

# **Catholic Higher Education, American Secularization, and the Catholic Intellectual Tradition: Rediscovering Mission from the Margins**

## **Introduction: Catholic Higher Education Today**

Catholic higher education in the United States stands at a crossroads. The “baby bust” stemming from the 2008 recession as well as ongoing pressures on parents and families means that all colleges, particularly those that serve less elite tiers of students, are increasingly in a position of having to fill seats however they can in order to survive, much less thrive.<sup>1</sup> The Covid-19 pandemic has caused a widespread decline in college enrollments, notably among more marginal and vulnerable populations of students.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, societal trends as well as self-inflicted wounds on the part of the church such as the sexual abuse crisis make Catholicism a less compelling vision (or, in marketing parlance, “brand”) for its educational institutions.<sup>3</sup>

This essay thus seeks to examine the bind into which this situation puts Catholic institutions, usually resulting in either a strong (to the point of overbearing) emphasis on Catholic identity in order to attract those most interested or a(n) (intentional or unintentional) de-emphasis in order to attract those least interested. The latter is particularly tempting for mainstream Catholic institutions in light of the aforementioned secularizing trends that have shrunk the traditional core audience for Catholic educational institutions. Neither of these approaches adequately serves the vision of the Second Vatican Council that Catholic institutions would be a “leaven in the world.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nathan D. Grawe, *Demographics and the Demand for Higher Education* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> National Student Clearinghouse Research Center <https://nscresearchcenter.org/stay-informed/>.

<sup>3</sup> On problems with branding language and Catholic mission, see

<sup>4</sup> This phrase from *Gaudium et Spes* has become emblematic of an approach to Catholic identity in higher education particularly. See Thomas Landy, ed., *As Leaven in the World: Catholic Perspectives on Faith, Vocation, and the Intellectual Life* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), which uses this idea as a motif.

The first part of this essay will examine the recent past of Catholic higher education, which came as a response to the Second Vatican Council and the subsequent Land O'Lakes conference. After weathering controversies around *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* during the 1980s and 1990s, the “consensus” of this era is now rapidly crumbling, with little clarity as to what might replace it. The second part of this essay looks at the contemporary challenges that have unwound this consensus. The third and final section examines how Catholic mission in higher education today must be grounded in contemporary – not just historical – theologies of mission in order to accomplish its purpose.

### **Catholic Higher Education Approaching the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Land O'Lakes**

Few events in the history of U.S. Catholic higher education have impacted its ethos as significantly as the Land O'Lakes meeting of 1967. This conference established the template for more than a half of century of institutional development.<sup>5</sup> It sought to chart both an internal course for institutions and a *modus vivendi* with church authorities. For a number of reasons, as this study will show, the latter in particular proved fragile and in sometimes elusive, especially with the onset of the papacy of John Paul II in 1978.

The Land O'Lakes meeting was a response to the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and its renewal of Catholic life more broadly. The Council addressed questions of Catholic education in *Gravissimum educationis*, but the emphasis of this document focuses significant attention on pontifical institutions of higher learning which have a much greater degree of control by church authorities.<sup>6</sup> The U.S. situation, with a multitude of Catholic institutions devoted to educating traditional undergraduate lay people, was an outlier in this sense, particularly at the time. There

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<sup>5</sup> Philip Gleason, *Contending with Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995),

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_gravissimum-educationis\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_gravissimum-educationis_en.html)

was thus a need to translate Vatican II and its ideas pertaining to higher education for the American context, especially during the postwar baby boom years in which college enrollments soared.<sup>7</sup>

The Land O'Lakes meeting and statement owed much to the work of Theodore Hesburgh, C.S.C., President of the University of Notre Dame, who had spent the previous 10 years transforming that institution into a credible modern university.<sup>8</sup> That effort had not come without strong resistance even from alumni.<sup>9</sup> It represented the culmination of a series of efforts going back several decades to increase the intellectual character of Catholic higher educational institutions, fighting their perception as mostly focused on career education on the one hand and catechesis on the other.<sup>10</sup> Earlier efforts such as the work of Sister Madeleva Wolff, C.S.C. to train sisters for theology, also figured into this trajectory.<sup>11</sup> Collaborators with Hesburgh at the time of Land O'Lakes included most notably Rev. Paul Reinert, S.J., of Saint Louis University.<sup>12</sup>

