Four Challenges to the Profession

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A School of Theology and Ministry in a Catholic and Jesuit University

By Richard J. Clifford, S.J.

On June 1, 2008, the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry (STM) came into being—made up of three existing entities, Weston Jesuit School of Theology, founded in 1926 in the town of Weston and since 1968 resident in Cambridge, the Institute of Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry (IREPM), founded in 1971 at Boston College, and C21Online (2004), providing non-credit courses on theology and spirituality. Weston Jesuit and IREPM are departments in the STM, which has a faculty of twenty-five, a student body of 336, and a library of 250,000 volumes.

Further reinforcing Catholic identity is Weston Jesuit’s status as an ecclesiastical faculty, which “instructs and teaches sacred doctrine and the sciences connected therewith” (Sapiencia Christiana, art. 2) and confers canonical degrees (bachelor’s, licentiate, doctorate) with the authority of the Holy See. Weston Jesuit’s status thus locates the School in an educational network of stunning universality. Panarchically, Weston Jesuit is one of 114 such faculties throughout the world (six in the United States). Among the more celebrated are those at Tübingen and Louvain, the Institute Catholique in Paris, the Gregorian University in Rome, The Catholic University in Washington, D.C., and the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley.

This is the time to ask: How does a professional school of ministry fit within the university? What are its responsibilities to the Church? These two fundamental relationships largely define it as a discipline and a component of ministerial education. Yet its role changed considerably over the centuries both in Europe and North America. Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan, in The Melody of Theology (1988) has described a momentous transition in American Protestant ministerial education, which is especially relevant for a Catholic divinity school today: the American liberal arts colleges where young men in the 17th and 18th centuries trained for ministry gradually grew into universities, raising the question where ministerial education fitted in the new and broader context. Faculties of divinity were often retained in universities of this kind, but historically some of these could be dismissed as “professional schools without any role within the university as defined by the arts and sciences, whereas others achieved such a role in the university at the cost of their Christian particularity and of their professional mission as schools for the ministers of the Church.”

Are such losses—a “role within the university,” “Christian particularity,” and “professional mission”—inevitable also for the STM in a Catholic university? I do not.

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believe so. Why, because STM faculty members, administrators, and students desire to remain united with their Catholic congregations, and because the Catholic tradition is safeguarded, on the one hand, by Church authorities and, on the other, by the traditional Catholic connecting of theology and prayer. The School's clear Catholic identity in fact can help it to be whole-heartedly ecumenical and aligned to the Boston College mission statement affirming "different religious traditions and value systems as essential to the fullness of its intellectual life."

Linking the local community to an international one is a Jesuit value and fully in keeping with the Boston College mission of preparing its students for "service leadership in a global society."

But the Western Jesuit's status and the STM's teaching of Catholic doctrine and morals adversely affect the academic freedom justified prized by the university. It is sometimes forgotten that in Catholic tradition all Catholic professors of theology are presumed to be exploring and developing for the people of the Church a tradition handed down from apostolic times. All of us today demand accountability of anyone in a responsible position, be it civil or ecclesiastical. Theologians should likewise demand themselves accountable when they work on the great tradition, and they should take seriously past and current interpretations, especially official ones.

The teaching office of the Catholic Church, the magisterium, normally deals with doctrinal and ethical teaching still under development. In our time, this would include the validity of non-Christian religions, the distinctiveness of priestly ordination in relation to lay ecumenical ministry and baptismal vocation, issues of sexuality, and restatement of traditional foundations. What demands scrutiny therefore is not so much what one is teaching (e.g., an ecclesiastical faculty) but what one is teaching (the topics mentioned above).

Some tension is inevitable. As Monika Stellwig has pointed out in Understanding Catholicism (2002), "In some respects, above all, the magisterium has institutionalized its own opposition by recognition of Catholic universities and colleges. Scholarly investigations of sources will sooner or later raise questions about common assumptions and suggest alternative approaches and applications." Debates are inevitable and are not all bad. The Dominican scholar Keith McClellan puts it memorably, in God Matters (1987), "It is a great function of debate to clean each other's glasses, that is why hard thinking has to be a communal affair and why argument, even apart from the courtesies of debate, is itself an act of fraternal charity."

But, as history teaches, not everybody wants his or her glasses cleaned. Some theologians have not been willing to explain themselves, and some Church officials have indiscriminately taken action against new ideas. A sad example of the latter was the wholesale suppression of the modernist movement at the turn of the twentieth century, which deferred essential debate on Catholicism and modernity for decades, and defined perhaps the greatest generation of theologians in modern times. Examples of the proper use of authority are more numerous though less often celebrated, so I will mention one close to my heart: the way that well considered
encyclicals and documents since the 1960s have mod-
ecked the integration of modern and traditional biblical
interpretation.

Paradoxically, Church authorities' criticisms and
requests for clarifications, so long as they are part of a
back-and-forth, should be accepted as casting light on
the great tradition.

The School's relationship to the
global and local Church

Any school of theology and ministry serves the Church
primarily by its research and publication, and prepara-
tion of ministers. But a richly resourced school like the
STM can go farther and assist the Church as it
struggles with contemporary practical and theoretical
issues.

