

Preface

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During the week of 4 August 1997 twenty-two faculty, administrators, and staff members—drawn from all areas of the St. Thomas community—met to examine the topic of academic freedom and the Catholic university. The results of their work together are presented here. These essays are notable for the diversity of their concerns and points of view as well as for their intellectual vigor and incisiveness. They provide those of us who were unable to participate a sampling of the seminar, and they call us to deeper reflection on a matter of utmost importance. All of us are in debt to these colleagues, especially since their topic is one that sometimes raises anxieties.

Often people (usually those unfamiliar with recent developments in Catholic higher education) look askance when they hear academic freedom mentioned as an important feature of a Catholic university. To a certain extent their puzzlement is understandable, for early in the twentieth century when Catholic universities were much more homogenous in their student bodies and faculties, the issue of academic freedom did not seem a pressing one. It became so only when Catholic universities started to enroll and hire greater numbers of students and faculty from other faiths and sought to become universities "in the full modern sense of the word." The 1967 Land O'Lakes statement that encouraged Catholic universities to pursue academic excellence, institutional autonomy, and academic freedom is a watershed in the history of American higher education. At the same time, the Land O'Lakes statement called for Catholicism to be "perceptively present and effectively operative." The effort to achieve these two goods—to be a modern university and to maintain Catholic identity—has marked the work of Catholic universities for the last three decades. It is what has called projects such as this seminar series into existence.

Some interpret this effort as a slow surrender to secularism, but such cynicism is often rooted in nostalgia for a world that never really quite existed and that can never be "regained." The changes of the last three decades can, and should, be viewed more positively—as the response of Catholic universities to the vision of Vatican II, especially as articulated in *Gaudium et spes* (The Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), which speaks specifically of "the excellence of freedom" and its necessity for people to direct themselves toward goodness.

This necessary freedom takes on a decidedly important character in the academy, dedicated as it is to the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge. For this reason, academic freedom is emphasized in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*:

academic freedom is the guarantee given to those involved in teaching and research that, within their specific specialized branch of knowledge and according to the methods proper to that specific area, they may search for the truth wherever analysis and evidence

lead them and may teach and publish the results of this search, keeping in mind the cited criteria, that is, safeguarding the rights of the individual and of society within the confines of the truth and the common good.

Elsewhere, the apostolic constitution speaks of respecting individual consciences and of building a community that "is animated by a spirit of freedom and charity. . .characterized by mutual respect, sincere dialogue and protection of the rights of individuals."