Key to the Land O'Lakes consensus was the shift of most institutions from control by sponsoring religious congregations to boards including laypeople.<sup>13</sup> This turned out to be a providential move within the broader context of events, as the same period witnessed a massive exodus of priests and religious, particularly brothers and sisters.<sup>14</sup> The consequences of this shift were manifold, both on a financial level and in terms of institutional mission. Financially, the members of sponsoring congregations often offset many expenses for the institutions through the

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<sup>7</sup> On the immediate postwar era, see William P. Leahy, S.J., *Adapting to America* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1991), 133-34.

<sup>8</sup> Joel R. Connelly and Howard J. Dooley, *Hesburgh's Notre Dame: Triumph in Transition* (New York: Hawthorne Books, 1972) 35.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 177-79: Ambrose F. Dudley, president of the Notre Dame Alumni Association in this period set off a controversy by arguing the need for colleges to inspire patriotism and to feature student athletes as leaders.

<sup>10</sup> John Tracy Ellis, "American Catholics and the Intellectual Life" is the most famous distillation of this discourse.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Ann Hinsdale, IHM, *Women Shaping Theology*

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<sup>13</sup> Gallin,

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low cost of their labor, and thus served as a kind of “living endowment.”<sup>15</sup> On the level of mission, this presence meant that stakeholders in the Catholic mission of the institution were constantly present and involved in various facets of campus life.

The statement produced by the Land O’Lakes gathering famously argued that a Catholic university “must be a university in the full modern sense of the word, with a strong commitment to and concern for academic excellence.”<sup>16</sup> This concern reflects the anxieties of the era, particularly the desire on the part of Catholic university leaders for their schools to be seen as serious institutions rather than extensions of parochial education. The discussion of “Some Characteristics of Undergraduate Education” is notable for its emphasis on ultimate questions, human development, and social problems of the era.<sup>17</sup> Preparation for careers is barely mentioned despite the fact that many Catholic universities at the time, including the most prominent such as Notre Dame, had long included professional schools and “professionalism” as it was then called at the time had been an issue in higher education well beyond Catholic institutions going back to the time of Robert Maynard Hutchins’ reforms at the University of Chicago.<sup>18</sup>

Overall, the Land O’Lakes conference issued its statement in a context in which Catholic institutions felt internal and external pressure to conform further to secular educational standards.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, much like the Council itself, the statement and the overall ethos which it encouraged had unintended consequences which were construed positively and negatively in different circles. A few institutions voluntarily gave up their Catholic identity in this period,

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<sup>15</sup> Anthony J. Dosen, CM, *Catholic Higher Education in the 1960s*, 181.

<sup>16</sup> “Land O’Lakes Statement: The Nature of the Contemporary Catholic University” in Alice Gallin, O.S.U., ed., *American Catholic Higher Education* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 7.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

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<sup>19</sup> Gallin, *Independence*,

often with the idea that this “secularization” was the result of what Vatican II wished.<sup>20</sup> Others, particularly in New York State, felt pressure to minimize Catholic language to have access to public funds (“Bundy money”), with mixed success.<sup>21</sup> Those institutions, while often remaining factually “Catholic,” needed to forswear official Catholic status for these financial reasons. Practically overnight, then, a number of institutions went from a sectarian, *in loco parentis* Catholic model to being deliberately indistinguishable from secular institutions.<sup>22</sup>

The consensus established by Land O’Lakes faced several kinds of cross-pressures in the years in which it obtained. The first of these was the existence of Catholic institutions within a higher education landscape subject to “recessions” in enrollment, particularly during the 1980s when the “baby boom” generation was fully graduated from college.<sup>23</sup> The return of these dynamics in the 2010s, which has thus far claimed even once-prominent Catholic institutions such as the College of New Rochelle and gutted the liberal arts of several others, spells the end of the Land O’Lakes era.<sup>24</sup> If, as enrollment officials frequently remind academics, margin drives mission, there were clear examples in which enrollment declines combined with financial mismanagement fatally undermined mission.<sup>25</sup>

