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EDUCATION IN A CHURCH IN CRISIS

The idea that the Catholic university is “the place where the church does its thinking” needs to be translated into concrete projects

By David O'Brien

The time has come for all of us involved in Jesuit higher education in the United States to take a hard look at our Catholic responsibilities. Over three decades of continuing “conversation” about Jesuit mission and identity, each of our colleges and universities has wrestled with the Catholic question, phrased in an early issue of this magazine as “Jesuit, Si, Catholic Not So Sure.” We have every reason to take pride in our fidelity to the Church and participation in its mission through our core work of research, teaching and engagement with questions of faith and justice. But one thing we have not done well, or at all, is share responsibility with others for the life and work of our American church.

Lacking an invitation to participate in broad advisory pastoral councils, we leave it to the Pope, the bishops and the reigning modes of church governance to deal with the church's organized life, even on questions integral to our own vocations. We pursue intelligent Catholicism, in dialogue with culture and with other faiths, but we take no particular responsibility for Catholic intelligence in parishes, chancery offices or public forums. We inspire young women for leadership in church and society, then shrug our shoulders when words and actions across the church insult Catholic women. We take pride in the intelligent faithfulness of so many of our graduates, yet we say and do little about the limited availability of vibrant parishes and apostolic movements which can sustain those commitments over a lifetime. We awaken and inform consciences about pressing questions of justice and peace, but rarely collaborate with the church's sometimes embattled social ministries and we ignore the fact that, in part through our own choices, existing political options have long left serious Catholics committed to a “consistent ethic of life” politically “homeless”.

Such detachment will no longer do. Our American church, not off in Rome but down the street, is in deep trou-

ble. The crisis is obvious in some parts of the country, perhaps less so in a quiet diocese or in one of those pleasant parishes where closet Congregationalists are content if they have a good pastor and an effective pastoral staff. But here on our campuses Jesuits and active lay Catholic faculty and staff know better. The integrity of the church, the credibility of its leaders, and the fabric of trust that sustains the church's common life are all in grave danger. And we, all of us, are involved, and responsible, like it or not.

The Church in Crisis

The Catholic Church in the United States is experiencing the most serious crisis in its history. Since 1984 the public has learned of widespread sexual abuse of minors by priests and dishonest, even illegal, cover-ups of those crimes by bishops. Church leaders failed to respond pastorally to victims of abuse and to deal in a just and responsible manner with the perpetrators. And the scandal is not over. The credibility of the bishops, the integrity of the priesthood and the trust essential to the life of the church have all been badly damaged.¹

Every Catholic and every Catholic organization and institution is affected. Shared responsibility for the life and work of the modern Catholic Church is not an option but a fact. This is especially true in the United States, where the church has never enjoyed the backing of the state, the patronage of landed families or endowments of great wealth. Instead it has been as close to a people's church as one could find in modern history. For all its hierarchical pomposity, it rested

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and still rests upon the freely given support of its members. It was shaped, and is still shaped, less by Vatican proclamations than by what one historian of immigrant religious communities called “folk memories brought to bear on new aspirations.” Or, as Andrew Greeley might say, Catholics are grown ups, as smart as anyone else, and they remain Catholics because they like being Catholics. It’s their church.

And what a legacy is entrusted to them. As immigrants and descendents of immigrants, Catholics built an astonishing array of parishes and schools, hospitals and orphanages, monasteries and seminaries and mother houses, the nation’s largest non-governmental network of social service agencies and its largest programs of overseas relief and development, and over 200 colleges and universities. As families faithful to their memories worked to fulfill new aspirations, they entrusted the works of their church to their priests and bishops. Confident in their solidarity, admiring the vigorous pastors who came from their ranks, and persuaded of the truth of recent church teaching about hierarchical ecclesial authority, lay Catholics, nuns, sisters and the rank and file clergy granted their bishops and assorted clerical higher-ups discretionary authority far beyond that allowed to any other leaders in a free society. Most of them distrusted hierarchies at their workplace, in politics or in the streets, but in their church they thought their leaders could be trusted.

Bishops have now betrayed that trust, but those who granted them authority over budgets and personnel as well as sacraments and doctrine, cannot avoid a share of responsibility. To paraphrase an old description of the laity, people paid, prayed and obeyed, even when they should have known better.

