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# The Catholicity of the Catholic University

Denise Lardner Carmody

*By being who they are, Catholic universities move from rhetoric to reality.*

When invited to write this piece, I was given a (then-tentative) title and this directive: we want "an essay that extends the ideas developed in your book on this subject." What author would not take the bait?

It was in 1994 that I wrote *Organizing a Christian Mind: A Theology of Higher Education*. I had just come to Santa Clara as chair of religious studies, after an academic career in state and non-Catholic, private universities. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* was raising either hope or hackles among those engaged in Catholic higher education. I am a cradle Catholic with a fierce love of my faith. Yet, both choice and circumstances had made my involvement in parish or ecclesial affairs close to nonexistent for many years. Suddenly, I was in a Jesuit, Catholic university chairing a department of religious studies for undergraduates with a graduate program in pastoral ministries that prepares people for leadership roles in parishes. The book was my on-the-job effort to clarify my thoughts about how Catholic faith might play out in a Catholic college. Writing it was a useful exercise for me, but I must admit that I never viewed it as more than that.

It is now 2002. After six (mostly) rewarding years as department chair, I am currently provost. What can I say about this issue today? I'm not sure. Certainly the topic swirls around us as much as ever. Many write passionately about the "Catholic-identity" of Catholic higher education, lamenting its morbidity or touting its vitality. On campus, however, I doubt that many of us find the topic a matter of daily concern. Class and manuscript preparations, the worrisome student or colleague, and lack of time--these are the issues that weigh on our professional psyches. Yet, unless we are comatose, Catholic-identity still registers at least as an

elephant in the room. For colleagues who are not Catholic the talk may make us wonder about our value to, and future role in, the university. For Catholic colleagues, the emphasis on Catholic-identity may raise fears of litmus tests for orthodoxy, a loss of academic rigor, and being ostracized by the broader academy. For Jesuit colleagues, perhaps there is a concern about being spread so thin that frustration is a daily companion. For all, the strengthening of Catholic-identity may conjure up visions of hierarchical interference, the demise of academic freedom, confirming the bigot's belief that "Catholic University" is an oxymoron.

Despite the negative undertone or subtext of some of the discussions, I see a positive possibility: reflection on what it means to be a Catholic university can lead to a conscious appropriation of who we are. To this end, I will reflect in print some ideas and aspirations that you can play off against your own. I make no claim to originality, only to the conviction milled from experience. One caveat--reflection must be disciplined, lest it become narcissistic and nonproductive. Since the same caveat applies to writing essays, let me exercise discipline by immediately setting out my assumptions.

A Catholic university must be catholic, universal. Its catholicism--its universality--will manifest itself through its diversity. A Catholic university can never be sectarian or cramped. Without doubt, the diversity it champions is inclusive and generous. To flesh out this conviction, let me cite a few examples. Within fiscal constraints, diversity should define the university's curriculum, community, and aspirations. Let's look at

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each in turn.

Ideally, our curricular offerings would mirror the breadth and depth of creation: nothing human is foreign to me. Concretely, since the content of any university's curriculum should be marked by academic excellence, the limits of our offerings must be determined by the academic quality that we must deliver. A Catholic university should be the first to demonstrate that neither politics nor expediency dictates our curriculum.

Similarly, pious rhetoric cannot--and need not--go bail for intellectual quality. In a Catholic university the quest for academic excellence is both an end and a means. After all, the purpose of a Catholic education is to insure that its graduates are (as the Jesuit Volunteers brag) "ruined for life." We expect that our students will be permanently incapable of living in intellectual and moral cul-de-sacs. A diploma from a Catholic university should equip and motivate the recipient to grow into the fullness of her or his humanity. Therefore, any curriculum worthy of being in a Catholic university must inculcate both intellectual acuity and ethical sensitivity. Achieving this lofty goal calls for creative methods, which in turn depend on the diversity of the community.

