

A Paradox in a Good Question

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"A resolve that is backed by prudent understanding is like the polished surface of a smooth wall."

– Sirach 22: 16-17

"The Idea of a Catholic University" seminar called participants to focus on an essential aspect of the identity of the University of St. Thomas. As a participant in that seminar, I recognized a paradox in the question it raised. On the one hand, the question of who we are as a Catholic university seems to get at the core of our identity; on the other, the question is both so difficult to ask and so easy to avoid that we may never answer it. In this matter, St. Thomas could follow organizational norms and proceed with business as usual until something threatens our survival. Or we could, as a community, decide to examine our identity now, in the hope that we can become like the "polished surface of a smooth wall," as we fashion a university suited for the 21st century. If we choose the latter, I think we must first be honest with ourselves about how and why exploring our identity — especially our identity as a Catholic university — is difficult, and why we might be tempted to postpone it.

Question of Identity

The answer to a core identity question can frame a host of future questions, guide decision making, and build community by emphasizing shared values. Yet when these core questions arise, organizations often ignore them because they appear to have little immediate relevance and because they are just plain hard to answer. It seems better to focus instead on solving daily problems and meeting current challenges. Some theorists support this approach, arguing that organizations shape their identity over time through a series of incremental choices made in response to smaller, more manageable problems. The issue of "who we are or want to be" may be interesting, they say, but organizational identity is ultimately forged in the context of real problems. Cynics argue that no good comes of exploring organizational identity anyway, especially if only the few at the top participate. As more people get involved, what are the odds we could agree on an answer anyway?

It seems to me, though, that wise individuals and organizations do reflect on the meaning of life and on questions of identity, purpose, and motive, if only to build strength to endure in troubling times. The words from Sirach cited above capture this idea beautifully. For organizations this reflection involves something more than clinging to the founders' ideals, however profound they may be. In maturity, organizations, like individuals, are called to rediscover and reaffirm old ideals or to acknowledge new ones that can come only with experience and trial:

The problem of self-identity is not just a problem for the young. It is a problem all the time. Perhaps the problem. It should haunt old age, and when it no longer does it should tell you that you are dead.

– Norman Maclean

Inertia works against us in this regard. As a community, we move along, driven by the need to do the essentials: teach, learn, research, manage, and attend to the demands of family, friends, and daily life. Because questioning and learning lie at the heart of our work we may even regard our work as a constant challenge to self-identity. To stop, to refocus, and to ponder our identity requires a mighty motivation because it requires rearranging so much else in our lives. It cannot be done in five-minute bursts between meetings.

Sometimes, though, circumstances force even the least reflective among us to confront our identity. A crisis or change may stop us cold: a loss or a confrontation with death leaves us questioning the meaning of life. Occasionally we respond to a subtler call: the polite, but insistent, voice of a fellow traveler wanting to know what we are doing here.

Why Should St. Thomas

Question Its Identity as a Catholic University?

And Why Now?

What, in addition to virtue, might motivate us, working as a community, to examine our identity as a Catholic university? No crisis looms for St. Thomas now. We are not recovering from a near-death experience. Yet I think we are getting a strong invitation from the insistent and not so polite voices in our external environment. Public criticism of higher education in general and private universities in particular, criticism of Catholicism, concerns about the secularization of Catholic universities, and recent papal teachings on the university all combine in a chorus of voices to ask what we are doing here.

Public Criticism of Higher Education

Daily we read articles criticizing higher education; some cite the high and escalating cost of education; some disparage curriculum content and students' preparation for work; a few suggest a lack of faculty and institutional accountability. Faculty and administrators must be well-prepared to explain their

organizations to a skeptical public. Most universities face pressure to hold down tuition, to acquire expensive technology, and to do both while paying higher salaries and benefits. These pressures demand difficult decisions. To make these hard decisions, a university needs a clear sense of identity, if only to appear logical and consistent. More importantly, a sense of identity and commitment to core values provide a basis for

assessing the implications of change, for understanding its meaning, for fashioning healthy responses, for surviving, and perhaps even for shaping change itself.