Several years ago, as the church across the globe responded to the Pope’s appeal for self-assessment on the occasion of the millennium, Catholics wrestled with the questions of responsibility during the Holocaust. Most texts admitted the sinfulness of individual church members,

Bishops have betrayed a trust

including bishops, but held fast to the sinlessness of the church considered as the “corporate extension of Christ on earth.” But the French bishops acknowledged another level of church life, between the individual and the mystical church, what they called an “underlying basic religious culture which shaped and deformed people’s attitudes.” This is what people mean during the sex abuse crisis when they struggle to acknowledge a wider web of responsibility than particular sinful priests and bishops. There were and are structures

and practices and habits that “shaped and deformed” our attitudes in the church. To take only one, there is the habit of deference when serving on boards or committees with clergy and bishops. Another is our passivity when church leaders speak or act without reference to scholarship or theological reflection. These and many other habits have contributed to the denial of responsibility now so evident across the American church.

When Pope John XXIII decided to throw open its windows, the Catholic Church stunned the world by its openly debated and reported collegial exercise in renewal and reform at Vatican II. No phrase caught on more quickly in this country than that used to describe the church as “the people of God.” This was taken as an invitation. Lay people responded eagerly to serve on consultative parish and later diocesan pastoral councils, to participate in an array of official experiments in shared responsibility nationally, and to join strong new governing boards in Catholic medical care, social services and higher education. Gradually church reforms were giving substance to the vision of the church as a united people, the very Body of Christ sharing fully in the life and work of the church.

Yet, when the scandal of sexual abuse of minors by priests first emerged in 1985 and then exploded in 2002, the limits of Catholic reform became clear. Catholics felt compassion for the victims, anger at the priest predators and their bishop protectors, and shame and embarrassment arising from their genuine sense of Catholic solidarity. Many spoke up to challenge their bishops. Most lay Catholics had to use the public media to do so until two of their number were invited to address the assembled bishops in June, 2002. Some were invited to serve on new pastoral care committees, to advise their bishops on handling new charges of sexual abuse and implementing changes designed to protect children in the future. But, for the most part, Catholics, including lay church employees, sisters, deacons, even many priests, had no way of sharing responsibility for the crisis and its resolution. The people may be the church in some spiritual sense, but in terms of power and responsibility, most Catholics are, as one commentator called them a century ago, “mere externs.” And for a long time they hardly noticed. Right now, when it comes to resolving the most serious crisis in its history, the American church is controlled by the Pope, the bishops, for the most part each on his own, and their chosen advisors.

Thus the overall public response of Catholics to the crisis is captured by a cover of the national magazine *Commonweal*. It pictured a large ear with the caption "Are the Bishops Listening?" Contemporary American church politics are the politics of monarchy, where those seeking to influence events can only do so by gaining the ear of the king. The court is filled with intrigue and rumors and, when the king ages, political discussion is dominated by speculation about possible successors. Worldwide speculation about the next Papacy is even now a cottage industry. Closer to home the only response people could make in Boston was to call for the resignation of Cardinal Bernard Law. The arrival of his successor was marked by the characteristic interest in his personal responses and his personal advisors. In its recent report, the National Review Board appointed by the Bishops told them that power without accountability is tyranny. Unfortunately many bishops prefer metaphors of shepherds and sheep.

There are three major challenges to this culture of deference. One is the lay group the Voice of the Faithful, formed in the Boston archdiocese and now spread out across the country. It has provided a vigorous, intelligent voice for people passionate to take responsibility for assisting in the resolution of the crisis in the church. While many prominent Catholics express their admiration for VOTF, few have joined or contributed funds and its impact so far has been modest. Still, in terms of acting rather than just speaking, it is almost the only game in town.

A second sign of hope is the quick and thoughtful response of Boston College, now organized as "The Church in the Twenty First Century Project." Led

by President William Leahy, S.J., BC has provided space for priests and people to meet, it has organized innumerable forums on the crisis and related issues, and it has given legitimacy to public conversations about important issues still not available in many parts of the church. Once again, BC has more admirers than imitators in the world of Catholic higher education.