Again, we strive for a diverse community not to gain some accreditation or marketing edge, but because diversity is crucial for genuine education. A university community that is diverse culturally, religiously, economically and ethnically has the potential for the lively interaction that fuels the ongoing renewal of campus life. Diversity is a precious resource. Ideally, our campuses should mirror the environment that our students will inhabit. "Global village" may be an overused phrase, but it is increasingly a reality. To realize the potential that diversity offers, however, our students, staff, and faculty must engage one another constructively. As we know, the more diverse the community the more likely it is to experience tensions; especially tensions resulting from biases based on ignorance or ancient enmities. Combating overt prejudice is relatively simple: it is confronted and denounced. The more insidious obstacle is overcoming our tendency to stick with "ours": at lunch, in the department, even at communal gatherings. We must

(individually and collectively) create opportunities for greater contact across disciplines, roles, and generations. In some instances, perhaps we need only be more intentional about established practices. For example, most university committees regularly require a mix of faculty, staff, and students. Can the composition of these committees be conscious experiments in collaboration, rather than the routine filling of slots? When diverse opinions are entertained respectfully, individuals often find common cause and learn the value of shared effort. Perhaps provosts (and other members of the administrative leadership cohort) could encourage such cooperation by modeling it.

My third locus for diversity, aspirations, is perhaps the most problematic. Diverse aspirations appear plentiful in higher education. Sadly, diversity here is

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often contentious, despite a veneer of civility. My strategic goal is more strategic than your strategic goal. If yours wins (translation: gets funded), mine loses. Departments compete for operating budgets; deans compete for faculty lines; vice-presidents compete for

the president's ear. No one intends harm; each legitimately competes for a "good." Meanwhile, such turf wars suck the oxygen from the university community, depleting our energy, derailing our progress and belying the religious bedrock of our institution. It need not be this way. Seldom are our diverse aspirations antithetical. In fact, they are usually compatible, sometimes mutually reinforcing. It is in the means to achieve our aspirations that we differ. More significantly, what too often impedes our ability to work together for the commonweal is ego: mine and yours. Making diversity harmonious--life giving--requires transparent procedures and self-sacrificing generosity. Then again, shouldn't we expect both--of ourselves and our colleagues? Consciously striving for such collegiality can itself be down payment on achieving it.

A Catholic university must be a university. The Catholic university is not a parish, nor a seminary, nor a social service agency. The differences are obvious. (If they are not, we **do** have a crisis in identity.) Still, there are some qualities and tasks a Catholic university has in common with each.

Like a healthy parish, the university endeavors to be a community--not merely a collection of individuals. The university is a place where ideas are studied, tested, and promulgated. The basis for its community is a vibrant intellectual and artistic life. It tries to be a community of scholars who support and initiate one another into the pursuit of truth. Without negating my previous emphasis on the importance of our being a diverse community, here I want to highlight the necessity of community. Working against our efforts to form and maintain community are many realities: academic specialization, two-career families,

commuter-faculty/staff, as well as the higher bar for tenure and promotion. Community requires us to share a common vision. Articulating our common vision is not sufficient, however. We must also create occasions for celebrating our achievements and renewing our commitment. University-wide convocations, liturgies, and campaign kick-off dinners are often community builders. So too are more prosaic things, like e-mails to the entire community--staff, students, faculty--that inform, encourage, or thank them.

Like a seminary, the university offers opportunities for contemplation, as well as rigorous study. The university community traditionally relishes the privilege of sustained reflection, *pace* the charge of living in an ivory tower. Most who call the university their professional home knowingly choose time over money. How foolish we are if we do not use a portion of that time for reflection. Taking time to think (pray?) is not a luxury; it is a duty, if we are to engage productively in our vocations. There is yet another way in which contemplation marks a Catholic university. Theology is part of the curriculum. If its department of religious

studies or theology is true to its mission, it (and the university) takes seriously Anselm's definition of theology: "faith seeking understanding." In doing so, it offers occasions for perfecting both faith and understanding. Indeed, theological studies hone the critical and contemplative skills of its students--skills that are eminently transferable.

Like a social service agency, a Catholic university is concerned with improving society, especially for its most marginalized members. My suspicion is that it is this goal that frightens many academicians. Why? We



Tibetan monks doing sand painting.

