

The University of St. Thomas' Statement Regarding the Addressing of Controversial Issues Within the Framework of the Idea of the Catholic University

by Norman W. Larson
Department of Journalism and Mass Communication

Several participants in the 1994 Faculty Development Summer Seminar on "The Idea of the Catholic University" commented on what they felt was free and open discussion at the University of St. Thomas. One faculty member, for example, said that he had taught for six years at three different universities before coming to St. Thomas last year, and St. Thomas "has been by far the most open and tolerant academic setting I've experienced so far." He said that he found it ironic that nonreligious universities are often held up as the ideal of academic freedom to which institutions such as St. Thomas could aspire. Another faculty member, who has been at St. Thomas for many years, commented that she had attended a conference earlier in the summer and came away with the knowledge that St. Thomas is "light years" ahead of what is allowed at some Catholic universities in regard to discussion of controversial issues.

The views of these two faculty members came up during the last week of July 1994 when a group of nearly 25 University of St. Thomas faculty, administrators, and support staff participated in the seminar on "The Idea of a Catholic University" under the direction of the Rev. Brian E. Daley, S.J., a professor of theology at Weston School of Theology in Cambridge, Mass. The "Statement Regarding the Addressing of Controversial Issues at the University of St. Thomas" was distributed at the beginning of Day No. 4's topic, "Christian Teaching Authority and Academic Freedom."

In recent years several people from all facets of the St. Thomas community — trustees, administrators, faculty, staff, students — have worked to develop a "Statement Regarding the Addressing of Controversial Issues at the University of St. Thomas." The statement was approved by the full University of St. Thomas board of trustees at its May 19, 1994, meeting after having been approved by the board's executive committee at its May 5 meeting. In announcing this approval in the June 20, 1994, issue of the University of St. Thomas Bulletin, Dr. Charles J. Keffer, provost, said the statement "is but the first step in the effort to embody the principles espoused in the statement." He said that he is "committed to working on the effective implementation of the statement," and he asked for the "help and cooperation" of everyone involved (Bulletin, 2).

The complete text of the statement appears as the last page of this essay. The statement begins with quotes from the University of St. Thomas "Mission Statement" and also from its "Convictions." Then there are two quotes from Pope John Paul II's "On Catholic Universities (Apostolic Constitution Ex Corde Ecclesiae of the Supreme Pontiff)," which was one of the readings that summer-seminar participants reflected upon in regard to

academic freedom and the discussion of controversial issues. Then comes the statement itself and a listing of what is referred to as "implications of this statement."

Central to the summer-seminar's discussion, as it was to the formulation of the statement regarding controversial issues, is the fact that the University of St. Thomas "commits itself to its Catholic character and to valuing the diversity of viewpoints reflective of a large society" ("Statement," 1). The "Statement" says that the University of St. Thomas "exists as an environment which not only allows, but encourages, members of the community to ask questions and openly explore challenging ideas in their personal search for truth" ("Statement," 2). It continues that controversial issues may be addressed in open forums, and that such discussion should take place "in a responsible and educative manner" and that the university "will ensure that these dialogues occur in an arena free of fear or reproach or reprisal." The statement concludes as follows: "While the university cherishes free expression, it recognizes the difference between freedom of ideas and freedom of behavior. In discussion and debate, members and guests of the university community are expected to treat one another with respect and dignity" ("Statement," 2).

Dr. Keffer, in a July 31, 1994, memo to me in response to my request for background information on the statement, said that its impetus was "multifaceted." He said that one impetus came from the board of trustees. Dr. Keffer said that in the summer of 1992, at the board's annual review of the performance of the Rev. Dennis J. Dease, St. Thomas' president, there was discussion about controversies on other Catholic college campuses, and "the question was raised as to whether St. Thomas had a policy statement related to these questions/issues/situations." A second impetus, Dr. Keffer said, arose from concerns of members of our Student Affairs staff who were concerned about how they "could/should handle issues that were/are controversial from a Catholic perspective." Dr. Keffer said that at that time he was serving unofficially in the capacity of vice president for student affairs because of the departure of the Rev. John Forliti. Dr. Keffer said:

"I was concerned about dealing with this subject in some direct and proactive way. It was agreed that a major training activity or professional development experience for Student Affairs staff should focus on this subject of controversial issues at St. Thomas."

