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# Mission Talk and the Bugaboo of Modernity

JOHN J. PAULY

Of all the monsters who inhabit the Catholic anxiety closet, modernity is the scariest—and the hardest to kill. After one hundred years of transforming American Catholic colleges into serious, capable academic institutions, why do so many educators now propose to use that bluntest of weapons, the mission statement, to slay the bugaboo of modernity once again? Many of the current fears oddly echo those expressed over seventy-five years ago by the English Catholic writer G. K. Chesterton. In his 1921 essay “The Mad Hatter and the Sane Household,” Chesterton mourned society’s loss of common purpose. “Modern society,” he said, “is intrinsically insecure because it is based on the notion that all men will do the same thing for different reasons.” Such an arrangement cannot endure, he thought, for “it is not founding society on a communion, or even on a convention, but rather on a coincidence.” He offered a parable: “Four men may meet under the same lamp post: one to paint it pea green as part of a great municipal reform; one to read his breviary in the light of it; one to embrace it with accidental ardour in a fit of alcoholic enthusiasm; and the last merely because the

pea-green post is a conspicuous point of rendezvous with his young lady. But to expect this to happen night after night is unwise.”<sup>1</sup>

Chesterton’s parable captures the tone of the contemporary discussion about the mission of Jesuit universities. Mission talk usually assumes that something terrible has happened or could happen to us unless we act quickly. We have changed, lost our way, no longer speak the language of our ancestors. We stand together but apart. We see no way through to the future save by a return to an imagined past. Mission talk offers a solution, though it is not always clear what

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<sup>1</sup>G.K. Chesterton, “The Mad Hatter and the Sane Householder,” *Vanity Fair*, January 1921, p. 54, quoted in Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Free Press, 1965), 15.

problem it proposes to solve. Sometimes the problem cited is simply the absence of Jesuits, though that is nothing new; the trend toward lay faculty with doctorates has been obvious since the 1930s. Moreover, Jesuits themselves have often disagreed about the mission and significance of their own colleges. At other times the problem is described in more explicitly ideological terms. Some worry that Catholics have been assimilated into a Protestant culture, or allowed the pleasures of consumer society to lure them away from their faith, or raised children who no longer honor their parents' values. What are we to make of such talk, and its implications for Jesuit universities?

A few simple observations are in order. The most obvious is that there never has been a single, authoritative conception of "the mission" to which we can return. American Catholics have argued about the purpose of their universities over and over, especially since World War II and with particular ideological fervor since the 1960s.<sup>2</sup> Jesuits, for their part, have never stopped remaking their mission, always dreaming how best to plant the seed of Ignatius in diverse climates across the globe. Often they have survived not by hewing to one purpose but by embracing the world, even when that meant pragmatically distancing themselves from Church policies they found unworkable.<sup>3</sup> Thus the term mission simply marks one spot where groups have gathered to argue about what it means to be Catholic. Everyone generally agrees on the social forces that have precipitated the discussion. The reasons most often cited include the decline in vocations, the assimilation of Catholic immigrants into mainstream American culture, the transformation of colleges for the few into universities for the many, the explosion of knowledge in science, technology, and social science, the expansion of graduate education, and the development of a national market for faculty that sometimes pits professional against local loyalties.

What observers disagree about is the meaning or weight we should give these changes. Occasionally the critique of Catholic higher education has come from the Left, as in the 1930s and 1960s when some Jesuits found social activism more compelling than university teaching. But the terms of the recent debate over mission have largely been set by the Right. Conservatives argue that the religious faith that once united Catholics has ebbed. The most politically determined hope to use their discussion of the university mission to advance a larger critique of multicultural democratic societies. They argue that Catholic universities have fallen victim

to political correctness, accommodating the views of every group except those of the very people who founded the universities. They mourn the relativistic values that young people bring to college, and the unwillingness of faculty (who seem to believe in so little) to profess values that support Church teaching. They accuse faculty of ignoring the mission of the institution that pays their salaries, and of neglecting their teaching for research that advances their individual reputations but does little for students or the Church. They fear that Catholic colleges will go the way of their Protestant counterparts, their religious mission steadily corroded by secularism. They ask: shouldn't a university founded and supported by Catholics declare its allegiances more forthrightly, inviting those who support the mission to join and politely nudging non-believers into positions elsewhere?<sup>4</sup>

This line of argument scares the hell out of liberals, which is, of course, its chief purpose. But this argument also deeply perplexes principled, dedicated non-Catholics and non-believers who may not understand the long-standing Catholic family feud that it rehearses. A complete refutation of the conservative critique would require a much longer response, but let me briefly suggest why I find this assault on the university wrongheaded not only in its criticisms of university faculty and students, but also in its attitude toward the dilemmas of modernity.