The drafting and implementation of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* during the papacy of John Paul II (1978-2005) represented a direct challenge to the Land O’Lakes approach to Catholic higher

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<sup>20</sup> Mary Luke Tobin, S.L., one of the women who acted as observers at Vatican II, defends the secularization of Webster College in *Hope Is an Open Door* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon), 62, characterizing it as transfer to a lay board when in fact it went significantly beyond what most institutions did in response to Land O’Lakes. The present-day university’s official history characterizes it as “the first U.S. Catholic college to become legally secular.” <http://library.webster.edu/archives/findingaids/madison/madisonwebsterhistory.html>. The other notable example of this was Manhattanville College in Purchase, New York.

<sup>21</sup> Gallin,

<sup>22</sup> This phenomenon mirrored the overall dynamics within the church of this period described by Garry Wills in *Bare Ruined Choirs*.

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<sup>24</sup> <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/02/25/college-new-rochelle-announces-it-will-likely-close-year>

<sup>25</sup> The story of Wheeling University, formerly Wheeling Jesuit University, is illustrative of this trend

education.<sup>26</sup> As one conservative supporter of *Ex Corde* has opined, the document was meant to address in part the fact that many Catholic universities “had experienced a crisis of identity and an attenuation in religious mission during the preceding quarter century.”<sup>27</sup> This was particularly true during the earlier stages of the drafting process when it appeared that onerous standards for demonstrating Catholicity would be applied.<sup>28</sup> While these did not end up being implemented, they established a perceived atmosphere of tension between universities and the church hierarchy, and the formation of various watchdog groups to highlight perceived lack of fidelity to Catholic teaching on campuses. This led various clerics and influential lay leaders to seek alternatives.

The actual text of *Ex Corde* turned out to be relatively irenic given initial expectations. It speaks eloquently of the university as “academic community which, in a rigorous and critical fashion, assists in the protection and advancement of human dignity and of a cultural heritage through research, teaching and various services offered to the local, national and international communities.”<sup>29</sup> In some ways this language is not far removed from the Land O’Lakes statement. What remained controversial, however, was the requirement for a licensing process for theologians, including meeting with the local bishop to obtain a *mandatum* indicating that they were teaching Catholic theology.<sup>30</sup>

Coming roughly halfway into the period defined by Land O’Lakes, *Ex Corde* thus occasioned a kind of taking stock of Catholic mission in relationship to their ongoing

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<sup>26</sup> Philip Gleason, “The American Background of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*” in Leo O’Donovan, S.J., ed., *Catholic Universities in Church and Society* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1993), 2.

<sup>27</sup> Wilson D. Miscamble, C.S.C., “A ‘Magna Carta’ Still to Be Adopted” in Anthony Casamento, CSMA and Michele Riondino, eds., *Ex Corde Ecclesiae: Reflections After 30 Years* (Strathfield, NSW: St. Paul’s Publications, 2022), 18.

<sup>28</sup> Journalist Kenneth A. Briggs documents some of the early stages of this process in *Holy Siege* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 182-8.

<sup>29</sup> *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* 12

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development as educational institutions. A number of Catholic institutions, most notably Georgetown University, took initiatives to examine and strengthen their language around Catholic identity.<sup>31</sup> Institutions took new notice of “mission drift” that had occurred during the previous decades and wrote mission statements articulating the way in which their founding Catholic identity continued to influence their ongoing existence. For mainstream institutions, then, this represented a revisiting of themes from the period when Land O’Lakes was issued, with an eye especially to the changed context for mission on campuses with drastically fewer representatives of founding religious congregations (or otherwise representatives of Catholicism) in prominent positions or on their campuses at all.

The alternatives pursued by conservatives for whom *Ex Corde* did not do enough to push back against the Land O’Lakes consensus ended up taking the form of an informal network of Catholic colleges and universities that charted a different course. Many of these institutions were new, often small liberal arts colleges with a “Great Books” curriculum; others were legacy institutions that took a more conservative tack for ideological and strategic reasons.<sup>32</sup> With the sponsorship of one of the watchdog groups mentioned above, the Cardinal Newman Society, they have coalesced into the *Newman Guide* network, named for the publication aimed at encouraging conservative Catholics to send their children to these institutions. The book explicitly distinguishes the schools featured there from “the typical secularized Catholic campus” and characterizes them as “faithful” Catholic institutions.<sup>33</sup> This rhetoric serves both an ideological and a marketing purpose, distinguishing institutions from their peers but also establishing their place within the culture wars.