That activity was held at the university's Chaska campus on Nov. 19, 1992, and Dr. Keffer was one of the day's participants. Subsequently, he asked a group of Student Affairs staff people to draft a policy statement that would address "many of the concerns that had been identified/expressed." Dr. Keffer said that his records show that the group produced the first draft of a possible statement on Dec. 10, 1992, and that even though this was the first public draft, the group's copy was labeled "Draft #5." From that time on, Dr. Keffer said he worked with the Student Affairs staff group and with other people and groups associated with the university to "revise, amend, review and further develop the statement." On March 4, 1993, a Provost's Forum was held on the statement, and Dr. Keffer said that it was one of the most well-attended Provost's Forums ever held. Much additional review and input followed. Dr. Keffer said that the statement was reviewed by the president's staff, "The TUG Group" (this was an ad hoc committee that Dr. Keffer said was commonly called TUG — The Unnamed Group), the Student Affairs staff and,

unofficially, by the priests of the university. In addition, he said that on at least one occasion the statement was published in draft form in the Bulletin for general comment prior to its eventual acceptance by our board of trustees on May 19, 1994. Dr. Keffer said that a further impetus for the statement "is a subjective one from my perspective." He said that he sees "the need for the university to make a public statement about what it means to be both a university and a Catholic university because both our internal and external publics need to know what we think that means and because there are too many people associated with the university internally who feel that there is a repressive atmosphere about controversial issues." These people, he continued, feel that controversial issues "cannot be discussed" at St. Thomas. "I don't think that is a correct statement of reality," Dr. Keffer said, "but if we do nothing proactive to counteract that feeling, it is likely to remain" (Keffer, 1-2).

What might have happened in an earlier day? It is interesting to speculate how John Ireland, the first archbishop of St. Paul, the founder of what today is the University of St. Thomas, would have reacted. Archbishop Ireland shepherded what started out on Sept. 8, 1885, as the St. Thomas Aquinas Seminary through several crises of the institution's early years and, according to Marvin R. O'Connell in *John Ireland and the American Catholic Church*, St. Thomas "survived because John Ireland would not have it otherwise. There was no clearer demonstration of the man's iron will, nor of his deep and abiding love for the place" (O'Connell, 202, 205).

Archbishop Ireland, as a cleric of another era, no doubt would have reacted in a much more authoritarian manner to crises — such as freedom of expression and discussion of controversial issues — that face today's administrators, faculty, and students at the University of St. Thomas. For example, Joseph B. Connors, in *Journey Toward Fulfillment; A History of the College of St. Thomas*, tells us that Archbishop Ireland, "despite his reputation as a liberal in certain ecclesiastical matters, held strong conservative views on the subject of collegiate and seminary discipline" (Connors, 143). Perhaps these views continued onto freedom of expression; and it makes one wonder if today's students — and faculty and administrators — would be "sent home" if they disagreed with any St. Thomas policies. Back in Archbishop Ireland's day, according to Connors, if there were objectors, "the ring leaders should be quietly asked to go home. The mass of students will soon settle down to the rule," and if any of the priests resisted, the archbishop would "recall them at once, and replace them by worthier men" (Connors, 143-144).

Nearly a half century ago, John Julian Ryan, who was an English professor at the College of Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass., offered much advice regarding Catholic education in *The Idea of a Catholic College*. But he also had some advice on what education in the Catholic college should not be. Although Ryan did not use the phrase "academic freedom," he said, for example, that no teacher should encourage or even permit students "to adopt uncritically either the time-honored verdicts — the lip service — of the past or the fashionable condemnation — the de-bunking bunk — of the present." A good teacher, according to Ryan, should prefer to turn out "an honest rough diamond" rather than develop a "synthetic pearl" (Ryan, 96-97).

Freedom of inquiry is important for both faculty and students. As Arthur F. Holmes, who was chairman of the Department of Philosophy at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Ill., wrote in 1975 in his chapter on "Academic Freedom" in *The Idea of a Christian College*: "Academic freedom is essential to the academic task." Academic freedom, according to Holmes, requires several freedoms: the freedom "to grow, to gain stimulation and to give it," the freedom "to meet great minds of the past and present, to interact rigorously with their ideas and weigh their values," and the freedom "to explore new horizons and press back the frontiers of learning." We must avoid "blinkers and cloisters and defensiveness about the problems," Holmes advised. Rather, we should have "open eyes and open doors on the world" (Holmes, 77-79). Some of this freedom might result in failure, particularly for young people, but we should not be discouraged by this because "embryonic leaders must try their wings even if first attempts fail" (Holmes, 81).

Nat Hentoff, in *Free Speech for Me — But Not for Thee: How the American Left and Right Relentlessly Censor Each Other*, quoted the Woodward Report to the Fellows on the Yale Corporation to call attention to the importance of freedom of expression in a university setting. A university, according to the report, values "freedom of expression precisely because it provides a forum for the new, the provocative, the disturbing, and the unorthodox. Free speech is a barrier to the tyranny of authoritarian or even majority opinion as to the rightness or wrongness of particular doctrines or thoughts" (Hentoff, 115).

Hentoff said that Yale, under Benno Schmidt as its president, "became the leading university in the country in defense of free speech." Schmidt, as quoted by Hentoff, told the fall 1989 entering class that for many students, the first year at Yale would be "your first experience living in a community rigorously committed to freedom of thought. You may find the experience unsettling. I hope you will find it exhilarating." On another occasion, in March 1991 in New York City, Schmidt said that "freedom of thought is in danger from well-intentioned but misguided efforts to give values of community and harmony a higher place in the university than freedom." Schmidt feared people who felt that "the purpose of education is to induce correct opinion rather than to search for wisdom and to liberate the mind" (Hentoff, 131-133).

