

Leadership Challenges for Presidents of Catholic Colleges and Universities

As I conclude my tenure as Chair of this association, I offer some brief thoughts that have been fermenting during these last two years. I've been an active member of the association for fourteen years and, like many of you veterans, gather annually to share the on-going narrative of our willing and, often, not-so-willing participation in the Catholic college and university version of the culture wars, with their various skirmishes mounted by the disaffected—both internal and external forces—ready to claim the high moral ground for their campaigns to impose upon our institutions a peculiar version of their own identity politics. Each group carries its own battle flags and comes to us from the right and from the left. Some attacks are bold, direct, and in the open; some come by stealth and intrigue. Some are led by their highest ranking superiors; others are more cowardly infiltrators who wreck havoc with misinformation, and propaganda. As the image implies, college and university presidents—particularly presidents of *Catholic* colleges and universities in the United States in our era—must be good strategists, knowing when and how to negotiate, arbitrate, mediate, or decide on tactics for a defensive campaign or offensive assault.

Of course, this profile is only partially drawn, and I'm certain that, among the qualifications listed for our jobs, “strategist and tactician” does not appear. Since studies indicate that the modern college and university presidency does not rank high among desirable careers, it may be prudent to keep this feature of our work to ourselves. Nonetheless, you and I both know that, in addition to the great joy and satisfaction our jobs include, a colossal amount of our time and energy is consumed responding to the persistent nuisance or, worse, defending against what is harmful, unjust, and damaging. In light of this, it is no wonder that our annual meetings have occasionally resembled the gathering of senior commanders huddled together in a war gaming exercise. Well, I, for one, am convinced that—battle fatigue notwithstanding—anything like a *Pax Romana* or *Pax Americana* is not imminent. But I am also convinced that a few well designed and executed strategies adopted both at the institutional level and as an association, may—in the long run—generate optimism for our mission in Catholic higher education.

My short list is not original, exhaustive, or all-encompassing. It derives from the concerns I have heard expressed by many of you over the years, at these meetings and elsewhere, and from my own experience. I do not pretend to offer strategies for fortifying every dimension of our colleges and universities. Others are well equipped to comment on the challenges common to all colleges and universities, public and private. My purpose here is simply to focus our attention specifically on what we as presidents might consider as part of our individual and the association's future agenda that may sustain and enhance what is distinctive and distinguished in American Catholic Higher Education.

First, we need to reckon with and do something about the diminishing pool of talented, skilled, motivated leaders who are attracted to Catholic higher education. Presidents need to be better recruiters for our own successors. It has been evident for many years that the traditional sources of candidates for our positions are shrinking: Congregations, Religious Communities, and Dioceses are challenged to supply capable and willing men and women to lead the institutions they sponsor. We know that many of the lay people who currently hold these positions are former religious or seminarians who are now close to retirement. In the meantime, many dedicated lay professionals

who may be interested in leadership positions in our institutions have not themselves benefitted from the theological education, religious formation, or ecclesiastical immersion that help current presidents of Catholic colleges and universities articulate informed and reasonably successful arguments for how and why their institutions behave. And, if at the heart of our mission is some demonstrable and personal integration of “faith and reason,” it is helpful that the leaders themselves are so integrated and give public witness to this. There are men and women already working in our institutions who have the potential to become great administrators and leaders, but they are not stepping forward, in many cases, because they lack confidence in their own preparation to lead faith-based institutions like ours. We need to encourage them and provide a broad array of opportunities for their encounters with theology and ecclesial culture.

Second. Let’s be honest, for many years now it has been easier to talk about our institutions in terms of the values and influences of the sponsoring congregation and, thus, avoid the litmus test created and applied by self-proclaimed experts on the “authentically Catholic.” Public perception about Catholic colleges and universities has also been heavily infected by debilitating images of a Church obsessed with anything that has to do with “sex” and a strain of “new Puritanism” that tolerates the core tensions and ambiguities inherent in the intellectual life not at all. Our efforts and that of the association can offer, at the very least, a partial antidote to this by retrieving and proclaiming a centuries old truth about Catholic universities: they are now, as they were in the 12th century, inherently controversial, messy places where scholars argue relentlessly, challenge authority and the status quo, push their students with dogged determination to think critically, master their disciplines, and encounter confidently the world as it is: imperfect, in a word, *human*. Thus, at its best, what distinguishes our tradition from others is that we educate our students not merely to live successfully in a dynamic, ever-changing universe but do so filled with hope and optimism. And the reason we can do this is because we take the Incarnation seriously. At the same time, I wonder who on our campuses understands and can articulate this? If these are few and far between, what are we doing about it?

Third, all of us are great advocates for the colleges and universities we lead. When faculty morale is “at an all time low,” we do our best to pump them up; when called upon to help in the recruiting effort of new students, faculty, and staff, we do our best to persuade them to cast their lot with us. We work hard trying to convince potential donors and foundations to invest in our institution, and we log many miles on the circuit meeting with Rotarians, Alumni, Athletic boosters—just about anyone who will listen to us—championing our college or university. Yet what is often missing in the messages we deliver is reference to the great value each college and university enjoys because of its membership in the global network of Catholic institutions. Most of us may take this for granted, particularly if we embellish our stump speeches with references to the great values and traditions that derive from being part of the family of Jesuit, Mercy, Dominican, Franciscan, Benedictine, and like institutions. As important and essential as these features of our institutional messaging may be, we really miss a significant opportunity if we do not also educate our audiences about the sheer advantages of our *Catholic* character; that is, what all of us on the planet have in common. We should claim often and publicly the universal legacy of the Church’s intellectual, social, cultural, moral, and spiritual traditions and continuing contributions to the academy, our social justice outreach, and the formation of our students.

Fourth, the association will be challenged more and more to find common ground and, thus, a common agenda. This assembly represents not merely geographic diversity but extraordinary

diversity of mission, size, programs, and student populations: from the traditional liberal arts, residential colleges to those whose instruction is primarily delivered on-line; from urban institutions with a mission to the poor and underserved to rural colleges in regions with severely declining populations; from universities distinguished by their scholarly productivity to those noteworthy for their teaching excellence. For many years now, we have found common cause in responding to the agendas shaped by others. This will not sustain us. As leaders, we need to leverage the strengths of our institutional diversity and launch a fresh agenda that will infuse the association with renewed vitality and purpose. The responsibility is ours.

The opportunity to serve as a member of this Board and as its Chair has been both gratifying and humbling. Since I also believe in the Incarnation, I am filled with hope for our future and pledge to continue working on behalf of our great mission to Catholic Higher Education.

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31 January 2010