

[< Back](#) | [Home](#)

Open letter to the University community

Letter to the Editor

Posted: 4/19/06

Dear faculty colleagues, staff and students:

The recent "closing statement" of our President Father John Jenkins has elicited an impressive number of positive responses on campus, and that must seem reassuring in many quarters of the University. But I am bound to confess that both the statement itself, and the early responses that welcomed it, left me feeling uncertain and unclear about our commitment to a future as a Catholic university. As Chair of the Department of Theology, though speaking only in my own person and making no claim to represent the distinguished faculty of that department whom I both love and admire, I feel I have the responsibility to register a minority report. I am not now speaking about the particular decision regarding "The Vagina Monologues." Rather, I am concerned with the rhetoric about the Catholic university in which the decision was framed and which is now becoming settled convention in articulating the character of our Catholic identity.

For increasingly there is a missing conversation partner. The statement of our President barely mentions the Church. If the Church is ever mentioned in the responses I have read so far, it is in the gratitude expressed that we have not attempted to "appease" the Church or the Church hierarchy, or else in the (unintentionally) patronizing allusion to those who care about the University's relationship to the Church as implicitly conceiving the University along the lines of a seminary. It is as though the mere mention of a relationship with the Church has become so alien to our ways of thinking and so offensive to our quest for a disembodied "excellence" that it is has become impolite to mention it at all. The President's statement repeatedly refers to "the Catholic intellectual tradition," a phrase that in itself is unobjectionable but which has now become almost a circumlocution used to avoid mentioning what seems unfashionable and almost unthinkable to mention, namely, the Church.

But *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, which the President's statement cites, speaks of a relationship not in the first place between the Catholic university and the Catholic intellectual tradition, but between the Catholic university and the Church. And, whether we recognize it or not, this relationship to the Church - to the real, incarnate Body of Christ, the Church as it is with all its blemishes and not the abstract, idealized Church in our minds - is the lifeblood and only guarantee of our identity as a Catholic university. There is no Catholic identity apart from affiliation with the Church. Appeal to "the Catholic intellectual tradition" apart from some explicit relationship to the Church risks reducing the tradition itself to an abstraction. And again, I do not mean an imaginary Church we sometimes might wish existed, but the concrete, visible communion of "hierarchic and charismatic gifts," "at once holy and always in need of purification," in which "each bishop represents his own church and all of [the bishops] together with the Pope represent the whole Church ..." (*Lumen Gentium* 1.4,8; 3.23).

Now, no one would deny that the relationship between University and Church is not a challenging relationship with many attendant difficulties. And there is certainly room for argument about what are the specific, appropriate forms and shapes that the University's relationship with the Church should take. But this relationship, which necessarily involves some measure of accountability, should never be dismissed as an irrelevance, and that is what is increasingly happening at our University, if our President's statement, the debate that shaped it and the responses it elicited so far, are any indication. The local bishop's statements in the present case are not even mentioned, and bringing them up almost seems like an offense in polite intellectual company. I am not saying that there must be a direct connection between the statements of the bishop and particular policies of the University, but neither has the bishop ever said that, not even in this case, and in any event the main point, again, is that his views and those of the magisterium in general have come to seem unworthy even of mention as possibly and in some small way determinative of our identity.

The President's statement, as a way of going forward, seems to ratify our unspoken declaration of independence from the Church, to permit it as the "default" mode of operation, and to invite the reduction of any model of the university which entails any explicit relationship to the magisterium of the Church as a "seminary" model (pace all intellectually rigorous

seminary programs, including our own). This is to invite and to cultivate an intellectual tradition that is not moored to any ecclesial community or authority that could have a claim on defining that intellectual tradition. It is to invite and to cultivate an intellectual tradition in which "Catholic" is not normed by accountability to any incarnate, historical body but only to the disincarnate, a-historical church of the mind.

The ancient Gnostic heresy developed an elitist intellectual tradition which eschewed connection to the "fleshly" church of the bishop and devalued or spiritualized the sacraments. Are we in danger of developing a gnosticized version of the "Catholic intellectual tradition," one which floats free of any norming connection and so free of any concrete claim to Catholic identity? Are we - meaning all of us, and not just the President, for this is not just his problem - disowning the problem, rather than facing it honestly as a problem, as a project, as a challenge, as a struggle and yes, as a commitment? There is no commitment if it is not explicitly stated.

These concerns may be more evident to a Theology department chair than to others, because it is beyond dispute that no one cares much about theology apart from the believing community, the Church, and that without a concrete accountability to the Church theologians would eventually be out of a job! But everyone who is honestly invested in Catholic identity, in a genuine Catholic intellectual tradition, in the special intellectual witness that is demanded of a Catholic university, should feel some caution, and even some regret, at the absence of any explicit commitment to accountability to the Church reflected in the President's statement, and in the early positive responses it received. Without a sense of the University's close relationship with, and accountability to, the Church, the unique and precious intellectual fabric that we have woven here and which many, including many who are not Catholic, have come to value precisely because of its special character and witness, can never in the long run be sustained.

I would ask that anyone who has come to value the uniqueness of our intellectual culture here at Notre Dame consider carefully what I have written, and not discount it immediately as just another instance of the standard boilerplate of extremist pressure groups that unfortunately exist within the Catholic Church today. This is not the time to indulge in the luxury of discounting by labeling. For this, I thank the reader in advance. I am sure that as a university community we can rise to this occasion. I am also sure that we have no other choice if we want to preserve some distinctiveness as an intellectual culture.

Thanks for your consideration of these matters.

Sincerely,
John C. Cavadini
Associate Professor and Chair
Department of Theology
Director, Institute for Church Life
April 14

© Copyright 2007 The Observer