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<sup>2</sup>My argument in this section generally follows Philip Gleason, *Contending with Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). But see also Christopher Jencks and David Riesman, *The Academic Revolution* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 334-405.

<sup>3</sup>For a fascinating look at how Jesuits debate their own mission, see *Proceedings of the J.E.A. Denver Workshop on Jesuit Universities and Colleges: Their Commitment in a World of Change*, ed. Eugene E. Grollmes, S.J. (Washington, D.C.: Jesuit Educational Association, 1969). Also see *Jesuit Higher Education: Essays on an American Tradition of Excellence*, ed. Rolando E. Bonachea (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1989).

<sup>4</sup>For recent examples of this conservative critique, see the following essays in *The Challenge and Promise of a Catholic University*, ed. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994): Ralph McNemy, "The Advantages of a Catholic University," 175-86; Wilson D. Miscamble, C.S.C., "Meeting the Challenge and Fulfilling the Promise: Mission and Method on Constructing a Great Catholic University," 209-24; and Marvin R. O'Connell, "A Catholic University, Whatever That May Mean," 233-42.

Here is my boldest claim: we will profoundly misunderstand our universities as social institutions if we describe them as expressions of a core mission. This is the preferred strategy of conservatives, who hope to use mission talk to bring the university to heel. But as Philip Gleason has argued, the debates over Catholic higher education illustrate a larger cultural discourse about the changing meaning of being Catholic in the United States. Gleason demonstrates that Catholics have never entirely agreed on just what the mission of their colleges should be or what behavior that mission requires (beyond a general commitment to serve God).<sup>7</sup> Conservatives' instinctive distrust of modernity (which amounts to a distrust of democracy, if the truth be told) seems particularly misplaced, for the quality of American Catholic universities owes much to the changes introduced in the name of modernization. The democratization of higher education since World War II may have blurred some Catholic universities' sense of mission, but it has dramatically lifted the academic ability of faculty at small colleges across the country. This opening of the American mind, as Lawrence Levine calls it, has particularly improved the lives of women. It has made the forms of casual bigotry, once so common in American life, less publicly acceptable. In this period American intellectual life has achieved unparalleled variety and depth because of the wide berth given academic freedom. Shouldn't we celebrate rather than malign these changes?<sup>8</sup>

Even if Catholics could agree on what their colleges should believe, they would have to agree on the forms through which participants should enact those beliefs. But Catholicism, as a cultural practice, has varied across language and ethnic groups as well as class lines. In particular, there has never been a simple consensus about what kind of behavior would make a university "Catholic." For example, not even conservatives propose to restore all the devotional practices once common in Catholic universities.

Should we again require students to attend Mass or Litany or Rosary, or ask faculty to begin each class with prayer? Should we encourage fasting? Should we reinstitute dormitory hours for undergraduate women, or regulate their mode of dress? All these and other practices were once considered indispensable signs of Catholic religiosity. They have fallen away, not because our faith has diminished, as conservatives would have it, but because American Catholics have developed a more complex and humane understanding of what their faith does or does not require. For the foreseeable

future, individuals and institutions will struggle to perform their Catholicism as best they can, with no guarantee of the outcome.

Thus does the current debate over mission too often ignore the actual history of Catholic higher education, preferring to deduce a course of action from allegedly shared core beliefs. In a similar way, the current debate often works with an oversimplified account of the communication practices that sustain large-scale organizations like universities. Focusing on the core mission of a modern organization ignores too much of the action to be of much use. Organizational theorists like Karl Weick have observed that organizations create rather than discover their sense of purpose; they literally make sense. "To talk about sensemaking," Weick writes, "is to talk about reality as an ongoing accomplishment that takes form when people make retrospective sense of the situations in which they find themselves and their creations."<sup>9</sup> To a surprising extent, participants in modern organizations continually renegotiate their understandings. They interpret one another's behavior and talk, not to discover its ultimate origins or transcendent truth, but to discern what acts and words signify in a particular time and place.

Wise organizations and skilled managers recognize the importance of strategic ambiguity in this sensemaking process. Ambiguity creates the space in which we can manage conflict, contradiction, and dissent.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the right kind of mission talk perfectly exemplifies the value of strategic ambiguity. Understood as

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<sup>7</sup>Gleason, *Contending with Modernity*, 318-22.

