

Higher education leaders commit to strengthening Catholic identity

Jerry Filteau | Feb. 11, 2011



With an image of Cardinal John Henry Newman behind him, Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson, Ariz., addresses the meeting of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities on Jan. 30. (NCR photo/Jerry Filteau)

ANALYSIS

WASHINGTON -- Affirming and strengthening Catholic identity was the central theme of the 2011 gathering of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, held here Jan. 29-31.

From convention addresses and *NCR* interviews with participants, it seemed evident that the gathered presidents and administrators, coming from most of the 230-some U.S. Catholic institutions of higher learning represented by the association, were not just committed to maintaining and strengthening their Catholic identity: They were enthusiastic about it and were finding more ways to do it successfully.

U.S. Catholic colleges and universities today have nearly 1 million students and some 65,000 teachers, many of whom are not Catholic, said Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Andrea Lee, president of St. Catherine University in St. Paul-Minneapolis.

“Among our faculties there is an amazing and sometimes confounding pluralism, perhaps occasional antagonism, indifference, and sometimes even embarrassment concerning our religious identity,” she said. “Still, on balance, we are enormously proud to be Catholic and to be part of such a magnificent whole.”

Later the same day, Jan. 30, Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Amata Miller, director of the Catholic identity program at St. Catherine, spelled out in detail that university’s program to infuse a Catholic sensibility into all aspects of its life -- from academics to campus activities and cocurricular life and to regular faculty and student formation -- through workshops, seminars, an annual lecture series and many forms of small-group discussions.

That infusion approach -- where Catholic identity consists not just of one or two required courses in theology or church history or the like, but in a pervasive effort to make that identity an integral part of campus life -- seemed to resonate with several university presidents interviewed by *NCR* between sessions.

"Ongoing dialogue with the local bishop is always important," said Thomas Trebon, president of Carroll College in Helena, Mont., one of only seven diocesan-sponsored Catholic colleges and universities in the country.

He said the college, which serves about 1,500 students (1,350 full-time equivalent), has seen in recent years "a significant increase in the number of students" attending Sunday Mass -- now averaging 300 to 400 students a Sunday. Even without considering that many students who live in or near Helena may be attending weekend Masses in their local parishes rather than at the Carroll College student center, that level of attendance for Catholic young adults is higher than the national average.

Jesuit Fr. Stephen Sundborg, president of Seattle University, said the university has instituted a variety of faculty and student programs, along with regular dialogue with the archbishop of Seattle, to focus more intently on the Catholic identity of the Jesuit-run university.

At lunch, several college and university presidents around the table expressed similar views, enthusiastically describing the efforts and successes of their institutions' approach to strengthening Catholic sensibility among faculty and students on their campuses.

I can't quote any of their remarks because I wasn't recording or writing notes on the conversation, but the thrust was clear: They loved what they and their faculties were doing to bring the riches of the Catholic moral, intellectual, doctrinal, liturgical, cultural tradition into the academic and campus life of their students. They spoke enthusiastically of the ways academic programs established by their institutions were contributing to lay ministry and other aspects of local church life in the dioceses where they were located.

Two occasions for the focus on Catholic identity were the recent beatification of 19th-century British Cardinal John Henry Newman -- whose *The Idea of the University* remains the classic work on Catholic higher education -- and the recent 20th anniversary of Pope John Paul II's August 1990 apostolic constitution, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* ("From the Heart of the Church"), which established norms for Catholic colleges and universities worldwide.

A not-so-minor historical aside seems in order here. As the U.S. bishops tried to develop local legislation and guidelines implementing *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (John Paul called for bishops' conferences to do so, taking into account local conditions, which vary widely around the globe), the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities played a major role in a dialogue with the bishops on how that implementation would take shape.

As a reporter at Catholic News Service in those years, and since my specialties included doctrinal issues, theology, and church law and practice, I began regularly covering the January association meetings in Washington. The theological, doctrinal, disciplinary and legislative issues of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* were emerging as a possible critical issue for the future catholicity of Catholic higher education in the United States, the largest system of its type in the world.

Between *Ex Corde*'s issuance in 1990 and the U.S. bishops' first implementation document six years later, tension over its requirement of an episcopal mandate for any theologian to teach Catholic theology was the overwhelming issue, although various efforts to implement the papal document at other levels were beginning to take shape.

The Vatican rejected the bishops' 1996 implementation document as inadequate from a legal standpoint. When an ad hoc committee of the bishops' conference tried to draft a more juridically responsive document, the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities strongly objected to it. In 1999 it even sent representatives to the Vatican to argue the case for Catholic colleges and universities against what they saw as overly restrictive

legislation.

To this reporter, the commitment of Catholic higher education officials to the Catholic identity of their institutions in those years was unquestionable. But the main focus of their energy at annual association meetings then seemed to be on the difficulties, on the tension between what *Ex Corde* demanded -- especially with regard to the episcopal mandate for any theologian teaching in a Catholic college or university -- and the iconic American university criteria of academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

At this year's meeting I found that the atmosphere has shifted remarkably in recent years, from a sense of tension and even fear to enthusiasm and gratitude for what *Ex Corde* has done to help colleges and universities give new focus to their Catholic identity -- to the spiritual and intellectual traditions of faith that have made them what they are today and that challenge them to pass that on to a new generation in a rapidly changing culture.

