

A Sign of Ecclesial Commitment: The Religious Founding Group and the Role of the Diocesan Clergy at the University of St. Thomas

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In *City of Wisdom* (1983) the Reverend David J. Hassel, S.J., addresses the importance of the Religious Founding Group (henceforth called RFG) in determining later directions of a given college or university. This is a significant factor regardless of which religious group is involved (Congregational, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Methodist, Baptist, and Catholic being the ones that Hassel discusses). For Catholic colleges and universities it is also significant whether the RFG is (as for most) a Religious Order, such as the Jesuits, the Benedictines, the Sisters of St. Joseph, and the Christian Brothers; or (like ourselves) a diocese; or some other group, such as a group of pious laymen who get together to start a Catholic college, provided that they have the permission of the local Bishop.

Here at St. Thomas we are all aware of our distinguished founder, Archbishop John Ireland, and we have celebrated both our own centennial (1985), that of the archdiocese (1989), and that of the major seminary (1994) with a certain maximizing of Archbishop Ireland. Now, Archbishop Ireland was many good things, but he was not a group. When he founded St. Thomas, he did so, not as a private person, but as the head of a corporation, the Diocese (as it still was in 1885) of Saint Paul.

What does it mean to be an Archdiocesan university? We know that we are one, but does anyone have a good description of the genus?

To answer this question, I would like to look briefly at three sources: the current (1983) Code of Canon Law, the experience of other diocesan colleges and universities in the United States, and the first 111 years of St. Thomas history.

Regarding the first of these, Canon Law is currently divided into seven "Books," of which the third is "The Teaching Office of the Church"; this in turn is divided into five "Titles," of which the third is "Catholic Education." Chapter II of this Title is "Catholic universities and other institutes of higher studies," and Chapter III is "Ecclesiastical universities and faculties." This latter chapter is concerned with seminaries and other schools of divinity; it is of interest to St. Thomas only insofar as part of St. Thomas is the St. Paul Seminary School of Divinity, and the Archbishop clearly has special responsibilities with regard to the faculty of the School of Divinity.

Chapter II deals more specifically with Catholic universities, but it does not make any distinction among the various types of Catholic university foundations noted by Hassel.

Canon 809, however, insists that the Church has a responsibility to make sure that there is at least one Catholic university available in every "region," so that presumably, if no Religious Order or other group establishes such a university, the local Bishop, or the Bishops of a regional or national conference, would be obliged to do so:

If it is possible and advantageous the conference of bishops are to see to it that universities or at least faculties are established, suitably distributed through their territory, in which the various disciplines are to be investigated and taught with due regard for their academic autonomy, and with due consideration for Catholic doctrine.

Regarding the experience of other diocesan colleges and universities in the United States, one must note that they are a varied group and that their histories and current organizations show as many variations as similarities. There are nineteen altogether, of which some of the more noteworthy, apart from St. Thomas, are:

Sacred Heart College, Bridgeport, Connecticut (Diocese of Bridgeport)

Seton Hall University, South Orange, New Jersey (Archdiocese of Newark)

Gannon College, Erie, Pennsylvania (Diocese of Erie)

Bellarmino College, Louisville, Kentucky (Archdiocese of Louisville)

Loras College, Dubuque, Iowa (Archdiocese of Dubuque)

St. Ambrose University, Davenport, Iowa (Diocese of Davenport)

The University of Dallas, Dallas, Texas (Diocese of Dallas-Fort Worth)

The University of St. Thomas, Houston, Texas (Diocese of Houston)

The University of San Diego, San Diego, California (Diocese of San Diego)

and, of course, The Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C. (National Conference of Catholic Bishops)

Even putting aside the unique situation of the Catholic University of America, we see considerably different degrees of diocesan involvement in these institutions. The University of Dallas, for example, has drawn many of its priest-faculty from the Cistercian monks of Our Lady of Dallas Abbey, and the University of Houston has drawn its primarily from the Congregation of St. Basil. Bellarmine College used to have the services of various Religious Orders (Franciscan men and Ursuline women), but in recent years the clerical and Religious presence at the college has dropped to a minimum (one priest in theology and one in Campus Ministry).