Some institutions slowly moved to organize seminars and conferences, a few offered hospitality or partnership to VOTF, but for the most part trustees and Presidents have been cautious, worried about the local bishop, and initiatives have been slow to arise from other sectors of college and university life.

The third sign of hope is the National Review Board. Formed by the Bishops at their Dallas meeting in June, 2002, the Board is composed of experienced lay leaders. They are charged with the task of insuring that the Bishops comply with their promises contained in the Charter for the Protection of Children. These include setting up in each diocese lay dominated committees to advise the bishop, zero tolerance for priest offenders, prompt pastoral care for victims, cooperation with civil authorities, and active efforts in parishes, schools and programs to insure that children are

safe. The Board was also instructed to study the scope of the sexual abuse problem and to examine the "causes and context" of the scandal. In January, 2004, after a full scale professional audit, the Board reported that the bishops had made substantial progress in implementing the Charter. In February they released the results of a study carried out by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Based on self-reports from dioceses and some religious orders, the report indicated that over 50 years 4392 priests, about 4 percent of



Photo: Ken Wagner © 1998 Seattle University

The Spiritual Journey of St. Ignatius Loyola, Panel 5 of 5: Abiding Intimacy with the Trinity in Rome. Artist: Dora Nikolova Bittau.

American priests, were accused of sexual abuse, and these cases involved 10,667 identified victims, a number all observers consider far smaller than the actual number, as most names never found their way into diocesan records.

At the same time, the Board released its own preliminary assessment of causes and context. They review problems with seminaries and the oversight of priests and they carefully examined celibacy (priests are not well trained for the demands of this commitment) and homosexuals (they should be welcomed to priesthood as celibates, but with careful screening). They gave equal attention to the failures of bishops, exploring with some shock the absence of accountability. They listed among the causes of the bishops' failure over-reliance on therapists, bad legal advice, lack of pastoral care for or even direct meetings with victims, and the bishops' failure to consult with their people, even to make use of existing mechanisms for consultation with priests, religious and lay people. The NRB's recommendations included further research, fraternal correction among bishops, more careful screening of candidates for the priesthood, and efforts to utilize the consultative mechanisms of diocesan and parish pastoral councils and finance committees already required by canon law.

The NRB report was a milestone. This is an all but independent lay commission, they did their homework in a patient, systematic way, they carefully avoided the most divisive issues in the church, and they offered an assessment that was at times brutally honest and a set of recommendations that affirmed the role of the laity and the idea of shared responsibility. It is a remarkable text, its publication a potentially historic event, but so far very little has been done to publicize the report locally, to honor the NRB and its members, or to build even modest political support for its continued existence, all tasks colleges and universities could carry out without fear of reprisal: after all, the NRB is the Bishops' own appointed committee.

So, even on the Catholic campuses, the only question still seems to be "Are the Bishops Listening?" So far the evidence is that they are listening but reaching conclusions quite different from those which would correspond to such central themes of Jesuit higher education as shared responsibility and lay leadership. If no one does anything further than was done the last two years, the prospects for the American church and for all Catholic institutions are not encouraging.

For one thing, the assignment given to the

National Review Board is under question. Its data gathering and oversight functions are not guaranteed to continue and its diagnostic assignment will require additional funds that will likely involve vigorous debate among the bishops. Given the obvious non-canonical status of the Board, and the failure to set up similar fact finding bodies locally (in most instances the new diocesan committees' jurisdiction does not include pre-2002 cases, and certainly does not embrace "causes and context"), one cannot be optimistic about the Board's future. One does not have to be an organizational expert to see that the Board's opponents and critics are well organized and well situated, its supporters, if there are any, are not well organized and have little standing in ecclesiastical decision-making. Predictably, the Bishops have postponed consideration of the Board's recommendations for continued audits and further research. In the absence of public demands for action, it is unlikely that there will be any serious official sponsored efforts at sharing responsibility for diagnosis, deliberation and decision.

What is to be Done?

In that context we in Catholic higher education have some responsibilities, particularly to help the church, the whole community of faith, "do its thinking" on this very important matter. This means diagnostics: serious research into the nature, scope and causes of the crisis. It means assisting the church to overcome obstacles to deliberation, such as the polarization of public debate. It means creating space for dialogue and deliberation where existing structures of shared responsibility do not do so. And where those structures are in place, we need to participate in them as well as assist them with appropriate research and educational projects.