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<sup>31</sup> Bruce Douglass, “Centered Pluralism: Report of a Faculty Seminar” in Wilcox, *Enhancing Religious Identity*

<sup>32</sup> For more on Great Books institutions, see *A Great Idea at the Time*

<sup>33</sup> *The Newman Guide to Choosing a Catholic College* (Virginia: Cardinal Newman Society, 2018), 9-10.

The era inaugurated by Land O'Lakes is ending even though many of its institutional legacies and ideological battles continues. The fragmentation of models on ideological lines continues and deepens, but new forms of fragmentation have set in. R. Scott Appleby's 2008 advice to stay the course and continue to adjust no longer seems viable.<sup>34</sup> The available paths forward for many institutions have shifted significantly – mostly by narrowing – in that period. Smaller institutions particularly – whether in the mainstream or the “Newman Guide” mold – find themselves in a very precarious situation. In a marketized higher education environment with fewer “customers” each year, stasis is not an option – growth (whether in enrollment, new campus facilities, or both) and decline (closure or evacuation of mission and the liberal arts) appear to be the only options.

Catholic colleges are thus “squeezed” in a sense by raw demography and the ongoing secularization of American life. Does secularization undercut the possibility for religiously-affiliated institutions to continue operating and serving the broad public in substantial numbers? It is to the latter phenomenon that this study now turns.

### **Secularization and Its Impact on U.S. Catholicism**

Secularization has become, somewhat quietly, a defining feature of American life in recent decades. Up until fairly recently, many sociologists viewed the U.S. through the lens of “rational choice” theories that argued that the “free market” in religion established by the Constitution inoculated the country from the kind of secularization found in Europe.<sup>35</sup> In the last decade, this dynamic has changed significantly. Practice and affiliation with religion have

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<sup>34</sup> Anthony J. Dosen, C.M., *Catholic Higher Education in the 1960s* (Information Age Publish, 2009), 258.

<sup>35</sup> Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America* is the classic of this genre.



declined rapidly, particularly among younger generations, and the rate of return in the later years of young adulthood for marriage and childrearing has also dropped precipitously.<sup>36</sup>

Political partisanship has been both a cause of secularization and an effect of it. Religion, particularly Christianity, has become increasingly identified with conservative political views and voting patterns.<sup>37</sup> This in turn feeds into dynamics in which politics or other pursuits replace religion for many people as a source of meaning for themselves and social connection to others.<sup>38</sup> Secularization thus does not necessarily express itself virulently, but rather often as a kind of indifference to religion and its questions. It ought to be read alongside other survey data showing that family and childrearing no longer occupy as significant a place in people's expectations for themselves and their children.<sup>39</sup> While religious teachings, particularly in a Catholic context, often emphasize marriage and family, the decline of both phenomena are not necessarily causally linked to one another but rather to broader societal trends.

Disaffiliation among Catholics takes on a different shape than it does among other religious groups in the United States such as Evangelical Christians. This is partially due to the Catholic conception of religious identity in which even a "lapsed" Catholic or someone who joins another religion never technically ceases to be Catholic.<sup>40</sup> It is also true, however, in that for many Catholics this theological reality has been paralleled by a kind of appreciation and internalization of a Catholic upbringing.<sup>41</sup>

The clerical sexual abuse crisis has been a major driver of Catholic disaffiliation.<sup>42</sup> All the evidence points to this, with declines particularly steep in places such as Massachusetts

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<sup>39</sup> Pew Research Center, Parent Survey.

<sup>40</sup> Stephen Bullivant, *Nonverts*, 178.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 185:

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

where this has been an especially salient issue.<sup>43</sup> That said, those who disaffiliate do not necessarily become atheists with no interest in religion.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, among “nones,” the default religious position looks like less atheism than a thin version of “spiritual but not religious.” In this sense, the significance of religious heritage in decision-making on questions related to education remains an open question.