<sup>8</sup>Lawrence W. Levine, *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture, and History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

<sup>9</sup>The cultural forms of American Catholicism are explored in the works of historian Robert A. Orsi. See Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), and *Thank You, St. Jude: Women's Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

<sup>9</sup>Karl Weick, *Sensemaking in Organizations* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1995), 15.

<sup>9</sup>Weick, *Sensemaking*, 120. The classic article on strategic ambiguity is Eric M. Eisenberg, "Ambiguity as Strategy in Organizational Communication," *Communication Monographs*, 51 (1984): 227-42.

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sensemaking, mission talk provides a ceremonial narrative that gives disparate facts an intellectually and emotionally coherent form, as when a university president proudly points to the volunteer activities of students as evidence of the difference that a Jesuit education makes. Strategic ambiguity allows an organization not to invoke its mission when such talk would make certain contradictions painfully obvious or lead to unresolvable conflict. For instance, Jesuit universities are filled with critics of popular culture who condemn advertising and consumerism, but virtually none of these critics campaigns publicly to abolish the business school. Jesuit universities praise students and faculty who donate time to social justice projects, but pay their prominent football and basketball coaches salaries twenty to thirty times those of their lowest-paid full-time employees. We who work in such universities do not necessarily experience such contradictions as hypocrisy because we imagine these acts as occurring in different spheres governed by different principles. Of course we are against advertising, we say, because greed is sinful, and of course we have a business school because it produces students, wealth, prestige, and future trustees for the institution.

The most idealistic supporters assume that hiring for mission could only help Jesuit universities maintain their identity. But as this discussion of sensemaking and strategic ambiguity suggests, too much mission talk may be hazardous to a university's health. Consider what happens in times of strategic planning, those moments when an institution most self-consciously and devoutly engages in mission talk. When administrators ask each department to describe its contribution to the overall mission, they create a new game whose rules nobody understands. Because top administrators are the only ones who can set that game in motion, the stakes are high and everybody has to play. No one tells the participants at the start just how any information gathered will be used. Administrators typically do little to reduce this uncertainty (for example, by declaring ahead of time that no department will be abolished). Indeed, strategic planning circumvents normal reporting procedures, allowing administrators to symbolize the organizational hierarchy as they would prefer it (top

administrators as keepers of the institutional mission, other employees as providers of services). Once completed, the plan rhetorically empowers administrators to decide which behaviors will best accomplish the institutional mission.

Those who support hiring and promoting for the Catholic, Jesuit mission almost never acknowledge the mischief it would sanction. Indeed, critics of mission talk are portrayed as being paranoid; after all, supporters say, how could it possibly harm an organization to talk about what it believes in? The defenders may be right, but only for the most paradoxical of reasons. Mission talk has done little harm so far precisely because we have had the good sense not to take it too seriously. Jesuit universities, in particular, have long recognized the value of strategic ambiguity. They have talked about their mission pointedly but genially over many decades, but never with the goal of ending their discussion with a definitive declaration of belief. In my experience at several universities, most participants consider strategic planning another ordeal to get through. The triumphs claimed in its name are often long-pending reforms that could have been accomplished if routine modes of planning worked better. The only people who consistently like strategic planning are top administrators who (after the fact!) point to the process as evidence of their executive ability.

What is now being proposed is that we take ourselves literally, and use our mission talk to guide future decisions on hiring and promotion. That is a troubling suggestion because it assumes that we agree on what the mission is and how best to perform it—and we don't. To propose to govern organizations as complex as universities in this way is either surprisingly naive or calculatingly cynical. Any decision to engage in formal, systematic mission talk disrupts the informal understandings by which participants make their everyday work meaningful. A further decision to act on the basis of that talk plunges participants into a dark well of uncertainty. Groups and individuals will look for cues about what words and acts will henceforth be deemed in the spirit of the mission. For example, they may alter their rhetorical strategies, using mission talk to explain decisions formerly justified in other terms. Hiring for mission will encourage new forms of competition between departments, as each vies to position itself as a more worthy recipient of future resources. In a Catholic university, clergy and departments most closely identified with traditional fields (read: philosophy and theology) are more liable to be treated (or imagine

themselves) as proprietors of the mission. Non-Catholics and marginally valued departments may find themselves in a piety contest that requires them either to hide their true opinions or to develop strategies for "passing" as supporters of the mission. Individuals will wonder what behaviors others will take as appropriate signs of devotion. Enthusiasm in public meetings at which the Jesuit, Catholic mission is discussed? Participation in Ignatian spirituality retreats? Quiet acceptance of questionable administrative decisions made in the name of the mission? Hiring for mission hopes to make us all prophets, but it would more likely turn us into Pharisees.

