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Four Challenges to the Profession

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 "foster[s] and teach[es] sacred doctrine and the sciences connected therewith" (*Sapientia 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. Parenthetically, Weston Jesuit is one of 134 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 professional school, and provide the measure of its success or failure.

From the beginning of Europe's universities in the Middle Ages, theology played an important role, both 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 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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Statue of Saint Ignatius, Boston College.

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 praxis. The School's clear Catholic identity in fact can help it to be wholeheartedly 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 do Weston Jesuit's status and the STM's teaching of Catholic doctrine and morals adversely affect the academic freedom justly 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 deem 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 ecclesial ministry and baptismal vocation, issues of sexuality, and restatements of traditional formulations. What draws scrutiny therefore is not so much where one is teaching (e.g., an ecclesiastical faculty) but what one is teaching (the topics mentioned above).

Some tension is inevitable. As Monika Hellwig has pointed out in *Understanding Catholicism* (2002), "In some respects also, 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 solutions." Debates are inevitable and are not all bad. The Dominican scholar Herbert McCabe put 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 sidelined 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 1940s have modeled the integration of modern and traditional biblical interpretation.

Put succinctly, 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 preparation 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 giving 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.

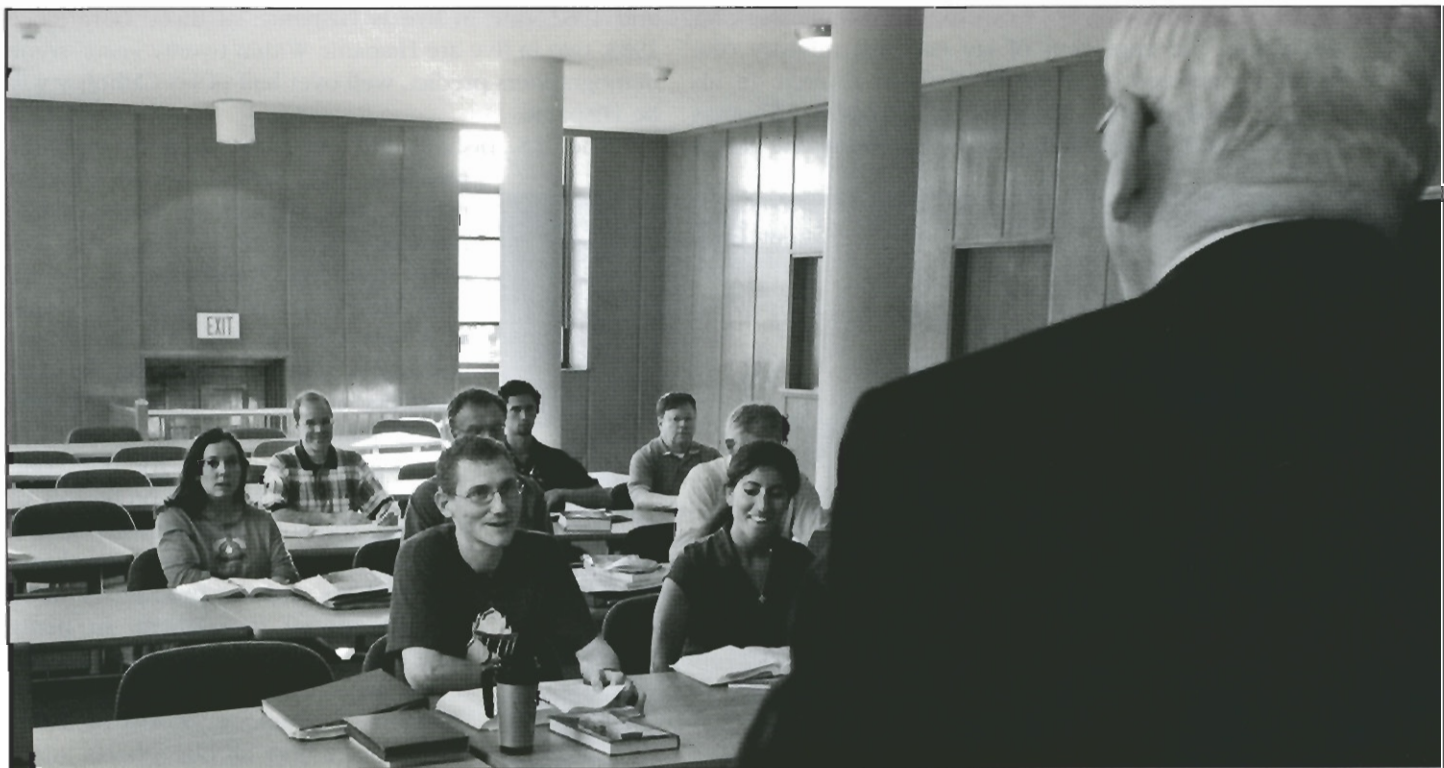
(1) *The challenge of assisting ministers in gaining trust, intelligibility, and competence.* These three qualities have been singled out by Father J. Bryan Hehir, Harvard professor and Secretary for Health Care and

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 accomplishing 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 Capuchins (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 presence 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 determinant of one's religious values is neither race nor gender nor class, but the generation into which one was born. Connect

Debates are inevitable and not all are bad.



Duane Faraugh, S.J., a student in the newly opened Boston College School of Theology and Ministry and Lynch School of Education graduate student Stephania Gianulis listen to a class lecture given by STM Dean Richard Clifford, S.J. (Photo by Lee Pellegrini, Boston College)

that finding with surveys conducted by Dean Hoge of Catholic University showing that Catholics of every generation prize highly "their relationship with God," but that those born after 1961 (48 per cent of U.S. Catholics), unlike their parents, place way down on the list their "relationship to the Church," the community of believers.

How can the Church hand on the faith in the face of such cultural barriers? Cardinal Avery Dulles recently surveyed modern religious education practices and concluded that the method called "shared Christian praxis"—rooted in experience and reflection, aligned with Scripture and tradition, and designed for action—was the most balanced and effective (*Origins* Oct. 11, 2007). The model was developed by Professor Thomas Groome at Boston College's IREPM and is taught in STM classrooms.

(3) *The challenges of helping women to exercise their gifts and of supporting lay ecclesial ministry (the two endeavors are inseparable).* The three major monotheistic 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: 44 percent in 1990, 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'Meara, O.P., concluded, contrary to what one might

infer from the declining number of clergy, that the Catholic Church is actually experiencing a surge in ministerial energy, a phenomenon that began even before Vatican II. Lay ministry has risen so 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 renewal, and it is changing forever the face of ministry in the Catholic Church.

One can compare earlier energy bursts in history: the martyrs in the early Church, the monasteries in the Middle Ages, mendicant orders and lay men's and women's communities 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 19th centuries. Now, that energy is entering the Church through lay ecclesial ministry.

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

(4) *The challenge of enabling U. S. Hispanic Catholics to find their place.* From 1990 to 2005, the Hispanic population in the US grew from 22.3 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 1983, two in five are Hispanic. Within twenty years, some 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. One result of the policy has been unsettling transitions, as priests from Latin America try to accommodate to a new culture, their U.S. congregations try to adjust to them, and Hispanic members of a parish try to work with non-Hispanic parishioners.

To prepare ministers for this community, the STM has two professors of Hispanic theology and ministry and a Hispanic Ministry Program with thirty-two students and the promise of more through special recruitment. In many ways these four challenges apply in different ways to all out Jesuit graduate professional programs. It will be interesting to see how all our schools adapt to this changing scene. ■



Opening mass at Boston College School of Theology and Ministry.