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THE CHARACTER OF CATHOLIC EDUCATION

An essay by Louis A. Barth, S.J., Richard W. Dunphy, S.J. and Richard D. Roberts found in In Perspective published by St. Louis University and edited by John J. Callahan, S.J.

The Church proposes; she imposes nothing. She respects individuals and cultures, and she honors the sanctuary of conscience.

-- John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio*, 1990

CATHOLIC HIGHER EDUCATION

The distinctive character and contribution of Catholic higher education have been discussed by many authors, committees and commissions over the years. The most recent authoritative statement on Catholic universities was made by Pope John Paul II in his Apostolic Constitution, *From the Heart of the Church* (*Ex corde ecclesiae*), issued on September 26, 1990. The following remarks are basically a summary of the papal document.

Some Catholic colleges and universities have been established or approved by the Holy See, by national bodies of bishops, or by individual dioceses, while others, particularly in the United States, have not been explicitly established or approved by these Church authorities. All of the Jesuit colleges and universities in the United States, including Regis University, which is governed by an independent board of trustees under the authority of the State of Colorado, belong to this second category and do not report to the Pope or the bishop of the diocese in which they are located. All Catholic colleges and universities are institutionally autonomous and guarantee academic freedom.

As an institution of higher education, each of these Catholic colleges and universities is an academic community which, in a rigorous and critical fashion, assists in the protection and advancement of human dignity and of a cultural heritage through teaching, research, and various services offered to the local, national and international communities. As Catholic, its objective is to assure in an institutional manner a Christian presence in the university world. Therefore, while respecting and valuing those members of its academic community who are not Christian, each Catholic institution of higher education exhibits the following essential characteristics:

- a Christian inspiration of the university community as such;
- a continuing reflection in the light of the Catholic faith upon the growing treasury of human knowledge, to which it seeks to contribute by its own research;
- institutional fidelity to the Christian message as it comes to us through the Church;

- an institutional commitment to the service of the people of God and of the human family in their pilgrimage to the transcendent goal which gives meaning to life.

Through its institutional fidelity to these objectives a Catholic college or university makes its distinctive contribution to the academic and socio-cultural worlds in which it exists.

The Catholic identity of each such institution has definite implications for its academic environment. It should pursue its objectives through the formation of an authentic human community, whose unity springs from its dedication to the truth, from sharing a common vision of the dignity of the human person, and from being a living institutional witness to Christ and his message. Its research efforts, in addition to assisting men and women in the pursuit of truth, should include the search for an integration of knowledge and should foster the dialogue between faith and reason. Since theology has an important contribution to make to these efforts, each Catholic college and university should have a faculty, or at least a chair, of theology. Because knowledge is meant to serve the human person, the moral and ethical implications of each branch of study should be examined and taught in order to contribute to the student's total development. Students should be challenged to pursue an education that combines academic excellence with growth -- growth in the capacity to ask questions, to understand, to make personal judgments, and to develop a religious, moral, and social sense.

The Catholic identity of an educational institution is a matter of the utmost importance to it, to the Church, and to society at large. Therefore, this identity should be made known publicly either in a mission statement or in some other appropriate public document. Each Catholic college or university must find effective means to preserve this identity, using both its institutional structure and its rules and regulations. Without ceasing to be a place of higher learning, each Catholic college or university has a relationship to the Church, so that all official actions, pronouncements, and commitments should be in accord with its Catholic identity. Likewise, with full respect for the freedom of conscience of each person and for academic freedom, the institution's activities should be consonant with its identity. The responsibility for maintaining and strengthening its Catholic identity rests primarily with the college or university itself.

THE MISSION OF A CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY

The mission of a Catholic college or university is allied to the basic mission of higher education, but with its own specific characteristics and purposes. Catholic higher education is a privileged place where the Gospel and contemporary culture can engage in fruitful dialogue.

As an academic institution and member of the international community of scholarship and inquiry, each Catholic college and university participates in and contributes to the life and mission of the universal Church. It prepares men and women to live their Christian vocation in a mature and responsible manner. By offering the results of its research and scholarship, it helps the Church to understand and respond better to the problems and challenges of contemporary culture. All of its basic academic activities (research, education, professional training, and the dialogue with culture) contribute in a vital way to the Church's work of evangelization, which is to establish the relationship between faith and life in each

individual and in the socio-cultural context in which individuals live and relate to one another.

Through inculturation the Church makes the Gospel incarnate in different cultures and at the same time introduces peoples, together with their cultures, into her own community.

-- John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio*, 1990

In its service to the Church, each Catholic college or university must strive to become an effective instrument of cultural progress for individuals and society. Its research should seek to discover the roots and causes of the problems faced by contemporary society, giving particular attention to their ethical and religious dimensions. In the face of increasingly rigid compartmentalization of knowledge, Catholic higher education must foster cooperation among the different academic disciplines, encouraging each to offer its distinct contribution in the search for solutions to these problems. Catholic colleges and universities must examine and evaluate the predominant values and norms of modern society and culture in a Christian perspective and find effective methods to communicate the ethical and religious principles that give meaning to human life. The promotion of social justice must also be a priority. In its service to society, it must develop collaborative relationships with the academic, cultural, and scientific world of the region in which it is located.

ACADEMIC FREEDOM

The governance of a Catholic college or university, whether it has been established and approved by Church authorities or not, remains autonomous so that it may function effectively. In virtue of its institutional autonomy and its identity as a university, academic freedom is guaranteed. Those engaged in research, in their search for truth within their specific disciplines and according to the methods of those disciplines, may proceed to whatever conclusions evidence and analysis may lead them. They may teach and publish the results of their research, so long as the rights of the individual person and of the community are preserved within the confines of the truth and the common good.

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

Applying the above to the American scene, almost without exception, United States Catholic institutions of higher education include many administrators, faculty, and staff who are from religious traditions other than Catholic, or who profess no religious belief. Many of them have made, and continue to make, significant and valued contributions to fulfilling the identity and mission of their respective institutions. What does a Catholic college or university ask of these colleagues? In brief, they are asked to recognize and respect its Catholic identity and its responsibility as a Catholic institution to be faithful to the teaching of the Church. This does not entail agreement with or acceptance of the Church and its various doctrines, nor does it prevent the statement of personal views which may differ from those held by the Catholic Church. The institution respects the freedom of conscience and religious liberty of each member of its academic community. Many administrators, faculty members, and staff from diverse religious backgrounds have taken positions in Catholic institutions and remain in those positions, some for their entire careers. It is unlikely that

they would have remained if they were truly dissatisfied, or in substantial disagreement, with the Catholic educational environment. Many find support and are comfortable in such an environment. They share some or all of its intellectual, moral, and humanitarian values; and they feel they can contribute to the achievement of at least some of its objectives. Certainly, not all of the values and objectives of Catholic higher education are unique to it. Those members of the academic community whose traditions are rooted in the Old Testament, or in the New Testament, or in both, find areas of emphasis which are familiar to them and with which they agree. Moreover, those who profess other religions or no particular faith, also have found areas of agreement. Experience has shown that in a Catholic college or university people can share educational ideals and values without necessarily sharing religious belief.



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