

# Reflections on the Seminar

by Michael F. Sullivan  
Business Affairs

## Introduction

Offered here are my reflections and comments on the summer seminar on "The Catholic University and Academic Freedom" within the context of two general constraints.

The first constraint deals with my own limitations in writing style and exposition. For most of the past twenty-five years I have worked within an environment dominated by business and operational issues. I have had limited opportunity to experience a research environment. Thus, my current writing style does not meet the standards of academic rigor and vigor. I have chosen to present my thoughts in the manner to which I am accustomed rather than attempt to be something I am not. I make no apologies for that, but simply state the obvious.

The second constraint deals with the very topic of the seminar: academic freedom. Most of the participants in the seminar hold an academic position at the University of St. Thomas and as such are protected by the construct of academic freedom. Administrators have not been granted that blessing. As one of the administrators in attendance at the seminar I feel constrained in expressing my opinions in these notes. Within these two constraints, therefore, I present a series of five observations on the topic of academic freedom and the Catholic University.

### Observation One—Historical Orientation

This seminar provided me an opportunity to review a wide array of opinions on the subject of academic freedom. I particularly enjoyed the opportunity to review the *1940 Statement of Principals on Academic Freedom and Tenure* of the American Association of University Professors, *the Land O' Lakes Statement*, and *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, documents which I have not had the time nor the opportunity to read in depth prior to this seminar. These documents, as well as the excellent selection of writings presented for the participants, provided me an opportunity to gain a more thorough understanding of the context of Catholic higher education and the developments of the most recent three decades on the central topic of academic freedom. As an administrator, I also enjoyed the opportunity to observe the somewhat widely divergent perspectives of members of the faculty of the University of St. Thomas, as well as those of our facilitator, Father Peter Ryan. These perspectives and interactions proved to me that the University of St. Thomas is a healthy environment for the exchange of learned opinion and that the search for truth can and does occur within the context of a Catholic university.

### Observation Two—The Nature of a Catholic University

Father Hesburgh argues that in order to be a great Catholic university an institution must be great and also Catholic. This makes sense to me. However, while we struggle with the definition of "Catholic" the definition of "great" is more elusive. Through our readings I learned that the great Medieval institutions of higher learning—the Universities of Paris, Oxford, Cambridge, and Bologna—were initially established by the Church to create the environment for the exploration of theological discourse. Over the centuries these and the great American universities became secularized due to a number of factors, not the least of which was the opinion of some in the Academy that the search for "natural truth" would be constrained by theological beliefs and faith. In the Twentieth Century, American higher education has developed within this context as well as been influenced by the central tenets of the great English and German universities. The Academy today in America has evolved to have three central purposes: teaching, research and service to the community. I believe these purposes can be fulfilled in Catholic institutions of higher education, including the University of St. Thomas. A Catholic university is also defined by its general environment, values, beliefs and modes of behavior of its constituents including faculty, administration, and students.

It is not only the curriculum that defines a Catholic university. Further, events that celebrate the core of our Catholicism, such as Mass, the celebration of the Sacraments, and efforts to promote social justice, are not only important in their very nature but also provide symbolic manifestations of our beliefs.

### Observation Three—The Impact of Ex Corde Ecclesiae

In May, 1997 Cardinal Pio Laghi acknowledged receipt of the "first draft" of the implementation document of the U. S. Catholic Bishops of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. In his acknowledgment, Cardinal Laghi provided a series of observations which requested clarification on such items as the implementation of Canon 812 which refers to the mandate required by those who teach theology on a Catholic campus. So, seven years after the publication of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* we are still in the process of formally determining the exact implementation strategies. I suspect it will be a number of years, perhaps decades, before a final resolution is achieved. In the meantime, Catholic universities and colleges, in my opinion, need to anticipate that the mandate for a theological faculty will ultimately be resolved. Even though the University of St. Thomas subscribes to the AAUP standards of academic freedom, perhaps we should consider changing the language of the contracts for future faculty in the Department of Theology.

This change would reflect the prescribed role of the Bishop under Canon 812. Whether the Bishop is considered internal or external to the university is only a matter of semantics, in my mind. If we are to consider ourselves a Catholic institution then we have no choice but to subscribe to the empowering authority of the Church. The Church, through its organizational structure, has authority similar to those of the State and accreditation associations. If we recognize the authority of the latter, why not the former? While a Bishop may not be competent theologically, the Bishop certainly has jurisdictional authority.

#### Observation Four—The Commitment of the University of St. Thomas

In my role at the University of St. Thomas I am aware of the financial and human resource commitment of the university to the Catholic nature of the institution. In recent years, some examples of this commitment include:

- The introduction of resident chaplains in student residence halls,
- The commitment to community service and outreach programs,
- The financial aid commitment to students of St. John Vianney Seminary,
- The Affiliation Agreement of the St. Paul Seminary,
- The expansion of the Murray Institute,
- The creation of the Center for Catholic Studies,
- The introduction of the quarterly scholarly journal—Logos,
- The replacement and improvement of the Byrne Residence for retired priests,
- The expansion of Campus Ministry, and
- The expansion of volunteer programs.

These are but a few of the programs introduced or expanded by the university in recent years that demonstrate commitment to Catholic ideals.

#### Observation Five—Sending the Message

I am fairly certain that no Bishop will formally implement a review of theological faculty in the near future. The Bishop does act, after all, within a political environment and such a drastic imposition will tear apart Catholic higher education and the Catholic Church. Rather, I believe that the Bishop will send the message to "tow the line" in activities in the higher education environment that are beyond the classroom. These activities would include such events as student sponsored speakers, student clubs and events which symbolically are contrary to Catholic teachings.

It is essential that a dialogue be continued between representatives of Catholic higher education and the local Bishop so that both sides learn and understand from each other the need to deal with controversial and other issues within an environment of academic freedom while at the same time complying with the teachings of the Church. It is not an "either/or" question. Academic freedom can exist within the environment of Catholic higher education. These two are not mutually exclusive but rather supportive of each other. Faith provides truth and light.

## **Conclusion**

I found the readings and discussion of the seminar to be stimulating. I particularly enjoyed the expertise and learned opinion that the members of the faculty expressed during the seminar. We need to remove the passion from the debate and rather consider the discussion a collaboration of strengths of the Church and Catholic higher education. I believe that the University of St. Thomas is poised for greatness and will and should meet its challenges within the context of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*.