Criticism of Catholicism

The media regularly report and editorialize on Catholic practice and teaching. Any Catholic university, including St. Thomas, can expect to be part of this scrutiny and must sometimes explain its stand in relationship to the Church and to the words of individual Catholics in matters of the public interest. Public criticism or misunderstanding of Catholic teaching and of individual Catholics may also affect students' decisions to enroll and remain here. It may affect the university's ability to attract new faculty and raise nontuition dollars.

A Shift Toward the Secular

Some commentators lament the Catholic universities' move toward secularization, drifting to the nonsectarian positions such as those assumed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by universities once affiliated with Protestant denominations (Gleason). A look at the apparent "secularization" of Catholic universities suggests that it results as much from a series of survival tactics as from strategic decisions to create distance from the Catholic church. Among the forces encouraging this shift in Catholic universities, three have been particularly pressing in the past two decades: economic pressures, changes within faculties, and external criticisms of the Catholic universities' performance. What exactly does this shift imply for St. Thomas? Is it what we choose?

Economics: Like other American universities, Catholic universities have begun offering an array of new programs in the past two decades. Demographic changes, market trends, and rising costs have prompted many to move away from offering primarily undergraduate education to mostly Catholic students. Popular, and usually lucrative graduate programs, like St. Thomas' own graduate programs in business and education, attract older students with significantly different motivations for selecting a university. The Catholic nature of the university may have little or nothing to do with students' decisions to enroll. For many of these programs, growth and reputation require that schools develop new alliances with business and government.

New undergraduate programs attract students with particular academic or career interests, but with no particular commitment to attending a Catholic institution. On some campuses, philosophy and theology faculties, once the distinctive voice of the Catholic university, have begun to feel like service departments for the new programs. At times, universities de-emphasize their religious affiliation when to do so makes them eligible for public funds to support programs, research, and buildings. The cross-signals resulting from pursuing funding opportunities sometimes confuse and frustrate students, faculty, and alumni.

Faculty Expectations: Changing faculty characteristics, expectations, and goals have also affected the character of Catholic universities. Like faculty elsewhere, faculty in Catholic

universities often identify more with professionals in their disciplines than with colleagues at home (Burtchaell). To some, the notion of participating in a "Catholic" institution is an interesting idea, but incidental to their careers. Changing expectations about teaching loads, research opportunities, and pay have also brought new dimensions to universities' economic decisions. Finally, as Catholic universities have hired an increasingly diverse faculty, many have little connection to or experience with Catholicism. Too often universities appear to rely on osmosis to help faculty learn about the Catholic nature of the university: the underlying message seems to be that being in a Catholic university really has no implication for teaching and research.

No Distinctive Voice: Finally, though viewed as successful at many levels, Catholic universities have been accused of failing to add a strong and distinctive voice to the American intellectual conversation, one arising from their own history and view of the human condition. An early critic, Richard Hofstadter, claimed that Catholic education has "failed to develop an intellectual tradition capable either of exercising authority among Catholics or of mediating between the Catholic mind and the secular or Protestant mind" (Burtchaell). Catholic university leaders responded to such criticisms by calling for new levels of excellence in their institutions. Typical gestures, both symbolic and substantive, were statements emphasizing academic freedom and ecclesiastical independence, commitments to supporting research, and reductions in the number of priests and members of religious orders represented on university boards.

"Ex Corde Ecclesiae"

Another voice calling St. Thomas to examine its identity as a Catholic university is John Paul II's. In his 1990 apostolic constitution on Catholic universities, the pope clarified the central role Catholic universities play in the life of the church. He also recognized the particular "honor and responsibility of a Catholic university to consecrate itself without reserve to the cause of truth," and went on to define the "essential characteristics" of a Catholic university and the university community (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*). In identifying these ideals, the document calls all Catholic universities to ponder their identity — individually, collectively, and in relation to the Church.

What Makes the Question So Difficult to Explore?

"Identity" is organic and cannot simply be imposed on a community — it must grow out of that community and its membership. For St. Thomas, the effort requires something more than sequential reporting of individual opinions and observations. It requires a dynamic constructive conversation. Faculty and staff meetings regularly remind us of some obstacles to such a conversation. But other difficulties exist as well, rooted in a reluctance to explore basic assumptions, in differences highlighted by expertise and language, and in organizational history and interpersonal relationships.

