

Values and the Identity of the Catholic University

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Philip Gleason identifies two tendencies found in contemporary prescriptions for Catholic colleges and universities looking for an identity. One is progressive or liberal and emphasizes studies related to peace and justice as clear signs of a school's Catholic character. A second is conservative or traditionalist; it stresses conformity with Catholic doctrine. Both tendencies include variations ranging from moderate to extreme. Neither tendency really excludes the other. Still, both are very specific about the path institutions should take to demonstrate their Catholicity.¹

Uncaptured in Gleason's analysis is the practical solution chosen by many institutions: the identification of Catholic education and a commitment to values. The University of St. Thomas, for example, claims that affiliation with the Catholic tradition "fosters a values-oriented education needed for complete human development and for responsible citizenship in contemporary society" and includes among its goals "a search for and discovery of truth and judgments of value as well as preserving and transmitting enduring truths and values."² Speeches at public events as well as casual conversation among interested parties often explicitly convey the practical understanding that "values," in the end, are what a Catholic university education will contribute to the commonweal in a religiously diverse and secular society.

Yet talk about "values," as we hear it, does not convince everyone. Some say it is all too vague; "just what values do you mean?" they ask, "and where do values come from?" Others recall that Allan Bloom connected "values" talk with a cloud of philosophical mistakes which was closing the "American mind."³ While "peace and justice" or "orthodoxy" can capture minds, "values" as a measure of Catholic identity seem to many to be vague and uninspiring. Such does not need to be the case.

A good starting point for a discussion of values in a Catholic university can be found in the Second Vatican Council's "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World."⁴ That document and the conversations between the church and the world that it promotes are particularly apt means to identify and to inspire the educational programs of Catholic colleges and universities as they now are. Furthermore, a focus on values as key to the identity of a Catholic university has many practical advantages over either of the strategies identified initially.

Part of the vision of "aggiornamento" that Pope John XXIII brought to the church in his pontificate, the Pastoral Constitution "Gaudium et Spes," translated both as "The Church and the Modern World" and "The Church Today," directly addressed the relationship between the Catholic Church, committed firmly to a faith and practice born in the preindustrial world, and the modern world, a product of revolutionary developments in science, industry, and democracy. Considered by some to be the most typical or characteristic achievement of the council, "The Church Today" helped many Catholics to

reconcile two goods they had experienced: the faith, worship, and morality of the Church that nurtured them and the decencies of modern life which they enjoyed. The council fathers spoke of "engaging in conversation" with the whole human family about the problems raised by modern living. They spoke of a grounding in the very nature of the created order for the autonomous development of human activities in the modern world. While continually referring to the transcendent truths that the Church teaches, the council fathers movingly conveyed to people living in modern times that the human efforts of their lives, increasingly complex and time-consuming because of the radically social character of modern life, could be blessed and take a place in a Catholic vision of life just as had the simpler structures of pre-industrial times. More precise theological and historical characterization of "The Church Today" is beyond the scope of this essay and writer. What is within scope, though, are the particular elements of "The Church Today" that lie open to the ordinary reader and offer guides by which the general term "values" can be substantiated as a reasonable path toward identity by Catholic colleges.

First, a Catholic university or college need not try to be a church, directly charged with mediating the work of Christ, in order to be Catholic. As an institution working hard to prepare students to live rightly in the modern world and to join with others in improving it, a Catholic college is not deviating from the mandate given at the significant moment of the Second Vatican Council: it is fulfilling it. What is applied broadly to all earthly activities by the council certainly applies to colleges and universities:

"... by their labor they are unfolding the Creator's work, consulting the advantages of their brother men, and contributing by their personal industry to the realization in history of the divine plan ... men are not deterred by the Christian message from building up the world, or impelled to neglect the welfare of their fellows. They are, rather more stringently bound to do these very things."⁵

Thus, a Catholic college or university in attending dutifully to the academic values of its daily work (the "discipline of fact" and the "discipline of knowledge" developed by Father Timothy Healy) is doing just what it should do.⁶ What already goes on in a Catholic university or college, the patient daily efforts to teach students and to advance human knowledge, is the worthy work in the world that the council fathers endorsed. Nagging doubts about Catholicity cannot be allowed to detract from this primary value of education to which Catholic universities and colleges must be committed; nor can more obvious marks of Catholic identity remedy shortcomings in the primary job of higher education.

Second, a Catholic college or university committed to values needs to heed what "The Church Today" said about the responsibility believers may bear for contemporary atheism: "To the extent that they (believers) neglect their own training in the faith, or teach erroneous doctrine, or are deficient in their religious, moral, or social life, they must be said to conceal rather than reveal the authentic face of God and religion."⁷ Here, the focus of a Catholic institution narrows to the need of the community from which it springs. If believers are poorly educated in their own religion and if their visible lives show little sign of Christian impact, then the conversation between the modern world and

the Catholic community will hardly be a fruitful one. From its commitment to values, a Catholic college simply must recognize the facts about the religious education of the students who come to it and provide the necessary remedies. If this means that some part of the advanced explorations in theology needs to be sacrificed in favor of more elementary instruction, at a particular time and place, certainly that will have to be done. If a Catholic college needs to be stricter in its code of behavior for students than a secular institution, certainly that will have to be done. The point is that a Catholic institution, while performing the fundamental task of any educational institution (promoting the values of higher education), claims a special connection to the Catholic community. That claim cannot be merely formal; it requires specific activities in religious education and student life so that the Catholic community can bring what it should to the modern world.

