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# “Jesuit Sí, Catholic Not So Sure” Revisited

By David O'Brien

The 20-year mark is an appropriate moment to take another look at questions I addressed in my article “Jesuit Sí, Catholic Not So Sure” (*Conversations* (1994 (#6)). And it is 40 years since the Jesuits’ 32nd General Congregation (1974), when they made their historic commitment to the service of faith and promotion of justice within a preferential option for the poor. And 2014 marks 25 years since the murder of six Jesuits and their friends by U.S.-trained military assassins at the University of Central America in El Salvador. That event deepened the Jesuit commitment to justice and broadened understanding of that commitment among faculty, staff, and students at the 28 U.S. Jesuit colleges and universities.

The earlier article grew out of discussions in the first national seminar on Jesuit higher education, on which I had the privilege to serve. I warmly supported the commitment to justice and also paid particular attention to the Catholic side of university mission and identity. I thought the justice theme was central to understandings of the church and its colleges and universities that emerged after Vatican II.

Recognizing that the meaning of Catholic identity was being renegotiated in the wake of Vatican II and long-term changes among American Catholics, I defended those who emphasized Jesuit rather than Catholic – “Jesuit Sí.” But I also wanted to help Jesuit academic communities and those of us who worked in Catholic higher education to carry out our shared responsibility for the life and work of the American church. It was in that spirit of moving forward from “not so sure” that I wrote the essay in *Conversations*.

Three of the central arguments I made remain before us.

First, each college and university community and Jesuit higher education as a whole had to think a little more systematically about their Catholic responsibilities and develop strategies for implementing their continuing commitment to be Catholic as well as Jesuit. Lay faculty, staff, and trustees would have to be brought into the conversations.

In the area of strategic reflection and planning, the last few decades have been very disappointing. A long, contentious debate about the Vatican’s statement “*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*” and its canonical implementation, along with the passing of a generation of bishops and academic leaders who worked closely together, sharpened divisions over Catholic responsibilities. Local clashes have led the bishops to adopt a policy of asking Catholic institutions to avoid honoring speakers who were deemed to oppose Catholic teaching. Academic leaders have responded to these conflicts respectfully, but the widespread concern with Catholic identity, especially when focused on controversial moral teachings, issues related to the role of women in the church, or divisive political judgments, have made it more difficult to escape the now chronic nervousness – “not so sure” – about Catholic affiliation.

Second, one strategy I thought worth considering was Catholic studies. As most American Catholic colleges

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and universities became independent, self-governing institutions between 1967 and 1972, they placed responsibility for the academic component of Catholic mission on theology. That gave the impression that Catholic thought and imagination were limited to theology, which turned out to be a pastoral as well as an academic mistake. Catholic studies programs, designed to engage issues of meaning and value with Catholic resources across the community, offered the opportunity to enrich the dialogue of faith and culture which is in fact central not just to higher education but to Christian life in a free, religiously diverse society.

Since 1994 Catholic studies programs have in fact developed on many campuses. The Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies stands as an example, unfortunately a lonely one, of the kind of support required for sustaining serious Catholic intelligence and imagination in the United States. These promising initiatives, along with new centers on individual campuses, are limited, however, by divisions among Catholics, tensions between academic institutions and the hierarchy, and the widespread erosion of pastoral resources across the American church.

Third, I argued that faith and justice work could be enriched by cooperation with diocesan justice and peace offices and with such national networks as Catholic Charities, Catholic Relief Services, and the Campaign for Human Development. The Jesuits of course had their own rich resources in social ministries of global reach that could also open minds and imaginations to new understandings of mission and identity.

There have been impressive local and national examples of collaboration between Catholic higher education and Catholic social ministry. While Catholic social services, medical care, and education remain extremely important components of American civil society, they suffer from internal conflicts over “Catholic identity” and public policy, disconnection from pastoral life, and declining financial support. Jesuits and other religious orders offer remarkable opportunities for community and public service at home and abroad, and their work and witness regularly refresh ideas of faith, justice, and the option for the poor. But collaborative and pastorally grounded social ministry remains a hope, not a fact.

This gap between faith and economic, political, and professional life is a very important pastoral problem as well. No one would argue that the American church has made great progress incorporating Catholic social teaching into pastoral care for lay people. Among working class and immigrant communities faith-based community organizing still resonates with pastoral care. But bring-

ing similar programs of democratic justice seeking and peacemaking into middle class parishes remains a challenge. Here is an area where academic and pastoral leaders might explore mutually beneficial programs of research, education, and pastoral planning.

Thinking and planning together about Catholic responsibilities was the central plea of my 1994 paper. The original national seminar considered establishing a national think tank on these matters which would develop ideas for consideration by the Jesuit Conference and the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities but decided that a strategy focused on encouraging dialogue on individual campuses made more sense. Perhaps the time has come to reconsider the possibility of a creative initiative for systemwide research, reflection, and planning.

An initial agenda for such a think tank might include: (1) thinking about what shared responsibility requires in all sectors of the American Catholic community; for Catholics shared responsibility for the life and work of the church is a fact and not an option; (2) consideration of what is required in the future to nurture and sustain American Catholic intellectual and cultural life; older Catholic publications, informal networks, and learned societies may no longer be adequate to the needs of the church for intelligence and imagination; (3) thought about how colleges and universities might work with pastoral leaders to explore how Christian ideas and values can creatively inform the civic and working lives of the Catholic people; attention might be paid here to the experience of new Christian movements; (4) searching for creative initiatives to demonstrate the tremendous resources of the contemporary church and its people across the globe for addressing questions of genuine importance to faculty, staff, students, graduates, and their families.

Of course the biggest challenge when I write of “not so sure” – then and now – is how we really feel about Christian faith and the Catholic church. Since I wrote in 1994, many things have happened in our church – the sex abuse crisis, the continuing inability to address the concerns of women, the scandalous divisions over public policies – to dampen enthusiasm about things Catholic. I had the good fortune over many years to stumble into many experiences of what Pope Francis calls “the joy of the Gospel,” so I could not but encourage everybody to enjoy and make vocational use of the gift of faith and Church. I know from experience that, in contrast, many good people have had less positive experiences of faith and Church. I pray now as I did in 1994 that we will find ways to talk together about how we might answer that challenge. ■