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Letter to the Editor

John Carmody

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Editor:

I found the conversation launched by David O'Brien in your Fall, 1994 issue (No. 6, Catholic Identity) intriguing, both positively and negatively. This may be because, after twenty-five years spent in universities with no Catholic affiliation, I have returned to a Catholic setting with new ears with which to hear. Many of the partners to the conversation in No. 6 wrote well, especially O'Brien himself, and overall the writers sketched admirably the practical tasks that lie ahead. Their commitment was plain and their proposals were intelligent. Still, at several points I wondered about the adequacy of the framework, the horizon, the overall mental setting that the conversation appeared to assume. The "Catholic" character of our schools seemed to be more important than the Christian or the human, which I judge to be bad theology.

Our species, *homo sapiens*, has existed for perhaps 100,000 years. The "Catholicism" under discussion in both *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* and your conversations has existed for perhaps 500 years, since the Counter-Reformation. What was God doing for the first 199/200ths of human history, when nature and the gospel (for 200ths 197-199) sufficed? Wouldn't answering that question give us a more adequate historical horizon? Don't we need as large, as magnanimous a view of the history of salvation as possible, if we are to situate Catholic faith properly?

Toward the same conclusion (the need for a larger context), consider the present demographic situation. Catholics are perhaps one billion among today's 5.5 billion or so human beings. Muslims are nearly as many as Catholics, as are people with no formal religion. Hindus are verging on eight hundred million, while Buddhists are

more than three hundred million. Atheists are about 250 million. If our conversations are not to seem touchingly parochial, ought we not to situate our convictions in the midst of the much larger search for faith going forward in our world nowadays? God has at least 5.5 billion children. Our privilege is to suggest how the light of Christ, the life of Christ, illumines the humanity for which all 5.5 billion have been created.

We Christians are both very important and of little account. When we have done all that we can, including developing the most creative institutions of higher education possible for us, we shall still be unprofitable servants. And this blunt reality ought to set us free—of many of the anxieties, temptations to self-importance, legalisms, and clerical narrownesses that now cut down our flow of oxygen. As any monotheism confesses,

God alone is great, all-important. To prosper in the one thing necessary, we need only guard our love of God (not our Catholic identity) as we would guard our life.

Every idolatry is a self-crippling, a chosen diminishment of what we might have been. Fortunately, little is fixed in stone. We might still become saints, people concerned passionately only for the greater glory of God. Irenaeus implied that this greater glory is human beings more fully alive, more beautifully absorbed with the vision of God. The vision of God, our appreciating the divine splendor, might become considerably easier, if we would just step back and raise our sights.

John Carmody
Senior Research Fellow
Department of
Religious Studies
Santa Clara University