Photo Courtesy of Marquette University Office of Public Affairs

are more thinkers than doers. Moreover, the deeper and more complex our thinking, often the less willing we are to offer solutions, much less engage in the sustained compromising needed to achieve change. (How many of us willingly serve on committees?) Further, it is generally true that most academicians are trained in analyzing, dissecting, and deconstructing reality. Thus, we may be less equipped to synthesize data, construct workable alternatives. Still, we are intelligent. Can we not use our intelligence in more than one way? Working together, we could challenge one another, correcting imbalances and strengthening sound solutions. Collaboration among colleagues in different specializations could result in research activities that could change public policy, secure grants, and rebound to the credit of the collaborators. Internally, effective university governance can produce policies that strengthen our strategic goals. None of this occurs instantly or painlessly; all of it depends on competence, good will, and patience.

Unless I seriously misunderstand my experience, I think we can readily agree on the university's need for academic rigor. We can probably reach consensus about the value of educating students to act morally and even altruistically--as long as those terms are left loosely defined. Where the paint begins to peel is when we insist that, as a Catholic, Jesuit university, we must educate from and for a faith that does justice. If that is how we intend to be identified, we best know what we are undertaking. My gut instinct is that it is analogous to deciding to have a child: you never fully appreciate the pains (or joys) that await you and, if you could, you might be too scared to try.

Let me spend some ink on a couple or three questions that need airing. Two interrelated questions are: Whose faith? and Whose justice? From all that has been already said, I am sure you know that the pluralism we prize in academe insures that "faith" here is a faith that is sensitive to, and enriched by, ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. Still, at the local level, we will reap the benefits of such an inclusive faith perspective, only if we create a campus culture permeated by this sensitivity. For example, hiring for mission is good, so long as colleagues understand that our "mission" is rooted in our fundamental religious

values, not in creedal conformity. Theoretically, those who know Jesuit history, and its place in the orthodox strand of the Catholic tradition, would assume this interpretation. However, it is prudent to reinforce regularly such assumptions, lest the fears I mentioned earlier emerge like pernicious weeds. When our non-Catholic colleagues consistently experience our respect for their religious beliefs, they correctly see themselves as partners in answering the dual questions: Whose faith? Whose justice? This is one reason why I argue that any effort to hire for mission must be matched by the equally important task of educating for mission.

Educating for mission must be on-going and multi-faceted. Initially the administration probably needs to take the lead, but success will come when the whole community understands (and can articulate) what we do, why we do it, and why doing it makes us distinctive. The commitment to educating from and for a faith that does justice is not negotiable. However, discussion about both its meaning (Whose faith? Whose justice?) and the means to realize our commitment involve progressive communal discernment. This is why, beyond a strategic plan that lays out our vision, we need strategic planning to implement, revise, update, and renew our vision. This, to me, is the heart of educating for mission. Again, this is less a new task than a deliberate effort to view all tasks from our center.

My final question is what should we expect as we attempt to take seriously our Catholic-identity? Let me prime the pump for your reflections by sharing a few of my own. Space, time, and experience limit what I can offer, making your contributions essential.

First, we should expect criticism. We may be attacked for changing direction, losing our intellectual commitment, pandering to liberal propaganda, becoming shells for the hierarchy, or caving in to the administration or to some segment of the faculty, staff, or student body. Possibly the most often-voiced criticism will be that we are hypocritical. Every unpopular decision--from tenure denial to budgetary allocations--will cause cries that the university speaks justice and acts unjustly. (Recently a student who failed an exam accused her professor of violating the university's profession of "educating the whole person

for competence, conscience, and compassion.") Another difficulty is the climate in which we now live: neither the Church nor its leaders are viewed as examples of moral integrity. While moral lapses within the official Church do not negate our religious heritage, they do make it easier for critics to mock us.

Not all the criticism will be self-serving, however, and we must be willing to hear those who point out our lack of attire. When criticism is without basis, we should question how well we are explaining our actions. We should also stay the course, as we try to improve communication. When criticism is on the mark, we should accept it and do better. Our candor will win support, perhaps even from our critics. I would treat criticism as the canary in the mine: knowing, if it goes silent, we are in trouble.