There are at least three levels on which to consider the challenge that the crisis poses for Catholic and Jesuit higher education. First there is the direct challenge of the crisis: how can those involved in Catholic higher education help the Catholic community deal with the problems of sexual abuse, pastoral care, moral and legal justice, and honest assessment of causes and consequences? Second, in light of the crisis, how might Catholic higher education reconsider its Catholic responsibilities? And, third, should individuals and groups involved in Catholic higher education become more involved in the internal politics that are shaping the future of the Church as we read this article?

Are the bishops listening?

The Crisis Itself

First, Catholic colleges and universities are called to help people, Catholics and others, understand the crisis. The questions posed to the National Review Board should be our questions: scope, causes, consequences. We can offer forums to the local church, we can insure that good information is available for the local media, and we can identify research needs and help get them carried out.

Second, Fr. Leahy speaks strongly of the value of listening sessions with the alumni. Disturbed by the crisis, they appreciate the opportunity to speak with others about it and to join Leahy in considering what they and BC can do to help the church.

Third, colleges and universities might consider how they can assist the local diocese. Each should offer to support in appropriate ways the work of the local pastoral care committees. Someone on campus should monitor the diocese's efforts, including its participation in the work of the NRB. The NRB work provides important public information. Local media often ask us for help in understanding and assessing these events. We can and should help.

Fourth, individual Catholics in our communities have at least three levels of responsibility. First, they should ask what their own parish or diocese is doing in response to the crisis. Second, they should be looking at their own professional organizations, including their AJCU networks, to see if there is anything appropriate for them to do about the church's problems. And, third, they should consider joining Voice of The Faithful or some equivalent organization through which they can make their voices felt in the diocese and across the country.

Fifth, colleges and universities and their sponsoring religious orders should of course be models of responsibility. Religious orders should have fully participated in the reforms called for by the Charter, with appropriate modifications openly announced and discussed. They should have enlisted advisory bodies with lay people comparable to those established in each diocese. College and university trustees would be well advised to undertake an assessment of past performance and present policies for dealing with sexual misconduct by faculty and staff, priests or lay people. There is some reason to believe that advisory bodies composed of professionals, past victims and at least some parents, could be helpful.

Sixth, and perhaps most important, Catholic colleges and universities should do all they can to support the National Review Board. They should help

publicize the Board's reports, organize forums to discuss its findings, ask about planned responses in the diocese, and urge alumni to learn about its recommendations. Its members should be appearing on campuses the next few years, to discuss their plans and in the process receive local publicity and support. In the process students and the entire community might be encouraged to think about the role of lay people on boards of Catholic schools, hospitals, social service agencies and on advisory councils in dioceses and parishes.

Constructive Contributions Beyond the Crisis

Much of what has been done to date has been about issues and problems beyond the crisis itself. As Fr. Leahy puts it: "The crisis brought into public view issues that had been simmering below the surface for many years, not only the clerical sexual abuse of minors and its toleration, but the gap between Catholic teaching on sexuality and the practice of many Catholics, discontent among many priest and lay people, especially women, with their role, and deep concern about how the faith is handed on to the next generation."

How can our schools help with these issues? First, the trustees of an institution, without fanfare, might undertake a Catholic audit comparable to the civic audit some institutions have carried out. The question would be how each program and office contributes to the life and work of the church, here and now. In every area of academic life there are resources in the church helpful to Catholic higher education, and resources in the colleges and universities that could be helpful to the church. One could name many partnerships already in place in ministry training, student community service, and community and neighborhood development. Catholic Relief Services and the Catholic Campaign for Human Development have staff assigned to develop collaborations with higher education, some of which are enormously impressive. Most of all, Catholic colleges and universities cannot fulfill their mission unless there are vibrant institutions, movements and ministries in our American church, and we cannot leave their presence and prosperity to the working of the ecclesiastical and cultural marketplace.

