

On Life Within a Catholic University

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A student of color came to my office one afternoon to vent his frustration about being in an American survey course in which he found the contributions of his people to be invisible, and his insights and contributions to class discussion considered irrelevant to the topic. His final comment to me was, "How can someone earn a Ph.D. and not know anything about me?" This student has an ancestry that is multigenerational Catholic and Minnesotan. His family settled in St. Paul in the early 1900s. Yet, he feels like a stranger in his own land.

My work gives me an opportunity to participate in a number of discussions within and outside of the University of St. Thomas community regarding the Catholic nature of our institution and the contributions to Catholicism from the communities of color. I find a common thread of misunderstanding that is often interwoven in the fabric of the discussion, that somehow to be Catholic excludes the wide diversity of peoples, cultures, and languages, the wide diversity of the gifts of women, and the wide diversity of the effect of socioeconomic class on any person or group of persons. That to be European-American, male, able-bodied, and economically well-disposed are the tenets for being Catholic. This is an extreme end of the thread, and to some may seem offensive, because consciously most Catholics do not think in these narrow terms. A constituency of the Catholic population does fit this description, and we rejoice in their contributions, as we rejoice in the contributions of all persons who are baptized Catholic. However, the behavior of some individuals and many institutional practices would suggest a narrow understanding of what it means to be Catholic. The reality of the Catholic Church is infinitely larger. Yes, we do have doctrines, commandments, and beatitudes that define who we are and how we are to behave as individuals, communities, and institutions. By our baptism we are called to love God and honor the human dignity of each person whom we encounter. More easily said than done, but the exhortation is there.

The Catholic Church is a worldwide church. On the American continents, our ancestors were strangers to this land, though the Native American tribes can claim first rights. The Catholic Church was brought here by our ancestors. In the United States, the Church mirrors the beauty and the complexity of this human experiment of cultures choosing to try to live together. As Church we have adapted, created, and participated fully in this experiment while still being connected to and participating in the global authority of the Vatican. Our educational system is a vital part of, and has an essential impact on, all of that this means to us as community called Catholic:

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. Through this dialogue a Catholic university assists the Church, enabling it to come to a better knowledge of diverse cultures, discern their positive and negative aspects, to receive their authentically human contributions, and to develop means by which it can make the faith better understood by the men and women of a particular culture. While it is true that the Gospel cannot be identified with any particular culture and transcends all cultures, it is also true that "the kingdom which God proclaims is lived by men and women who are profoundly linked to a culture, and the building up of the kingdom cannot avoid borrowing the elements of human culture or cultures." A faith that places itself on the margin of what is human, of what is therefore culture, would be a faith unfaithful to the fullness of what the Word of God manifests and reveals, a decapitated faith, worse still, a faith in the process of self-annihilation." (Ex Corde Ecclesiae, par. 43 and 44.)

The University of St. Thomas, as a Catholic university, has the mission, the responsibility, and the capacity to fulfill this aspect of Pope John Paul II's criteria of what it means to be a Catholic university. It would seem to me to be a useless waste of valuable energy to make Catholic and aggressive inclusion of culture, race, gender, and socioeconomic class mutually exclusive of each other. Exposure and inclusion is what it means to be Catholic and educated. Critical analysis of the information gathered from research, exposure, and inclusive practice through the norms of the Church and the norms of broader society is also a part of the educational process. Discernment and judicious use of power in the outcomes and reporting of the analysis is of importance. Pope John Paul II exhorts us to our Catholic mission as a Catholic university.

So what does any of this mean? From my perspective, it means:

- 1) that in the community of the University of St. Thomas we own and celebrate the fact that we are a Catholic institution that continuously strives for the achievement of excellence in education;
- 2) that within the educational community of the University of St. Thomas, it is not acceptable to exhibit behaviors that are disrespectful to other religious traditions and beliefs or that are sexist, racist, classist, homophobic, or disrespectful to the human dignity of our membership and those with whom we come in contact;
- 3) that as an educational institution that honors human dignity, we struggle with the reality that there is rarely "one way" to be or to do anything. As a Catholic educational institution we have a responsibility to impart our values system, provide educational opportunities for critical analysis and discussion, and demonstrate how values conflicts can be dealt with, so that the members of this community are able to deal effectively with the complicated life issues that exist inside and outside of our walls;
- 4) that as an educational institution that honors human dignity we allow all members of our community to define who they are and the gifts and talents they offer, without the

impediments of stereotype and misguided political correctness which can be used as an excuse to erect barriers that are demeaning and exclusive;

5) that the efforts that are made to invite and retain faculty, staff, and students who are women and/or of other races, cultures, and backgrounds not be sabotaged by misinformation about lowering the standards of excellence for this educational institution;

6) that as a Catholic educational institution, our faculty and administrators be of diverse and values-compatible background and talent so as to contribute to the critical analysis and evaluation necessary to provide excellence in curriculum and programming rich in the diversity that is Catholic;

7) that our Catholic values and attitudes honoring human dignity be our primary guide, not how much money we have available or leftover;

8) that as a Catholic educational institution, founded by Archbishop John Ireland for the purpose of access to excellence in Catholic education to anyone who sought it, we are faithful to our mission;

9) that as a Catholic educational institution we continue to provide our students with the foundations to live in the world as it is and is becoming: "The vision of the university must be able to lure the whole university into the future with practical effectiveness" (Hassel, 12);

10) that as an excellent Catholic educational institution we continuously challenge individuals to honor themselves, their heritage and personal story; and to honor and value the heritage and stories of those with whom they come in contact, we do not have to agree with or accept everything that another puts before us, but we owe each other due respect and value.

Finally, I am reminded of the students, faculty, and staff with whom I have had the pleasure of working, persons who came to this Catholic university for the expressed reason of its excellence. I am reminded of how some, though they wanted to be here, felt alienated in their own land because individuals or institutional practice temporarily forgot what it means to be Catholic. A passage from Lorene Cary's *Black Ice* summarizes the corresponding responsibility of all those who choose to come to this Catholic university:

A couple of years after I taught at St. Paul's, I was asked to serve as a trustee. During my term, I visited the school for board meetings, and I talked with the students. I could feel their attention one Fall evening when I told them to try to think of St. Paul's as their school, too, not as a white place where they were trespassing. The next Fall a boy told me: "I had been thinking of it as their school. It was like I had forgotten that this is my life" (Cary, 5).

The promise that Jesus has made to us is that by His presence with us we have access to life. This is our life, let us claim it to the fullest.

Notes

John Paul, II, Apostolic Constitution, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, of the Supreme Pontiff, John Paul II, on Catholic Universities, August 15, 1990, p. 26-27.

David J. Hassel, SJ, *City of Wisdom: A Christian Vision of the American University*, Loyola University Press, Chicago, 1983, p. 12.

Lorene Cary, *Black Ice*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1991, p. 5.