Second, we should realize that we are in this for the long haul. A trustee recently admonished us that our prime marketing tool is to be who we are. I muse about this a lot--sometimes sadly when the weight of the task seems overwhelming; often gratefully when I appreciate what an honor the task is. Beneath the momentary mood I am convinced, though, that the task is open-ended. We are forming the culture of our university. Culture-building is incremental; like life, it happens while we are doing other things. Yet again, like life, it requires reflection if it is to be purposeful. This reflection should be regular, humble, and peaceful; i.e., reflection that is suited for the long haul. If we--as a community--engage in sustained reflection about how we can best be who we are, humility and peace will follow.

Can we doubt that humility will accompany our efforts to be who we are? We are taking on the challenge of educating the whole person in such a way that our students' education is from and for a faith that does justice. If we have an I.Q. higher than a floor mop, we know that such a task is beyond us. We will make mistakes, correct those mistakes, and make new ones. Humility, i.e., realistic self-knowledge, will both preserve our peace and increase our success. My conviction that we should proceed peacefully is pragmatic, as well as intuitive. I fear that the magnitude of what we are attempting and the passion we bring to the task can make us crisis-junkies.

Precipitous action often brings bad results. Decisiveness, on the other hand, demands reasonable consultation and reflection. My mantra (recited frequently to myself) is that peace is the path to wisdom.

Thirdly, as we attempt to take seriously our Catholic identity, we must strive for balance. One of the strengths of our Roman Catholic tradition is its insistence on "both/and," rather than "either/or." Both nature and grace. Both academic rigor and social justice. Both diversity and community. Both reason and faith. Both commitment and detachment. Both institutions and prophets. Both serious effort and a sense of humor. Here, as in most of what we are trying to achieve in our institutions of higher education, we

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do well to heed the counsel of Ignatius Loyola: "Work as if everything depends upon God; pray as if everything depends upon yourself." How difficult; how essential for wholeness and holiness.

Finally, I think it is important that we appropriate our Catholic-identity within our specific Jesuit campus culture. (Paraphrasing Tip O'Neil, "all Jesuit cultures are local.") BC is not Georgetown; Santa Clara is not Holy Cross. How each Jesuit institution manifests its Catholic-identity will be its unique contribution to the whole. We can and should learn from one another, support one another's efforts, and delight in one another's successes. (That last one might border on utopian, I admit.)

Those are my thoughts about the meaning and worth of trying to be who we are: a Jesuit, Catholic university. As I return to my daytime job, I am confident that as long as the question of our Catholic-identity spurs us to an authentic appropriation of its deepest ideals, we and the university are becoming who we are.



Photo Courtesy of Le Moyne College

When she wasn't busy preparing for law school, Peta-Gaye Prendergast packed a lot into her four years at Le Moyne College in Syracuse, N.Y. A leadership role in *Pride in Our Work, Ethnicity, and Race (POWER)*, various International House activities, including protesting the School of the Americas, and Jumpstart, the Americorp-sponsored program, were among her extracurricular work. Pretty impressive, until you realize getting "just" a classroom education was never part of her plan.

"I learned so much more outside of the classroom than if I only went to classes," says Prendergast, who majored in International Studies. "All my extracurricular activities combine with what I learned in class to make me much more of a whole person."

Arriving in Brooklyn from her native Jamaica at the age of 10, Prendergast might seem an unlikely candidate for a Jesuit education. But it was actually while growing up on the island that her Jesuit roots were planted. "I attended a Jesuit school in Jamaica," she says. "Though I attended public schools in New York, I was always drawn to the combination of service and education."

It was this propensity that led her to Le Moyne. And from the moment she set foot on the picturesque suburban campus, her commitment to join and serve never stopped. For example, through Jumpstart she was asked to volunteer 900 hours - a figure she initially thought unobtainable but that she ultimately reached easily. "Going to a Jesuit college helped me get in touch with my own faith," Prendergast says, who was confirmed on campus earlier this year.

In Fall 2002 Peta-Gaye Prendergast will enter Fordham Law School. Though she's not sure what she will specialize in - international human right law is one possibility - Prendergast says that community service will always be part of her life, and part of her as a person.