Another viewpoint was offered by Roger Kimball, in *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education*. Kimball was disturbed by what he called "the recent trend against free speech in the academy." He said that while we may want to deplore speech and action that hurts the feelings of others, the university, "traditionally a bastion of free speech and where controversial ideas may freely circulate, had begun to encroach even on these ideals in the name of a certain vision of political rectitude" (Kimball, 68).

This seems to bring us back to where I started this essay. All facets of this university community still may not agree, but we at the University of St. Thomas do seem to have the free and open discussion that is prized in a collegiate community.

Bibliography

Bulletin of the University of St. Thomas. Vol. 27, No. 32 (June 20, 1994).

Connors, Joseph B. *Journey Toward Fulfillment: A History of the College of St. Thomas*. St. Paul, Minn.: College of

St. Thomas, 1986.

Hentoff, Nat. *Free Speech for Me — But Not for Thee: How the American Left and Right Relentlessly Censor Each Other*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc., 1992.

Holmes, Arthur F. *The Idea of a Christian College*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975.

Keffer, Dr. Charles J. Memo dated July 31, 1994, to Norman W. Larson.

Kimball, Roger. *Tenured Radicals; How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1990.

O'Connell, Marvin R. *John Ireland and the American Catholic Church*. St. Paul, Minn.: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1988.

Ryan, John Julian. *The Idea of a Catholic College*. New York: Sheed & Ward, 1945.

"Statement Regarding the Addressing of Controversial Issues at the University of St. Thomas." June 1994.

**STATEMENT REGARDING THE ADDRESSING
OF CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS**

In its undergraduate programs the university is committed to the development of the student through a liberal arts education within the living Catholic tradition and through a high degree of personal attention in a spiritually and intellectually stimulating campus environment. ... In all of its academic programs and other educational enterprises the university is

committed to meeting the diverse, changing needs of the community. ... The university fosters in the student an energetic, thoughtful approach to the challenges of contemporary life.

– from the University of St. Thomas' Mission Statement

The university's educational program ... strives to give a student a foundation for clear thinking and expression.

– from the University of St. Thomas' Convictions

" ... it is evident that besides the teaching, research and services common to all universities, a Catholic university, by institutional commitment, brings to its task the inspiration and light of the Christian message. In a Catholic university, therefore, Catholic ideals, attitudes and principles penetrate and inform university activities in accordance with the proper nature and autonomy of these activities. In a word, being a university and Catholic, it must be both a community of scholars representing various branches of human knowledge and an academic institution in which Catholicism is vitally present and operative."

– from "Ex Corde Ecclesiae,"

Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities (Paragraph 14)

"By its very nature, a university develops culture through its research, helps to transmit the local culture to each succeeding generation through its teaching, and assists cultural activities through its educational services. It is open to all human experience and is ready to dialogue with and learn from any culture. A Catholic university shares in this, offering the rich experience of the church's own culture. In addition, a Catholic university, aware that human culture is open to revelation and transcendence, is also a primary and privileged place for a fruitful dialogue between the Gospel and culture."

– from "Ex Corde Ecclesiae,"

Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities (Paragraph 43)

In its Mission Statement and supporting documents, the University of St. Thomas commits itself to its Catholic character and to valuing the diversity of viewpoints reflective of a larger society. Diversity is complex, and is best achieved through intentional planning, listening, reflecting and interacting.

St. Thomas values its role as a diocesan, Catholic university. The university also recognizes and accepts responsibility to respond to the dynamic tension that exists between the challenges of contemporary living and educating within the living Catholic tradition.

The university exists as an environment which not only allows, but encourages, members of its community to ask questions and openly explore challenging ideas in their personal search for truth. Open forums through which controversial issues may be addressed in a responsible and educative manner will be available. More important, the university will ensure that these dialogues occur in an arena free of fear of reproach or reprisal.

While the university cherishes free expression, it recognizes the difference between freedom of ideas and freedom of behavior. In discussion and debate, members and guests

of the university community are expected to treat one another with respect and dignity.

Some of the implications of this statement are:

1. The University of St. Thomas is committed to open dialogue about controversial issues.
2. The university will provide in-class and co-curricular opportunities for discussion and debate about controversial issues.
3. The university believes that public dialogue around challenging issues does not diminish its fundamental commitment as a Catholic university.
4. The university has the responsibility to educate members of this community about the beliefs and moral values that make us Catholic.
5. The university will refuse official recognition to any group or organization which promotes a position contrary to the teaching of the Catholic Church.
6. The university welcomes to the campus students, faculty and staff from diverse cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds. It values the perspectives they can provide on issues of common interest.
7. The university will strive to ensure that each member of this community receives respect.
8. The university employs individuals who are committed to the ideals stated in this document.

– June 1994