In a Jan. 30 keynote address, Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson, Ariz., praised the recent efforts of U.S. Catholic colleges and universities to reaffirm and strengthen their Catholic identity and urged them to follow Newman's example.

"He would challenge each of you to do what you do with integrity," Kicanas said. "He would emphasize his understanding that the faithful as a whole possess the Spirit and should be listened to. This has much to say on how we exercise authority. He would encourage you to educate a generation of laity who would bring their faith to bear on burning questions of this time. ...

"You need to set the laity afire with their responsibility to bring the Gospel values to the pressing concerns of our day and to take their proper place as coworkers in the vineyard with the ordained to realize the Lord's mission," he added. "Your work of evangelization among the young and not-so-young is at the heart of the church's work."

Lee said, "Since *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* was published, we have focused intense energy on our identity, purpose and place within the church and the academic universe. It is exhilarating, deeply satisfying and exhausting work."

In a hallway conversation, John Garvey, new president of The Catholic University of America in Washington, told *NCR* that he thought *Ex Corde* "has had a much more meaningful impact than many suppose" on the conscious Catholic identity of U.S. Catholic institutions of higher learning.

When the papal document first appeared, he said, "the whole discussion was about the mandate," the requirement that professors of theology and related church disciplines have a mandate from the local bishop to teach.

Over the years, he said, that has evolved to the point that now the focus in the Catholic academic world is, "What should we do to live out our Catholic character?"

The emergence of Catholic studies programs and many other forms of expression of Catholic identity on campuses across the country in the past two decades "is the direct result of *Ex Corde*," he said.

[Jerry Filteau is *NCR* Washington correspondent.]

"Make Catholic identity central to your efforts?"

Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson, Ariz., gave the keynote address Jan. 30 at the 2011 meeting of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities in Washington. The following are excerpts from his talk.

Much has happened in the 20 years since *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* was issued. Initial concerns have lessened as universities and colleges learned that bishops seek communication and desire cooperation and collaboration. Efforts have been made in a number of institutions to incorporate the norms given in *Ex Corde* into their governing document, realizing their value in helping Catholic institutions to retain their Catholic identity.

In conversations I have had at a number of Catholic institutions of higher education, I sense a true and fervent desire to be Catholic, to remain Catholic. I think it is a gross misunderstanding to be suspicious of the intentions of these institutions and their boards regarding Catholic identity. They are proud of that identity and that identity is a central part of their mission statements. ?

However, there are areas to which we need to continue to pay attention.

1. The need for teachers of Catholic theology to receive a *mandatum* from the local bishop has been, perhaps, the most neuralgic issue resulting from the issuance of *Ex Corde*. Some have sought the *mandatum* and others have not. This inconsistency could reflect some distrust or concern about undue interference or not seeing the importance of doing it. Yet involvement of the bishop with faculty teaching Catholic theology is critical to true communion in the church. Students have a right to know that they are learning about Catholic theology, if that is their expectation in particular courses.

Clearly there needs to be room in an academic community for disagreement, debate, and a clash of ideas, even in theology. Such debate and engagement can clarify and advance our understanding. In discussions with local bishops, faculty need to be able to disagree and question with mutual respect. However, the bishop is the authentic teacher of the faith and, in union with the pope and bishops, responsible to interpret the faith. ?

When teaching Catholic theology, make clear what is Catholic teaching, what are areas for legitimate interpretation, and what is not in accord with Catholic teaching.

2. We need to continue and intensify engagement with one another as bishops and administrators, faculty and boards to build stronger bonds and relationships. That strong foundation of trust will see the bishop and university through turbulent times when inevitable conflicts arise. ?

3. Keep up your efforts to make Catholic identity central to your efforts.

See if you can find additional ways to teach ethical and moral implications in every field of study.

Look at your core curriculum to see if the Catholic tradition is sufficiently being passed on through required courses.

Catholic identity could be enhanced by the integration of three elements in all you do, communion, sacramentality and a liturgical perspective.

Sacramentality involves recognizing the signs of God in the visible. Catholic symbols would be prominent. And more, the campus would be a place where students look beneath the surface to find the face of the Divine.

Communion means the use of all gifts rightly ordered. This element finds a proper place in the life of the campus, for the bishop, the faculty, the administration, the students, alumni, indeed, all facets of campus life. There would exist a harmony of gifts and a spirit of collaboration.

The liturgical year would influence the life and rhythms of the institution. Much can be learned by students, in walking through the liturgical year, about the mysteries of the faith and the countless witnesses to the faith that are found there.

4. Encourage and prod campus ministry programs to not only focus on a small group of enthusiastic, highly committed young people who deserve our support and encouragement, but on the de facto neglect of the vast majority of the baptized in your institutions who are identified as Catholic but not committed, not engaged, not involved.

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