Given the legacy of Catholic colleges and universities as institutions founded primarily to serve Catholics facing discrimination or proselytism elsewhere, this significant reduction in numbers in the church raises a number of challenges. In particular, it increases the already-existing temptation to secularize (that is, remove or pare back any pretense of being a Catholic institution) in pursuit of prestige or survival. As Alice Gallin, O.S.U., remarked, many institutions have already “not been able to articulate with precision the characteristics” representative of Catholic identity.<sup>45</sup> This is a problem in a demographic context in which institutional maintenance barely works as a short-term much less a long-term survival strategy for institutions.

Traditionally, Catholic schooling, particularly at the high school level, has helped foster continued church affiliation through life.<sup>46</sup> They have also traditionally served as “feeders” to Catholic colleges. Catholic school enrollment, however, has dropped by 21% since 2010, with high closure numbers in elementary schools particularly.<sup>47</sup> These numbers reversed somewhat due to typically less-stringent Covid-19 lockdown policies particularly in places where schools remained closed for all of the 2020-21 school year, but it is likely these numbers will revert to

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<sup>43</sup> “Change in Catholic Adherents Rate Between 2010 and 2020”

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<sup>45</sup> Alice Gallin, O.S.U., *Negotiating Identity* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 182.

<sup>46</sup> Christian Smith, *Young Catholic Americans*; Paul Perl and Mark M. Gray, “Catholic Schooling and Disaffiliation from Catholicism” in *Journal for Social-Scientific Study of Religion*

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broader trends.<sup>48</sup> These trends indicate less students being explicitly prepared for Catholic higher education, and credit agencies among others have taken notice and lowered ratings for Catholic institutions in expectation of continuing enrollment decline.<sup>49</sup>

Secularization thus presents a clear challenge to Catholic colleges and universities, but the solution is not readily apparent. For Newman Guide schools, it means appealing to and fostering the continuation of a subculture of committed conservative Catholics who view these institutions as bulwarks protecting their children from what they view as cultural evils tolerated at other institutions. This approach has a market but is questionably sustainable except for the most robust of these institutions, as even these often rely on the same preprofessional programs and majors as mainstream schools. For more mainstream institutions, the choice becomes whether to transform or to secularize.

Daniel Hendrickson, SJ has studied the question of secularization and Jesuit higher education at length in dialogue with the work of Charles Taylor. He does so by articulating what he calls “pedagogies of fullness” in the Jesuit tradition that can help answer some of the challenges posed by secularizing culture.<sup>50</sup> The broader question this approach raises, however, is how to convince students that these approaches are worthwhile. This is particularly a problem due to the steep decline of liberal arts majors – and thus the culture that liberal arts education brings – within American higher education generally, including Catholic institutions.<sup>51</sup>

Within this changing context, it is all too easy for institutions to “drift” into situations that, while understandable in their origins, become untenable for the long term. Gerald Beyer and James

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<sup>48</sup>[https://www.ncea.org/NCEA/Who\\_We\\_Are/About\\_Catholic\\_Schools/NCEA/Who\\_We\\_Are/About\\_Catholic\\_Schools/Catholic\\_School\\_Data/Catholic\\_School\\_Data.aspx?hkey=86ec3eb1-b329-4e98-9f0e-f271dc6b8d50](https://www.ncea.org/NCEA/Who_We_Are/About_Catholic_Schools/NCEA/Who_We_Are/About_Catholic_Schools/Catholic_School_Data/Catholic_School_Data.aspx?hkey=86ec3eb1-b329-4e98-9f0e-f271dc6b8d50)

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2021/03/05/narrowing-enrollment-pipeline-p pressures-roman-catholic-colleges>

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Keenan, SJ have both demonstrated in important recent studies the ways in which workplace ethics at Catholic institutions, particularly in the treatment of adjunct faculty and staff, have departed from Catholic social teaching.<sup>52</sup> This holds true in other ways, particularly under the broad rubric of what has become known as the corporatization of universities – dynamics of institutions can change rapidly due to the availability of money to pursue certain projects rather than others.

