist that we welcome dialogue and conversation. We can both learn from one another. Better still, we might work together in a venture that can help transform not only our colleges and universities, but through them our Church, nation and world. ■



Undated photo of New York Jesuits, photo courtesy of Saint Peter's College Archives.