Assumptions and Abstractions

In asking, "What is the idea of a Catholic university?" we are questioning our institutional purpose in society, challenging our most basic assumptions about the value of what we do. Few organizations choose to explore questions such as this simply because they seem to have little practical application to current business. Indirectly, of course, organizations grapple with the question of purpose in a host of derivative issues, which they often describe as "value conflicts."

Several examples of such derivative issues at St. Thomas come to mind. In faculty discussions they have come embedded in curricular issues: How much theology should a St. Thomas undergraduate be expected to learn? How much philosophy? Why is either one essential? Institutionally, they have appeared as political questions: how many symbols of Catholicism will we forego to secure city support for a downtown campus? Are these symbols essential to preserving our Catholic nature? In my own business classes they creep in as students try to assess St. Thomas' competitive position: How does St. Thomas' Catholic identity differentiate it from other ACTC schools? Is this identity essential for our survival?

Another factor inhibiting our ability to discuss the question of our identity as a Catholic university lies in our personal abilities and preferences for dealing with the abstract. While we appreciate theory in our own disciplines, this appreciation may not transcend other disciplines or avenues of community inquiry. Individual tastes for dealing with abstract questions and our tolerance for philosophical debate varies widely. What one person experiences as riveting conversation, another hears as a confusing jumble of competing ideas and self-serving arguments; or worse, as boring and repetitious statements of the obvious.

Expertise and Language

As a community we approach "the idea of a Catholic university" with different degrees of preparation, which presents another obstacle to dialogue. Most of us know comparatively little about the subject as a field of scholarly inquiry. Some of us have never read a classical work on the idea of a university. What, in our past education, has prepared us for the discussion? Certainly not doctoral study, where it is rare to get any exposure to educational philosophy or theory. Whether we judge this as a failing or simply see it as fact, the truth is that many of us come to the discussion ill-prepared.

In the seminar on the Idea of a Catholic University, participants were guided through selected historical pieces and documents outlining the history and development of universities in general and Catholic universities in particular. Without those readings, only a handful of people in the seminar could have been truly engaged in the conversation. Even with the readings, I sensed a certain intimidation factor when the more expert among us delved deeply into some essential point.

Compounding this preparation problem is a language problem. Here the philosophers have the clear advantage, for the language and methods best suited for exploring the idea of a university, and the questions posed in such a discussion, lie in their domain. Even the

literature on the subject is written in a style more familiar to the philosophers than to others. In this language problem, universities — and St. Thomas — are not unique. Language differences challenge cross-functional communications in all kinds of organizations, especially where people develop high levels of expertise in specialized areas. Knowledge areas or specialties literally talk past one another. In these situations, productive conversation is possible only when the various groups respect the critical differences in language and orientation, and find some common basis for discussion.

Trust, History, and Humanity

The character and quality of our interpersonal relationships may be the most serious impediment to a community discussion of identity. Too many past efforts at community reflection have been marked by loud, if not acrimonious debate, a certain amount of posturing and politics, and discord, ended but not resolved, through a vote. Though efficient and democratic, the process still leaves winners and losers. Many, though not all, of the decisions reached in such processes, get implemented without much ado. Others continue to fester, resurfacing in later discussions. Cynics view this as standard procedure when academics assemble to solve problems. Perhaps, but it does little to establish the trust and candor essential to explore a subject so intimate as that of identity.

In addition to trust and fairness issues lingering in our organization's memory, another obstacle to discussion lies in the tensions among and within subgroups. At St. Thomas, as at many other universities, we live with a general level of tension between the traditional liberal arts and the career-oriented programs, and between the graduate and undergraduate schools. Even within these broad groups, tension arises as disciplines compete for resources or disagree on goals and policies. These tensions, plus the fallout from previous battles, flavor the content of what we say and what we do not say; they influence what we hear and what we dismiss; they affect our judgment and our commitment. In other words we take our full humanity — our thoughts, feelings, values, and perceptions — into the discussion.

Going Forward

Despite all the obstacles against it, or perhaps because we can see those obstacles, I think a genuine, community exploration of our identity as a Catholic university is possible. That the topic has already been explored in a summer seminar attended by staff, faculty, and administrators, raises hopes that we may, as a community, move on to explore and define our identity together and that we may reflect our shared identity in the way we live as a university community. Going forward requires more than goodwill, however. It also requires that we share a strong will to overcome the obstacles in our way.

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