To summarize my position: any attempt to describe the behavior of a complex modern organization as the expression of simple, shared beliefs spectacularly misunderstands the sociology of our universities. At its worst, mission talk functions as a cover for conservative ideology or administrative power. Judiciously used, especially retrospectively rather than prospectively, mission talk adds sense and significance to an organization's work. The most satisfying mission statements, to my mind, capture the tone of an organization without too narrowly specifying the behaviors expected of individuals.

Consider the admirably succinct corporate mission statement that governs the 119 franchises of the Great Harvest Bread Company: "Be loose and have fun. Bake phenomenal bread, run fast to help customers, create strong, exciting bakeries, and give generously to others." That is a great mission for a bread company; with a couple of word changes, it would be a great mission for a university. Have the tens of thousands of hours spent on mission statements at Jesuit universities the last few years produced anything that compelling?

I suspect not. The most depressing feature of the mission debate is that it shows how little faith we have in our own experience. Over and over at Saint Louis University I have met faculty, staff, and administrators who talk sincerely about why they want to work for a university that encourages moral self-reflection, believes in social justice, respects difference, considers education more than job preparation, and values the whole person. That sense of conviction and shared purpose has been achieved without any formal plan to hire for mission. People did not come to Saint Louis University because they heard it had a strategic plan based on sound philosophical principles. Rather they discovered at the university relations and modes of being that gave their life's work special meaning and

significance.<sup>10</sup> That Jesuits have maintained twenty-eight such institutions in the United States is an unprecedented accomplishment. Yet some think it not enough. Conservatives, in particular, demand adherence to the letter, not the spirit, of Catholic doctrine. They say they want universities guided by Catholic faith, but what they really want is belief and obedience. Faith is another matter entirely. It is a stay against uncertainty, not a guarantor of truth. If we had more faith in what we do each day, we would not carelessly fiddle with what already works in order to solve a problem that does not really exist.

Most surprising of all, the recent proposals to hire for mission thoroughly misread Jesuit history, discovering failure where we ought to see success. Jesuit colleges and universities have endured not because they spell out their core beliefs, but because they adapt and improvise. Jesuits engage the world as they find it, letting its needs become theirs. More than any other order, Jesuits have mastered the arts of strategic ambiguity. They have faced up to modernity, often subjecting their own performance and abilities to withering scrutiny.<sup>11</sup> They have opened their door to heretics and skeptics whom others had exiled. Most remarkably, Jesuit colleges and universities continue to change with the times, incorporating new forms of learning even as they steadily transfer responsibility to lay faculty, administrators, and trustees. We dishonor this Jesuit heritage by proposing to routinize its charism. Specific guidelines on hiring for mission are a clumsy attempt to bureaucratize the ethos of a living culture.

If we study what Jesuit colleges and universities have accomplished, we will fear modernity less, and come to understand why, in this case, Chesterton was wrong in his judgment of it. What Chesterton left out of his parable, among other things, was conversation, the social relations by which individuals constantly reorient themselves to one another. He imagines four isolated individuals with separate purposes who never speak. But we know better than that. A truer story would imagine the painter discussing the reform he supports with the others gathered under the lamp, or someone asking the man with the breviary what he is reading, or the alcoholic urging the others to join him in song, or the man waiting for his young lady expressing admiration for the work of the painter. Having come once to paint the pole, the painter returns for the singing; the second time around, everyone bring friends. Women and children as well as men now wander into that space, strangers as well as acquaintances. In pursuing

an individual destiny, each discovers an emergent sense of connectedness. Universities are just such places. They make their purposes by acts of conviviality, not by mission statements. A great university, like a great city, survives by treating all things as conversable. It is the lamppost that beckons us to draw together.

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<sup>10</sup> At the August 1969 Denver Workshop, James Albertson, S.J., then academic vice president at the Santa Clara University, made a very similar point: "The distinguishing feature at any institution is not be found in its catalogue nor in a statement of purpose. The distinctive feature of any institution is to be found in the people gathered there. If there is something distinctive about the people we have in our institutions—whether they be Catholic, Jesuit, or lay—then we have distinctive institutions. If there is nothing distinctive about the people we have, then we do not have distinctive institutions." *Proceedings of the J.E.A. Denver Workshop*, 80.

<sup>11</sup>For an account of the Jesuits' 1931-32 "Commission on Higher Studies," which severely criticized the order for inadequately preparing its college teachers and administrators, see Gleason, *Contending with Modernity*, 178-97.