To prevent this kind of “mission drift,” it is necessary to have a clear and up-to-date sense of mission. At a Catholic institution, mission ought to be connected to what the church understands as mission, even as this clearly plays out differently in the educational context. The final section of this study will consider how contemporary theologies of mission can shed light on the mission of Catholic colleges and universities.

### **Rediscovering Mission**

Mission in higher education is typically framed broadly in terms of the overall purpose of the institution. This fits into the broader secular context in which any institution of any kind formulates a mission statement. In the Catholic context, however, *mission* takes on a different valence. Mission here refers ultimately to the project of the church in the world. This field of inquiry has taken off particularly in parts of the world where the church has been growing in recent decades, such as Asia and Africa. The final section of this essay will argue that bringing together missiology, particularly insights from these parts of the world, with concrete questions of mission in the context of higher education can yield insights for responding to the challenge of secularization. Engaging secularizing American culture involves drawing upon the Catholic

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intellectual tradition as a *living* tradition which extends far beyond the confines of the Euro-American world.

Pope Francis has approached his entire papacy through the lens of mission, viewed not as proselytism but as the ministry and work of the church.<sup>53</sup> This approach has been quite distinct from the “new evangelization” favored by his predecessors John Paul II and Benedict XVI, in part because it seems less focused on conversion (whether internal or external) and more on example. The approach to missionary conversion is most evident in his first major document, *Evangelii Gaudium*, in which he lays out his vision of discipleship. Stephen Bevens has called the approach taken by Francis a “missiology of attraction.”<sup>54</sup>

This approach is grounded in new theologies of mission that have come out of the experience of the church in lands where it lacks the hegemonic past that it has had in Europe. While some have proposed that a “reverse mission” will come from these countries as a kind of evangelization or proselytization of a godless West, it is more significant in the context of this study that thinkers in these contexts have elaborated the meaning of mission in a way that resonates with the challenges faced by Catholic higher education today.<sup>55</sup>

Lamin Sanneh has written critically about the way in which many missionaries to Africa and other parts of the world equated Christianity with civilization. This he argued, misled people and sowed “seeds of disenchantment,” since it was easy to see the abuses of Western civilization and colonialism as part and parcel of Christianity.<sup>56</sup> As Sanneh puts it, the gospel could not be equated with the good works produced by Christians such as educational institutions or

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<sup>53</sup> Stephen Bevens, “Pope Francis’s Missiology of Attraction,” *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 43 (2019), contrasts this approach to the “New Evangelization” adopted by his immediate predecessors.

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<sup>56</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 230.

hospitals.<sup>57</sup> What is important for Sanneh in this regard is that the emphasis on the “civilizing” aspects of Christianity tended to get in the way of inculturating it among the people. If Christianity is identified with European civilization, this undercuts its embrace by non-Europeans and integration with their civilization.

Clearly an educational institution has a different kind of Catholic mission from a missionary enterprise, but Sanneh’s distinctions point to some important observations about Catholic mission in such institutions. In an educational institution, the educational work itself certainly expresses the mission of the institution – as a school – but not the *Catholic* mission as such. This mission must come from the presence of Catholics and Catholicism – in its local reality rather than construed as an ideal type – within the institution itself. The institution itself thus can become a place of inculturation, but in order to do so it must be meaningfully Catholic. Properly understood, this is the opposite of sectarian, but rests in a delicate equilibrium between sectarianism and secularization.

Enrique Dussel, like Sanneh, has been concerned about the implications of missionary work particularly in his case for the peoples of Latin America.

Robert Schreiter has argued that mission has changed in several respects since the Council, a parallel argument to what I have made above concerning Land O’Lakes.<sup>58</sup>

Susan Bigelow Reynolds has coined the idea of “slow conversion” for thinking about solidarity, and this is a helpful context for envisioning institutional mission, also.<sup>59</sup> While clearly the purposes of Catholic educational institutions is not conversion in the strict sense, it does typically entail a kind of “conversion to the mission” of the institution to ensure ongoing

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>58</sup> Robert Schreiter, “The Changed Context of Mission,”

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institutional vitality. As Reynolds puts it, “conversion rarely makes life easier for its subjects,” and this is true on an institutional level, also.<sup>60</sup> Conversion to mission means asking challenging questions and thinking clearly about priorities in a way that will make many administrators (and others) uncomfortable. In particular, it requires re-evaluating the purpose of institutions in light of the ends they serve. This means, of course, defining those ends in an honest manner.