Second, colleges and universities should assess the state of shared responsibility in the diocese. Where effective instruments exist, programs of education,

training and support for lay participants should be in place. Where instruments of shared responsibility do not work well, the colleges and universities could advocate for their introduction and effective implementation. In addition, higher education should seek representation on such consultative bodies locally and nationally.

Third, Boston College, as a result of Fr. Leahy's listening sessions with graduates, is exploring new ways to reach out to build continuing education projects around the country. The experience of many institutions with distance learning may assist this process, as would new forms of cooperation among the Jesuit institutions, each reaching out to Jesuit graduates in their region.

Fourth, individual colleges and universities, and cooperating institutions, could serve church leaders and decision makers with technical and academic resources. This could range from facilitating informative workshops for church leaders to training of professional personnel to seminars for newly appointed bishops. The idea that the Catholic university is "the place where the church does its thinking" needs to be translated into concrete projects as too many church factions turn away from serious thinking about faith, ministry and American culture.

Fifth, Catholic higher education should confront the highly divisive Catholic culture wars, which poison efforts to deal with problems in the church's common life. When the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin proposed the Catholic Common Ground Initiative as a way of countering the growing polarization at all lev-

els of the Church, other Cardinals disagreed, arguing that unity could be found in submission to the teaching authority of the Vatican and the hierarchy. As a result the project came to be identified as liberal, and therefore controversial, though it continues to enjoy the support of many bishops. The Catholic university would find in Bernardin's original message and in the subsequent experience of the Initiative ideas and projects that correspond to its own Catholic mission to help a divided church do its thinking about important pastoral and theological questions. Catholic colleges and universities should consider ways in which, in partnership with the Initiative, they might serve the church in this way.

Sixth, each college or university should determine what issues are most critical to the life and work of the church and attempt to bring a degree of intelligence to bear on those problems. At BC the problems were identified early as the "roles" of lay people, priests and bishops—church governance—the gap between teaching and practice on

matters of human sexuality, and the problems involved in handing on the faith across the generations. Arguments about each of these questions need to be better informed by scholarship and by prayerful reflection on the traditions, experiences and teachings of our church. Of course "handing on the faith" is of particular interest. Once again our debates, not only those of others, badly need to get beyond clichés about religious illiteracy, creeping individualism and mindless obedience to questions of responsibility across boundaries between secondary and higher