Seton Hall provides an interesting point of comparison with the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul because it is almost as large as St. Thomas and it has a rather large priest faculty, mostly diocesan. Seton Hall has one advantage in this regard over St. Thomas, insofar as the other dioceses of New Jersey (Camden, Metuchen, Paterson, and Trenton) are expected to free some priests for service at Seton Hall.

Regarding their Boards of Trustees and their Presidents, there is no consistent pattern among these universities.

And so, for much of our notion of what it means to say that the University of St. Thomas is an archdiocesan university, we must turn to our own history.

From 1885 until 1928 the College of St. Thomas, although having its own corporation and by-laws, was run as an Archdiocesan institution; priests, including Presidents, were assigned here the same way pastors were assigned to parishes even though in 1894 the St. Paul Seminary was separated from the College. In the early years the College was not self-sufficient financially, and the Diocese (after 1889 the Archdiocese) of St. Paul picked up the tab (the last conspicuous example of this relationship came in 1946, when Archbishop Murray taxed all of the parishes of the Archdiocese to pay for the new Albertus Magnus Hall).

From 1928 until 1933 the Archdiocese loaned the College to the Congregation of the Holy Cross from Notre Dame in Indiana as a sort of experiment; if the experiment had continued, probably St. Thomas would have become an institution run and largely staffed by the Holy Cross Fathers and Brothers, but even during the Holy Cross years those diocesan priests already on the faculty here did not leave but continued to be assigned here. Joseph Connors' *Journey Toward Fulfillment* lists five of them: James Moynihan, Mathias Gillen, Michael Saunders, Nicholas Moelter, and Joseph Schabert (p234).

After 1933 the College reverted to what it had been before 1928, and priests were assigned here by the Archbishops. Also, even as late as 1968, in the first year of the Archbishop's Appeal (later called the Annual Catholic Appeal), this college and St. Catherine's were on the list of beneficiaries, although that policy was dropped the following year.

From the beginning the College/University has been a corporation separate from the Archdiocese, but the by-laws of the corporation call for some close archdiocesan ties: the Archbishop of St. Paul and Minneapolis is ex officio the Chair of the Board of Trustees, the Vicar General (the Archbishop's number one assistant) is ex officio a member of the same Board, and the President must be a priest, but not necessarily a priest of this archdiocese.

The by-laws are not clear, however, as to the status of the priests of the College (since 1990 the University), although those priests who are full-time Faculty of the School of Divinity are covered by Book III, Title 3, Chapter 3 of the Code of Canon Law (1983).

The situation of the priests at the University, apart from the School of Divinity, is therefore anomalous. On the one hand, there clearly are a significant number of priests here, mostly diocesan, and most of those coming from this Archdiocese and assigned here by the Archbishop, as there have been since 1885; on the other hand, there is no guarantee that this situation will continue.

Two factors militate against the future existence of the priest- faculty at St. Thomas. First of all, there is no written commitment from the Archdiocese to continue supplying them; and secondly, the University's commitment to Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action usually involves it in national searches for faculty, and a diocesan priest without a higher degree and without teaching experience would not hold up in a national search (priests assigned to St. Thomas have typically been given a few years to complete their doctoral work). The first of these considerations--the possibility that the Archbishop might cease to assign new priests to

St. Thomas—is aggravated by the declining number of priests per laypeople in the archdiocese, as in most of the Catholic world. And the second—the conflict between archdiocesan assignment and national search—is aggravated by the fear of the perception of clericalism and the possibility of demoralization or anti-clerical backlash on the part of the lay faculty.

What can be done? Some persons would probably say that the phasing out of the priest-faculty is historically inevitable and perhaps desirable, but it isn't really "inevitable" unless we let it be. And some others would certainly say that having a significant number of diocesan priests around, especially as faculty, is part of what people have meant when they called St. Thomas a "diocesan" university.