A third value to be professed and developed by a Catholic college speaks to the need of both the Catholic and the American communities. "The Church Today" approaches an anathema when it states:

"They are mistaken who, knowing that we have here no abiding city but seek one which is to come, think that they may therefore shirk their earthly responsibilities. For they are forgetting that by the faith itself they are more than ever obliged to measure up to these duties, each according to his proper vocation."⁸

In the same mode, the council fathers denominate as one of the "more serious errors of our age" the idea that "religion consists in acts of worship alone and in the discharge of certain moral obligations." By this mandate, "The Church Today" highlights the primary character of the values to which we claim commitment: they are not only to be objects of honor but also of action.

Just because the observation that religion can't stop at the church door has been made countless times doesn't mean that it shouldn't be made countless times again. For the Catholic community in the United States, the challenge and excitement of the nearly 30 years since the Second Vatican Council has come in no small part from the meeting of this teaching and the maturing of the immigrant church. The church emphasized service in the world at the same time as younger, schooled Catholics felt ready to articulate their values in neighborhood, community, and nation. Thirty years later in an atmosphere of highly individualistic values, Catholic colleges can find many opportunities to spell out how the Gospel of Jesus entails specific actions in daily life, ranging from sexual morality to social justice. Some of the specification will come from theology; some will come from philosophy in the treatment of ethics. Many disciplines in a Catholic college can contribute to building awareness and commitment to the idea that religion entails responsibilities in the social sphere: history, for example, can pay attention to how the idea of God has affected behavior in different cultures and different times.

The point thus far has been that the term "values" is properly and truly applied to the identity of the Catholic college. At the most fundamental level, all of the activities that go on in such an institution promote the values of education, values that move people toward development that is consistent with their human nature; promoting these values is entirely

in consonance with the Catholic vision traced out in "The Church Today." Second, Catholic colleges and universities place high value on promoting the religious knowledge of their own communities and pointing out how standards of morality flow from this religious knowledge and commitment. Third, Catholic colleges promote the full understanding of "value" itself, particularly for church members; that religious life is not exhausted by activities in church but entails consequences in the realm of action. Further specification and development of strategies by which these values to which Catholics claim commitment can be translated into specific educational activities are outside of the scope of this essay. What remains is to cite the real advantages that the "values" approach has for Catholic identity.

Definitions that are primarily legal or theological, important as these may be in their respective spheres, can have little direct influence on most of the actions that a faculty will take as it considers how to maintain and improve its Catholic identity. Legal questions focus particularly on authority, control, and accountability to the Catholic hierarchy; theological questions extend into the realm of grace. Practically we will probably not affect our real status as a Catholic institution by spelling out in greater detail the relationship with the local bishop; nor will our deliberations about a core curriculum be measurably changed by considering that, somehow, we comprise a community of wisdom. Considering Catholic identity primarily as a commitment to values — understood in the ways promoted by "The Church in the Modern World" — offers the widest range of opportunities for the greatest number of people in Catholic institutions to take specific actions as a consequence of that identity.

Second, a values commitment allows the fullest range of development to the varied character and traditions of Catholic institutions. Catholic institutions of higher learning are diverse. In the United States, they range from small colleges in out-of-the-way places to M.D.- and J.D.-granting institutions in megalopolis. Many are historically connected with religious orders of men or women, each with its own mission. Some colleges were born out of an ethnic community and remain connected to it. Many have responsibilities within their communities for programs that fill a local need. An identity linked to values allows this diversity among Catholic institutions to be most fruitful.

Third, the Catholic tendency to proceed from abstract definition as a first step is well-known, as are some of its unfortunate consequences. The task of producing an abstract definition is often exhausting; the results are often so attractive in their intellectual contours that it sometimes seems that energy and attention get deflected from the tasks of proceeding to the consequent action. Because there seems to be no dogmatic necessity to proceed from a definition with respect to Catholic university education, we can better do justice to the efforts of great varieties of people working in different regions at different tasks by trying to find a way of tying identity to what is rather than what ought to be in a legalistic or theological sense. A values approach offers the greatest flexibility in this area.

Seen from either its Roman or its Catholic background, the Catholic Church has a universal character: local divisions of the church live most of their lives locally, while

federated with other local divisions and in communion with Rome. The character and customs of local churches are emphasized in several documents of Vatican Council II. Recognition of the reality of local churches, with their local differences, proceeds from the existence of real differences among human communities at local levels. Institutions of higher education, if they are vital and truly related to the communities they serve, will display local differences and emphases (consider, for example, the strong emphasis on business-preparation programs in the Catholic colleges of the United States). A definition of Catholic identity must be broad and real enough to reflect what a wide variety of Catholic institutions actually do. It must also be capable of inspiring specific actions in pursuit of that identity by institutions of diverse character. A commitment to values along the lines defined by "The Church Today" allows ample opportunities for Catholic colleges and universities to fulfill their mission as a part of the church in the modern world. n

References

- 1** Philip Gleason, "American Catholic Higher Education, 1940-1990," in: *The Secularization of the Academy*. eds. George M. Marsden & Bradley J. Longfield (1992), 224-258. See pp. 250-251.
- 2** University of St. Thomas, "Statement of Purpose/Convictions." 1993.
- 3** Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*. (1987).
- 4** Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*)," in: *The Documents of Vatican II* (1966 paper bound edition), 199-308.
- 5** "The Church in the Modern World," 232-233.
- 6** Timothy S. Healy, S.J., "The Doing of Truth," Typescript, 10.
- 7.** "The Church in the Modern World," 217.
- 8.** "The Church in the Modern World," 243.