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## RESPONSES

*Facing Up to Catholic Identity*

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David O'Brien is a moralist in the best sense of the word. He feels a responsibility to awaken his colleagues in Catholic higher education to their responsibilities for the continued well-being and improvement of the work on which he

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and they are engaged. No reader could miss this note in the essay appearing here, if only because the word "responsibility" recurs in it almost two dozen times. Appropriately enough, his reflections on facing up to the task of preserving and enhancing the religious identity of Catholic colleges and universities are highly responsible. They are also timely and valuable.

O'Brien's impeccable credentials as a Catholic liberal add to the timeliness and value of his essay by making it impossible to dismiss the concerns he addresses as fantasies entertained only by "anti-intellectual conservative Catholics and ecclesiastical bureaucrats." True, he balks at the term "secularization," but that appears to be something of a semantic quibble.

After all, O'Brien acknowledges that "the drive for academic respectability" and the changes associated with it have "left huge question marks punctuating legitimate worries about Catholic identity," and he suggests that "the loss of nerve among Catholic academics themselves" is the heart of the problem. Whether one applies the term "secularization" to these developments is immaterial. I, for one, will gladly abandon its use if doing so will encourage others to deal with realities of the present situation as O'Brien does here.

But O'Brien goes far beyond simply acknowledging the reality of the problem. More important, and much more original, are his insistence on the need to face up to the need for action and his constructive suggestions as to the kind of actions that might be taken. It is certainly not enough to fend off ill-advised and unworkable attempts to impose direct ecclesiastical supervision upon Catholic colleges and universities. What Catholic educators must do is respond positively and effectively to the legitimate concerns that *prompted* these imprudent curial initiatives.

As is natural in a pioneering treatment of the subject, the suggestions O'Brien makes are rather

abstract and generalized. But they definitely point in the right direction and identify matters that deserve systematic and sustained attention.

He is right, first of all, in saying the problem will not take care of itself, but must be self-consciously addressed. And he is also on target in insisting that everyone who is committed to Catholic higher education has a responsibility in this respect, not just administrators and members of theology departments. He also recognizes that the issue of faculty hiring is crucial, and at the same time elusive (just "hiring Catholics" is not enough), and delicate (requiring courage, honesty, and keen awareness of all the sensitivities involved). In this connection, the idea of identifying and nurturing graduate students and younger faculty who have a positive commitment to Catholic higher education is both practicable and promising. The same is true of O'Brien's suggestions with respect to the need for programs of Catholic studies and centers of specialized research.

Education for justice is a theme that O'Brien has stressed for many years, and such programs are well established on many, if not most, Catholic campuses. Hence they furnish a natural base upon which to build; and, as O'Brien points out, there are new directions in which they might go.

His own essay makes clear that David O'Brien himself continues to move in new directions. By doing so, he has made another important contribution to the cause to which he has been long and fruitfully dedicated.