A professional school should challenge, as well as
serve the profession, and the STM can do so less by giv-
ing concise answers to contemporary problems than by
suggesting new possibilities. I see four areas inviting
fresh interpretation, centered around the Church's young
people, its women, its new immigrants, and its clergy.

(1) The challenge of training ministers in gaining
trust, intelligibility, and competence. These three qual-
ities have been singled out by Father J. Bryan Hehir,
Harvard professor and Secretary for Health Care and
Social Services in the Boston Archdiocese, as essential for
ministers today. As the Bible — and common sense —
tell us, a preacher must believe the message and serve
others with unselfish simplicity. Only then is the message
intelligible and the minister's
authority established. The best
institutional route for accom-
plishing this goal is a well
designed formation program,
and the School of Theology and
Ministry is distinctive in attempting to run one for all its
students in accord with the U.S. Conference of Catholic
Bishops' directives in the Program for Priestly Formation
and Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord.

The Gapachina (a branch of the Franciscan family)
and Jesuits at the School run formation programs for
their own men, and a feature of the School is the pres-
cence of Jesuit tradition and spirituality, represented by
the Jesuit Rector, ten Jesuit faculty members, and fifty-
five Jesuit students.

(2) The challenge of handing on the faith to the next
generation. Last June in Miami, sociologist James
Davidson, argued in the keynote address to the Catholic
Theological Society of America that the greatest decrep-
titude of one's religious values is neither race nor gender nor
class, but the generation into which one was born. Connect

Duane Farahough, S.J., a student in the newly opened Boston College School of Theology and Ministry and Lynch School of Education
graduate student Stephanie Gamulik listen to a lecture given by STM Dean Richard Clifford, S.J. (Photo by Lee Pilkington, Boston College)

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that finding with surveys conducted by Dean Hope of
Catholic University showing that Catholics of every genera-
tion place highly "their relationship with God," but that
g再一次 born after 1961 (48 per cent of U.S. Catholics), unlike
their parents, place way down on the list their "relationship
in the Church," the community of believers.

How can the Church buck in the face of
such cultural barriers? Cardinal Avery Dulles recently sur-
veyed modern religious education practices and con-
cluded that the method called "shared Christian prac-
tice"—rooted in experience and reflection, aligned with
Scripture and tradition, and designed for action—was the
most balanced and effective (Origina Oct. 11, 2007). The
model was developed by Professor Thomas Groome at
Boston College's HREM and is taught in STM classrooms.

(3) The challenges of helping women to exercise their
gifts and of supporting lay ecclesial ministry (the two
entrepreneurs are inseparable). The three major monotheis-
tic faiths — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam — took
shape in a world where men generally had the public
roles and women the domestic ones. Today the Catholic
Church, like these other religions, struggles to adapt to a
world where women enjoy public roles and offer their
talents to the community. The percentage of women in
parish ministry is growing: 41 percent in 1996, 54 percent
in 1997, and 64 percent in 2005.

Where do such women fit in the Church? I cannot
give a concise answer, but I can suggest a framework for
discussion: the explosion of lay ecclesial ministry (the
bishops' preferred term) in the Catholic Church. In his
widely used book, Theology of Ministry, Thomas
O'Leary, O.P., concluded, contrary to what one might

in the declining number of clergy, that the
Catholic Church is actually experiencing a surge in min-
isterial energy, a phenomenon that began even before
Vatican II. Lay ministry has risen as naturally and quietly
from the grass roots that only relatively recently has it
become the object of explicit reflection. But lay ecclesial
ministry is more and more recognized as a profound
novelty, and it is changing forever the face of ministry
in the Catholic Church.

One can compare early energy bursts in his-
tory: the monastics in the early Church, the
monasteries in the Middle Ages, mendicant orders and lay
men and women's communi-
tes in the thirteenth century, missionary orders
in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, lay
people's and sisters' administering Church institutions
in Europe in the 17th to 18th centuries. Now, that energy is
moving the Church through lay ecclesial ministry.

Historically, such bursts have not killed off other
growth, but made them grow too. Hence, we can
expect that clergy will benefit from lay ministry.

(4) The challenge of cultivating U.S. Hispanic
Catholics as full their place. From 1990 to 2005, the
Hispanic population in the US grew from 22.5 million to
42.7 million, and now constitutes 14 percent of the total
population of the nation. 70 percent of Hispanics self-
identify as Catholics. Of the Catholics born between 1961
and 1982, one in five is Hispanic; of those born since
1982, two in five are Hispanic. Declining years, many
demographers predict, well over half of US Catholics will
be Hispanic.

The U.S. bishops did not allow separate Hispanic
parishes, but instead added Spanish
masses and services in non-Hispanic
parishes. This result of the policy has
been unsettling transitions, as priests
from Latin America try to accommodate
to a new culture, that U.S. congrega-
tions try to adjust to them, and Hispanic
members of a parish try to work with
non-Hispanic parishioners.

To prepare ministers for this com-
nunity, the STM has two professors of
Hispanic theology and ministry and a
Hispanic Ministry Program with dizzy-
ning numbers of Hispanic graduate
professional programs. It will be inter-
esting to see how all our schools adapt
to this changing scene.