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Art spurs debate over Catholic identity, open inquiry

Tom Roberts | Mar. 2, 2009

Pablo Eduardo, a Bolivian artist who resides in Gloucester, Mass., sculpted Boston College's statue of St. Ignatius of Loyola. (Boston College Office of Marketing Communications/Ian Thomas)

"Catholic College Hangs Crucifixes" may not come across, at first glance, as a "Man Bites Dog" kind of headline, but at Boston College, crucifixes affixed to classroom walls, following on recent installations of other Catholic art on campus, have raised a howl in some quarters claiming infringement of intellectual freedom.

The debate on the campus of the Jesuit-run school might be seen variously as one more skirmish in the Catholic culture wars, as an affront on campus to those of other faiths, or as a sign that Catholic institutions are entering a new period of post-Vatican II maturity in which Catholics no longer have to prove they are open to other religious traditions.

Amir Hoveyda, head of the college's chemistry department, was quoted by the campus newspaper, *The Observer* , describing the crucifixes as "offensive."

"I can hardly imagine a more effective way to denigrate the faculty of an educational institution," he said. The crucifixes, he said, were installed "in a disturbingly surreptitious manner" and without discussion with the faculty.

"I welcome it," said Thomas Groome, chairperson of the Pastoral Institute, a department within the new school of theology and ministry. "It's a funny thing, but I think in postmodernity we are in a better place to claim our Catholic identity than in modernity."

In an earlier era, said Groome, Catholics in academia were almost embarrassed because of the church's "hegemonic claims" that it was the only path to salvation. More recently, however, "we've been able to say, maybe we don't have the only meta-narrative in town, but we have a good one, so why wouldn't we show it to the world?"

Groome, author of *What Makes Us Catholic: Eight Gifts for Life*, said the "reinstating of the crucifix -- it is a reinstatement -- is timely. It's not seen today as hegemonic and sectarian the way it may have seemed 35 to 40 years ago. In a sense, we've been chastened. It's not a narrow sectarianism we're falling into."

The crucifixes were installed in all 151 classrooms on campus during the Christmas holiday, many of them brought back by students from "immersion and service trips" to Latin America and elsewhere, said school spokesman John Dunn. Installing the crucifixes was part of a more comprehensive move to enhance the school's Catholic identity, an eight-year effort that was begun in 2000 by university president Jesuit Fr. William Leahy with the founding of the Committee on Christian Art.

The charge of the committee, according to a statement from its chair, Jesuit Fr. T. Frank Kennedy, was to display "Christian art in spaces inside and outside" campus buildings reflecting "the Catholic heritage that is Boston College as it identifies itself as a Catholic and Jesuit university."

As a consequence of that work, two murals, one depicting Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker movement, and another showing former Jesuit superior general Pedro Arrupe, have been displayed in the foyer of Lyons Hall since 2001. A towering statue of St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus, was installed in front of Higgins Hall in 2005, and a new statue of St. Thomas More is being designed for the university's law school on its Newton campus.

The works commissioned by the Committee on Christian Art, made up of administrators, faculty and students, also include a sculpture by Peter Rockwell, son of famous American artist Norman Rockwell. It is titled "Tree of Life" and described by Kennedy as a "whimsical fountain that plays upon imagery from the Jewish and Christian scriptures."

According to local news reports, some faculty, especially those of non-Catholic faiths, have complained loudly about the placement of religious art, especially the crucifixes, in the classrooms. "I believe that the display of religious signs and symbols, such as the crucifix, in the classroom is contrary to the letter and spirit of open intellectual discourse that makes education worthwhile and distinguishes first-rate universities from mediocre and provincial ones," Maxim D. Shrayer, chairman of Slavic and Eastern languages and literature, told *The Boston Globe*'s Michael Paulson.

Kennedy, in his statement, noted that "humans use all kinds of imagery as symbols of our identity," stating that music, sculpture, poetry, painting and dance may be "even more necessary than words." In the current generation of university students, he said, "conservative and liberal labels don't apply" in the search for appropriate symbols. "Pre- and post-Vatican II comparisons are not helpful. I find our present generation reaching for symbols in a new way (and yet curiously using the same symbols of old) to help them find those deepest desires of their hearts: for peace, unity, a sense of belonging and an abiding presence of love."

Kennedy, a music professor, also is head of the Jesuit Institute at Boston College, founded in 1988 as an intellectual resource that provides programs, lectures and discussion around matters of faith and culture.

The controversy at Boston College is merely the latest in an ongoing debate over Catholic identity that has spanned more than two decades, and involved a host of Catholic institutions and discussions at the highest levels of the U.S. hierarchy over what constitutes Catholic teaching and how overtly an institution's Catholic character should be on display.

Zealots at both ends of any given issue cause an occasional stir of controversy, said Richard Yanikoski, president of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities. "But if you take away the extremes and focus on the mainstream, I don't recall any movement in Catholic higher education that has received more attention than the question: What is Catholic identity?"

"Acknowledging that it is not a single list of specifics," he said, university officials and others have discussed how Catholic identity can manifest itself in a particular time and place, in relation to the charism of a given

order or in the atmosphere created by a specific bishop.

He said he thinks the new emphasis on placing Catholic symbols and other efforts to establish Catholic identity more visibly may be the result of a new confidence in the Catholic community. In a previous era, he said, Catholic institutions may have felt a greater need to prove their academic competence and to hire non-Catholic faculty at a time when faculty and administration was far more dominated by clerics.

"I think the argument can be made that the pendulum swung too far," he said, and that institutions now are feeling that symbols can once again be displayed without jeopardizing academic freedom.

As for the crucifix, he said, "precisely to the extent that people care about this -- pro or con -- the symbol still has salience and deep meaning. For some people it provokes thought, and after all, that's not a bad thing in a university."

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