Catholic universities today, then, must adapt their mission not just to their markets but in keeping with what it means to be a Catholic institution today. This means being a global institution that engages Catholicism not as a historically interesting European tradition but as a living reality whose center of gravity – both globally and, crucially in the United States itself – has shifted decisively away from its traditional heartlands. Catholic institutions must seek to serve the reality of the Catholic community rather than just those privileged enough to afford full tuition. More than any demographic change, this is the true meaning of the reckoning that approaches for Catholic higher education.

### **Conclusion: Toward a New Vision**

Embracing Catholic identity for 21<sup>st</sup> century institutions of higher education means embracing this living tradition as articulated by Pope Francis and others. This may lead to a differentiated approach to dealing with the official church institution and hierarchy such as bishops, but it can and should mean adopting “Catholic” as a positive identity that can be reclaimed from negative associations. This is particularly true of institutions founded or transformed by Vatican II whose identities can of a more collegial church focused less on the hierarchy and more on the ability of everyday lay people to model and instantiate what it means to be Catholic. The conclusion to this essay will sketch out three ways in which Catholic

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institutions of higher education can carry forward their mission with honesty and vitality in the contemporary context.

First, Catholic institutions need to embrace Catholic mission as a positive but constantly negotiated aspect of institutional identity. David J. O'Brien, Michael Buckley, and others have commented that at many Jesuit institutions, "the word *Jesuit* is much displayed, but *Catholic* is harder to find."<sup>61</sup> O'Brien goes on to further observe that "the separation of faith from daily life...is institutionalized on Catholic as on other campuses."<sup>62</sup> This matter began to be rectified in the interim with the creation of institutions such as Collegium as well as intra-campus dialogues about Catholic mission at better-funded schools, but Catholic institutions ought to be unafraid to claim the term *Catholic* and to interpret it for themselves (within reason). While bishops have the right to determine which institutions appear in the *Official Catholic Directory* and thus maintain status as Catholic institutions, they do not have a monopoly over defining Catholicism and Catholic mission. Their intervention, indeed, is about setting limits, and often but not always institutions that decisively transgress those limits have already determined a secularizing course.<sup>63</sup> Fostering debate about Catholic mission and identity is indeed one of the prerogatives of a university if it is to truly be a place where the church does its thinking.

Second, Catholic institutions need to orient and root their other choices in terms of mission. This is a somewhat taken-for-granted facet of the Land O'Lakes era in that the administrators who made these choices were deeply imbued with the founding missions of their institutions by virtue of being members of religious congregations. Today, institutions need to come up with their own version of the "Mission Priority Examen" that the Association of Jesuit

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<sup>61</sup> David J. O'Brien, "Conversations on Jesuit (and Catholic?) Higher Education: Jesuit Si, Catholic...Not So Sure," in George Traub, SJ., ed. *A Jesuit Education Reader* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2008), 218).

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

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Colleges & Universities has developed for member institutions.<sup>64</sup> Without this, the danger is of institutions drifting through decisions based on the opinions of trustees who are not fully formed in their mission. This will lead to short-sighted thinking and decisions on curriculum, spending priorities, and other matters, that are out of step with the institution's reason for being.

Third and finally, in keeping with the above, Catholic institutions must recommit themselves to educating Catholics, not as an elite class but rather as the community that gives the institution its historic and contemporary identity. It is thus appropriate, then, that Catholic traditions, for example, structure aspects of the school's calendar, even as other students receive appropriate pastoral care from their own religious ministers and the ability to celebrate important holidays without penalty. This ought not to be an exercise in hegemony, and certainly not one of conversion, but rather being true to institutional identity. This also means focusing recruitment strategies on populations, particularly on the margins, that contain large numbers of Catholics.

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<sup>64</sup> <https://www.ajcunet.edu/missionexamen>