

Introduction

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Being concerned about one's identity seems to be a peculiar preoccupation of modern America. It touches not only individuals, unsure of how to conceive of their place in society and uncertain of how to behave in a way that is authentically their own; it also touches institutions, and can touch them deeply. For colleges and universities with a historical link to a Church founded, perhaps in the mid-19th century, as a place to educate ministers and to form an articulate, socially mobile laity — the continuing character of that religious and ecclesial identity today is often surrounded by a nagging nest of questions: How much should a college be allowed to undergo the evolution toward secularism that has been so generally characteristic of 20th-century American institutions? What will be the long-term effects on religious identity of curriculum development, institutional expansion, the encouragement of faculty research, or generally accepted practices of hiring and tenure? Who, among the academic community's many constituencies of responsibility, will make such decisions? What factors will motivate those decisions, and constitute for the college's leaders the "bottom line"?

The very existence of an institution that is, in an active and meaningful sense, committed corporately both to the life of faith and the life of the mind, seems to many modern Americans problematic, even paradoxical. Our culture puts a high value on diversity and tolerance and looks with suspicion on strong commitment to all but the most formal principles of decision and action. We tend to regard religion as a totally private matter, a symbolic way of expressing our deepest personal feelings and longings, rather than as part of the realm of public discourse that makes the claim to be true. So we tend, as modern Americans, to be uncomfortable about letting our study of the human and physical world be governed, in any sense, by the common convictions and procedures of a religious community; the search for truth and the formation of mature minds requires, we assume, a freedom that is mainly conceived as an absence of both presuppositions and institutional constraints. Our media and our cultural prejudices suggest to us that ties with a church inevitably will conflict with the unfettered intellectual and personal development colleges are supposed to foster.

On the other hand, those involved with traditionally religious colleges and universities are coming to recognize, more and more, that much of their institutions' welfare is tied up with the continuance of their religious identity. Much of what draws students to enroll in a college, leads faculty and staff to seek permanent employment on its campus, and moves benefactors to be generous in its support, has to do with the perceived vitality of those common ideals and priorities, those "values," that grow out of its religious history and that shape its corporate character. In allowing a religiously affiliated college to become secular, one runs the risk of losing one of the very things that make it special, and that may ensure its survival in an intensely competitive future.

Hence most Catholic colleges and universities in the United States today are engaged in some kind of long-term common reflection on "Catholic identity": on what it means to be a Catholic institution of higher education in the America of the 1990s and beyond. Most people realize by now that being a college "in the Catholic tradition" must be more than simply a fact of historical origins, if that Catholic identity is to contribute to the institution's well-being and promote its mission; it must involve policies and decisions made and implemented at every level of the college's existence, shaping and expressing its relationship to the wider community of Catholic faith, sacramental communion and ecclesial life. Yet there is obviously a wide range of opinions, within colleges and within the Church itself, on what those policies should be and how those decisions should habitually be made. For Catholic colleges to remain both internally harmonious and vitally in control of their own futures today, it seems essential at least that continuing, serious discussion of these issues occupy a central place in campus life. Catholic identity must be something Catholic colleges shape as educational communities.

As a scholar and teacher myself, and as a Jesuit priest who has served as a trustee of four Jesuit colleges and universities over the past 15 years, I have been involved in a good deal of this kind of conversation, and have even done some writing and speaking on the subject of "Catholic identity." So I was delighted to receive an invitation last spring from Prof. Michael Mikolajczak to be the animator of the first summer seminar for faculty and administrators at the University of St. Thomas on this sensitive yet urgent complex of questions. My job was not so much to suggest answers as to provide the resources for discussion — a set of readings on the history, ideals, and problems of Catholic higher education — and to facilitate that discussion among some 30 carefully chosen volunteers from St. Thomas's faculty, staff, and administration, during one intense week of reading and talking at the end of last July.

For me, at least, it was an exhausting but enormously rewarding experience. I discovered (as I usually do in my courses) that I had been over-ambitious in drawing up the reading list, but I did learn a great deal from the authors we read, and was struck, to my own surprise, by the recurrence of common themes within the wide range of their writings. More vividly, however, I was struck by the quality of our discussions. The seminar group was as varied in interest and expertise, in Church membership, in age and length of service at the university, in overriding concerns and convictions — as one might imagine in any American academic institution; yet, it was a group constantly characterized by graciousness, energy, patience, mutual respect, and serious focus on the issues our discussion raised — a model, really, of civil and informed interdisciplinary academic exchange at its very best.

This collection of essays is a gathering of the "first fruits" of that week of discussion. Each member of the seminar was asked to write a brief memorandum of his or her own reflections on the University of St. Thomas's "Catholic identity," in the aftermath of what we had all read and heard, as a way of capturing at least some fragments of this stage in what is to be a continuing conversation, on the campus and beyond it. The scope of these essays, like their length and style, varies a good deal; but the whole discussion they evoke had — and continues to have — a rich and many-faceted unity to it. Our hope is that the

conversation itself will be contagious, and will stimulate many other members of the community on Summit Avenue — and perhaps even other Catholic college and university communities around the United States — to carry it on.

May these essays, then, and the common reflection they represent, enrich the life of the University of St. Thomas and advance the cultural and educational mission of the Catholic Church!