From the point of view of the Archdiocese and its priest-shortage, it would be good if the Archdiocese would make it an open, publicly-stated policy that a certain percentage of its priests (such as 5 percent?) would be assigned to the University of St. Thomas. Furthermore, now that men entering the seminary are several years older than they used to be and frequently have degrees, even doctorates, in hand, and given the way people move around nowadays, this policy could even be used to attract candidates who might otherwise be lost to Religious Orders or other dioceses.

Also, remember that when Archbishop Ireland founded St. Thomas, the Diocese of St. Paul included all of Minnesota and those counties of the Dakotas east of the Missouri River. St. Paul lost most of that territory in 1889 and most of the rest of it in 1957, when the Diocese of New Ulm was created, so that now the Archdiocese consists of only twelve counties, basically the metropolitan area. But, if we could follow the model of Seton Hall (cf. above) and ask our suffragan dioceses to contribute even one priest each, we could pick up some additional suitable priest-faculty. In this regard, the Second Vatican Council, in its Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, states "priests belonging to dioceses which are rich in vocations should show themselves willing and ready, with the permission or at the urging of their own bishop, to exercise their ministry

in other regions, missions, or activities which suffer from a shortage of clergy."
(Presbyterorum Ordinis, #10)

There remains the delicate matter of the relationship of assigned priests to nationally recruited lay faculty. This is probably especially sensitive in the theology department; it was only as recently as 1967 that the first layman began to teach in that department at St. Thomas! But I think everyone would be more comfortable if the Archdiocese and the University were to work out a policy and be up-front about it, as they are with the by-laws for the President and Board of Trustees.

Perhaps such guidelines could take a form like this:

16 priests on the University faculty, in addition to the President and the priest(s) in Campus Ministry;

Sources: 8 from the archdiocese, 4 from other dioceses within the metropolitan province, 4 from other dioceses or Religious Orders;

Deployment: spread among the departments as much as possible, with no more than four in theology and no more than two in any other department.

If any priest's work is significantly below par, his department Chair could terminate him, following the usual procedures; in most cases his Bishop/Superior would then assign him elsewhere. If he remained assigned to the University, he would be given non-academic work and would not be counted among the priest-faculty.

Why do I think it is important to take steps to insure the continuing presence of diocesan priest-faculty at St. Thomas?

a) It has been our tradition, without break, since the very beginning; this is part of what "archdiocesan" means here.

b) Every (arch)diocese in the Catholic Church consists of at least one (arch)bishop, some priests, some deacons, many lay people, and usually some women and men Religious. These groups need not all be visible parts of every diocesan institution, but, in an institution over a century old and with over 10,000 members, the groups should all be present in some way, especially that group that has been conspicuously present from the beginning. As Richard John Neuhaus has put it as the third of his eleven theses on "the Christian university," "While conviction is more important than affiliation, affiliation can help sustain conviction." Here at St. Thomas the presence of priest-faculty members is a strong sign of our affiliation.

c) Catholicism is, in a certain sense, a spirituality, and not merely a group of people, but it is a spirituality with a significant difference: part of what is believed in, part of what is experienced, is a visible, institutional Church. Catholicism is not something we think about only, but something we live together with the other members of that Church. We

cannot claim to be communicating Catholicism at all adequately unless we communicate the sense of an institutional connection with that visible Church. At St. Thomas the presence of the diocesan clergy has been a principal means by which that connection has been affirmed over the years.

d) Although most diocesan priests are parish priests, there is no particular reason to equate the two terms; after all, besides teachers, there are diocesan priests assigned in various non-parochial ways: hospital chaplains, military chaplains, prison chaplains, Chancery and Tribunal staff, and other avocations. It would be sending a misleading message to our students if they saw priests doing only pastoral work, and that only in a parochial setting. That is why I not only think that there should be priests at the University, but I also think that most of them should be teaching in the classroom. In the fourth of Neuhaus's theses we read, "A Christian university is not a church, but is part of the church's mission."

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