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# A Tolerance for Ambiguity: The Catholic Mission Officer

James P. McCloskey C.S.Sp.

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James P. McCloskey, C.S.Sp. James P. McCloskey, C.S.Sp. serves as Senior Advisor to the President for Strategic Initiatives at Duquesne University. Ordained in 1980, he completed his Ph.D in Education at Fordham University in 2002, specializing in organizational behavior and change. He has served as Vice President for Mission and Identity at Duquesne University and Vice President for External Relations. In 2003, he was elected provincial superior of the US East Province, and in 2004, at the general chapter in Torre de Aguila, he was elected a member of the General Council, with special responsibility in the area of education. He has also served as a member of the Spiritan international team in Paraguay.

## TOLERANCE FOR AMBIGUITY: THE CATHOLIC MISSION OFFICER

In the dining room of the residence for religious on campus, there is an informal but pre-determined seating arrangement. Beneath a fresco of the Last Supper, with faces of the apostles drawn to resemble those of the religious in residence at the time, senior members of the community sit together predictably. Graduate students arrive late each evening and gravitate to the same adjacent seats. But at the very center of the large table, a vacant space between two veteran religious is always left empty. On one side of the gaping hole is seated a senior faculty member, retired but active in the university community. On the other side is a seasoned administrator of many decades. Both have spent their entire professional careers at the university. And the place between them is vacant for a reason. They speak together, with evident formality, only when necessary. They frequently spar at community meetings with either thinly veiled invective or an occasional frontal assault. The member seated nearest the window is the voice of Catholic social justice for the university community. The one across the divide is the popular advocate for prayer and return to more traditional forms of piety on campus. This middle position between the two is both symbol and shape of the ministry of mission and ministry at the university. At best a bridge, on occasion a referee, but always at the critical center of debate, the mission officer is the fulcrum between competing definitions of the meaning of *Catholic* at a Catholic university.

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### The Shape of the Problem

Among lay colleagues, the cues regarding difference of perspective and definition of the meaning of *Catholic* are often more subtle, but nonetheless clear: an eye-roll at a board meeting (for the benefit of the mission officer) directed at a colleague who questions the existence of the Gay-Straight Alliance on campus, a complaint about the cacophony at Mass when some congregants re-phrase traditional responses with inclusive language. On occasion, a sly test is administered by a staff member who wants

to know if the officer has read a certain article in the NCR, leaning closer to hear if the response is National Catholic Register or National Catholic Reporter. Is he left or right, conservative, or liberal, of their church or mine?

The compelling and complex challenges, however, are neither politically motivated nor extremist. They are the more formal, structural ones. And this is especially so in the academic life of the university – in areas of curriculum development, faculty hiring, matters of academic freedom, and other critical programming. The essential question is not *Catholic* or *non-Catholic* – but the meaning and interpretation of Catholic thought by Catholics themselves in the policy and programs of the university.

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Two cases involving both faculty and administrative decision-making will serve to illustrate this question – a pointed example of the public face of Catholicism in university life.

### **The Failed Search**

Upon the retirement of the chairperson of the theology department, a national search was launched from the college of liberal arts for a replacement. One of the largest academic units at the university, the department rightly boasts of its rich cultural, ethnic, academic, and religious diversity, theologians who contribute to a wide range of scholarship and teaching expertise. Following published university procedure, the search committee recommended a slate of finalists for the position of chairperson. Several finalists had published controversial works in support of moral positions not quite in consonance with the magisterium – and several finalists were not, themselves, Catholic.

Those who disagreed with the list of finalists made appeal at once to the mission office. Should this critical position of department chairperson – a public voice for theological studies at a Catholic university – not be automatically assumed by a Catholic? Other voices claimed that scholarship not compatible with the magisterium of the church, especially when published by an institutional leader, constitutes a violation of core mission principles of the university. Still others felt that a department of theology at a Catholic university necessarily must seek and hire the best minds and voices in contemporary theology, even if those voices lead to controversial ideas and conclusions. Perhaps, they stated, necessarily so!

Seated in the middle position between divergent and sometimes hostile camps, the mission officer becomes the arbiter of the “authentically Catholic” voice of a Catholic university. And this is so among Catholics in particular. Juggling issues of academic freedom, sound scholarship, relationship with the official church, and the public face of Catholic mission, clarity on the subject is critical. Further complicating the matter are issues of gender,

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sexual orientation, and organizational culture. What is the measure of a truly Catholic appointment? Sometimes clarity seems almost impossible to achieve.

### **Political Activism and the Bishop's Letter**

Shortly after the publication of a strong and passionate letter from the local bishop on the question of religious liberty and healthcare provisions at Catholic institutions, a faculty member decided, in good faith, to duplicate the letter and submit it to colleagues in the particular department, both faculty and staff. University protocol prohibits the distribution of political materials on campus. The content of the letter was interpreted by some to include overt political references and suggestions. The dean of the school, an observant Catholic, agreed with the interpretation of the letter as a political statement, meeting the requirements of the prohibition, and withdrew the letter from faculty and staff mailboxes. The faculty member initiating the activity filed complaint to both the dean and the mission officer. Is the letter, this faculty member maintained, not a pastoral privilege of the bishop? Surely so, responded the dean, but the letter had been published in the local Catholic newspaper and distributed on campus through approved campus ministry venues. Its pointed distribution to specific members of faculty and staff, by a person with a history of partisan political activism, constituted, in his estimation, a political action, violating the university mandate towards non-partisan political activity on campus.

Both faculty member and dean appealed to the mission office of the university for clarification and resolution. Not simply the content of the letter (endorsed by both parties) nor the author (esteemed by both), but the meaning of the letter, its form of distribution, and its association with a political activist, became the issues at hand.

### **Conclusion**

Ambiguity about the meaning and interpretation of Catholic thought is nothing new to Catholic institutions, especially to Catholic colleges and universities. American Catholic higher education has struggled with the issue from the Land O'Lakes Conference, Wisconsin, in 1967 (a gathering of Catholic university presidents and other church leaders who set out to describe the nature and mission of a Catholic university in the modern world) to the controversies surrounding the *mandatum* for theologians after Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, 1990. While describing the distinctive characteristics that make a university Catholic, the Land O'Lakes Conference also sought to align Catholic universities with their secular peers, affirming the importance of academic freedom and true autonomy "in the face of authority of whatever kind, lay or clerical, external to the academic community itself." Given these tensions about the meaning of Catholic identity in the academy, there remains a strong consensus among many in the field of Catholic higher education that the mission and identity of Catholic universities is more vibrant than ever. Why, then, such tortured and complicated disagreements about the meaning of Catholic thought at a Catholic university? And what is a path to resolution on the matter?

For many mission officers, the focus of efforts in mission and identity lies in the contemporary interpretation of the charism of the founding religious congregation. For

others, a chief goal is the achievement of a “critical mass” of Catholics; namely, the number of committed Catholics on campus as a signal of strength in mission. But the question of the meaning of *Catholic* itself, for and among the Catholics at a Catholic university, is an even more pressing and urgent concern. The role of the mission officer is to stand faithfully at the center of debate, pressing the conversation, sifting through the political and expedient towards a discussion of the heart of Catholic teaching and spirit. Symbolically, it is taking the seat between the two religious at the table who simply disagree about the meaning of *Catholic* at the school and locating the essential with them that will make Christ the center of the enterprise.

More than anything, it requires profound tolerance for ambiguity – a trust in prayer, the good will of faculty, staff, and administrators, and belief in the power of God to act, not always comfortably but surely.

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*James McCloskey, C.S.Sp.  
Duquesne University, Pittsburgh*