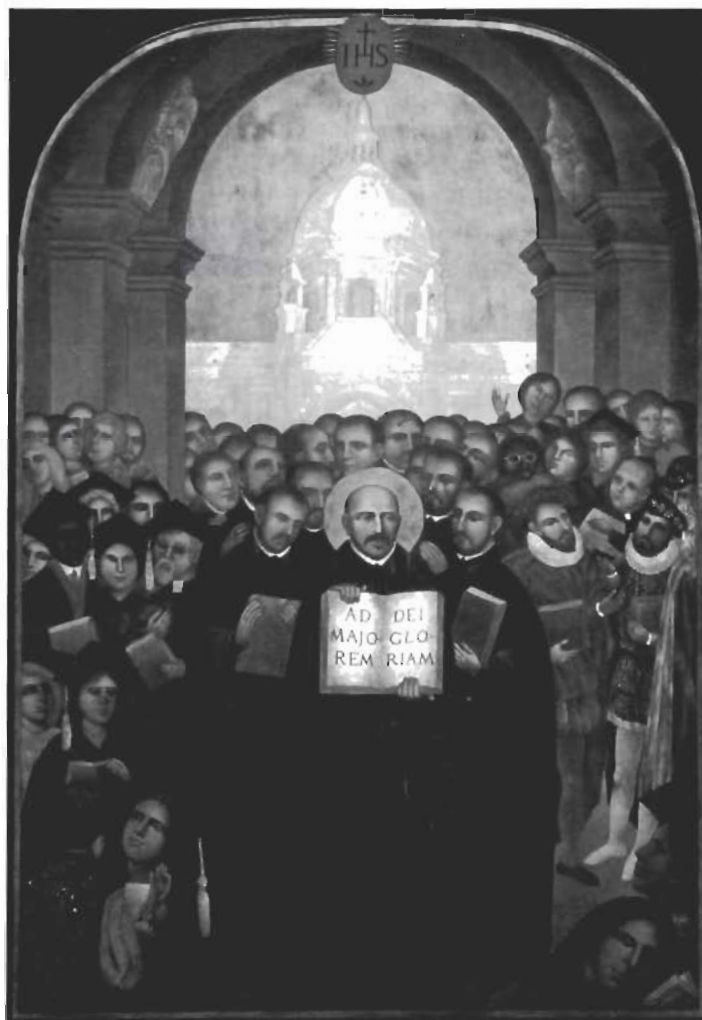


Photo: Ken Wagner © 1998 Seattle University

**The Spiritual Journey of St. Ignatius Loyola, Panel 3 of 5:
Educated and Blessed with Companions at the University of Paris.
Artist: Dora Nikolova Bittau.**

education, theology and pastoral ministry, pastoral and social ministry. Here our experience as well as our scholarship has much to offer a reflective church.

Seventh, Catholic institutions of higher education have a responsibility to take those steps needed to nurture and sustain a rich intellectual life and develop intelligent leadership, including lay leadership. Catholic higher education in general must always be deliberate and intentional about supporting Catholic intelligence and must provide appropriate forums and projects for the church "to do its thinking." Catholic colleges and universities must find ways to enable the local church to share in its life and must insist on their proper role in the pastoral life of the diocese, for example by participating in diocesan pastoral councils.

An Invitation to Ecclesiastical Politics

This invitation to consider the politics of the church is of course an invitation to consider our own personal and professional responsibility. As in the wider politics of our democratic society, shared responsibility for the church forces us to ask what we think, and feel, really think and feel, about the church, not the church of our dreams, but this church, here, in this place, right now. As citizens we know there is a common good beyond our individual goods, a public interest beyond private interests, even our own. In quiet moments, or in education of the young, we even admit that the common good will most likely not be done unless it is attended to, unless some are dedicated to it and all are willing, sometimes, to make sacrifices for it. The good citizen, national or global, is one who does that, willingly, because of a sense of shared responsibility for the commonwealth.

And so in the church: do we truly love the church and if so are we prepared to express that love by sharing its common life, in part through the work of reform and renewal. One priest tried to convey to his people that their parish was as safe as it could be because its councils and committees and staff met regularly, set goals, held each other to account, and did all that in a setting of prayer and the mutual commitment of community. In short, they had a lot of meetings. He admitted he disliked meetings but he understood that the hard work of negotiating differences for the sake of the community as a whole was indispensable. People did that work because they genuinely cared for one another. Theirs was what John Cardinal Dearden once called the church, a community of faith and friendship.

To ask about higher education in a church in crisis is to ask some of the avoided questions of the Ex Corde debate, questions about the responsibilities of truthfulness and the relationship between knowledge and power right here, in our college and church. If we would do more than teach *about* Catholicism in the midst of crisis, we Catholics in Catholic higher education will have to rethink our practical, day-to-day relationship with the Catholic community as it is. We will have to ask each other if we care enough about it to devote to its common life some portion of our time, talent and treasure. If we are unable to do that, the prospects for an intelligent American Catholicism will continue to dim.

Eighth: in addition we should take another look at Catholic Studies. Most of us in Jesuit higher education agree that research and teaching in all fields can and should go on without immediate reference to the claims of faith: good art, good science, good teaching, all are goods which are Christian goods because they are authentically good work. I wonder if there is not an alternative claim: that Catholic Studies, research and teaching informed by Catholic faith, broadly understood to include theology but much more, is a public and academic good. If so, then a crisis which calls into question the integrity of the church and thus of all its members damages not just the Catholics among us, or a Catholic element of an institution that has little to do with the other elements, but the entire community. If not, then perhaps there is more merit in the claims of even friendly critics like Peter Steinfels that we have allowed Catholicism to become marginal to our basic enterprise of research and teaching.

Finally, representatives of Catholic higher education meet regularly with bishops in the Bishops and Presidents Committee to discuss matters of common interest. Working through this committee the Presidents should a) explore current projects where higher education can serve the church; b) present an annual agenda of pastoral reflections and priorities arising from our experience; and c) seek mechanisms for collaboration in pastoral research and planning.

¹ The Report of the National Review Board, issued February 27, 2004, gives added weight to this statement of the seriousness of the crisis.