

ACCU Panel Presentation
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John Nichols has asked me to address two issues: the importance of mission for our colleges, and how we keep our missions alive through general education, especially considering the diminishing number of professed religious at our institutions.

Let me start by observing that mission statements and general education programs share something important in common: they both go to the heart of the matter. A college or university mission expresses the institution's reason for being: This is our purpose; here is what we are trying to do. In the case of The College of St. Scholastica, for example, we say that we want to provide intellectual and moral preparation for responsible living and meaningful work.

General education is also about the heart of the matter. General education is so named to distinguish it from the special education of the major. General is related to special as principle is related to instance. General education is about the point that every major illustrates. General education is the "super major," the major of majors.

I know from experience that it is very difficult to get faculty to think about general education as itself an integrated major. We are more comfortable developing lists of desired skills and abilities and arguing about distribution requirements that reflect our disciplinary preferences. But I think the authors of the Harvard Redbook got it right in 1945 when they argued that: "Just as we regard the courses in concentration as having definite relations to one another, so should we envisage general education as an organic whole whose parts join in expounding a ruling idea and in serving a common aim."

This leads me to a second point. Our missions and our general education programs share something else important: Both are trying to engage students in the big human questions, both are trying to pass along from generation to generation the best thinking about what really matters. In this regard, mission and general education serve as important counterweights and correctives to what one author has called the "learn to earn" mentality that is so widespread among our students and in American culture.

Our Catholic colleges and universities understand that workforce preparation, broadly understood, must include serious reflection on life's big questions: What does it mean to be a human being? How ought we to live in the world? What is a good life? These are the questions that the religions of the world, including Catholicism, try to answer. They are also the questions at the center of liberal learning and general education. These are the questions whose answers form a frame of reference that guides the pursuit and application of knowledge.

How can we preserve our missions in our general education programs?

The first thing to say is that there is no better place to preserve the mission than in the general education program. If a mission statement expresses the common aim of the institution and a general education program expounds the ruling idea of the curriculum—and if both are concerned with the big human questions—then general education provides a superb opportunity

to express and embody mission. A strong general education program is the institutional signature.

All of our missions are informed by the Catholic tradition; most of our missions are also informed by the distinctive charism of a founding order. All of us face the demographic reality that our founding orders are getting smaller; some may eventually go away altogether. In terms of the presence of professed religious, our campuses will look very different in twenty or even in ten years.

How do we preserve our precious missions in this situation? This is a question with which we are all wrestling. It has been the main agenda item at the annual meeting of Benedictine presidents for the past several years. Concerning how we preserve the distinct charisms of our founding orders, I have no new wisdom to offer. Orientation programs, integration of the history and values of the order into the curriculum, oblate programs, discussion groups, offices of mission integration—these are some of the main approaches. The Benedictine presidents are developing a leadership institute to help mentor new presidents and senior staff at our institutions. Other orders have taken this approach, as well.

We need to remember also that being Dominican or Franciscan or Jesuit is a *way of being Catholic*. I believe that one of the best ways we can preserve the spirit of our founders is to enhance the Catholic tradition in the curriculum and the life of our colleges. Religious orders may diminish or consolidate, but Catholicism endures. Just here is the challenge, because many of our faculty and staff are much more comfortable with our founders' values than they are with the Catholic tradition.

How can we preserve and advance our Catholic character in our general education programs—especially in the pluralistic environment of many of our campuses?

The usual way of answering this question is some variation on what I'll call the doctrinal approach. What percentage of faculty, staff, students and trustees are Catholics? How familiar are these populations with Catholic teachings? What are the theology requirements in the general education program? How many Catholic professors have the *mandatum*?

Questions of Catholic literacy and Catholic population are obviously important when we are talking about preserving our Catholic identity, but I must confess that I find this approach somewhat incomplete and unsatisfying. At least on my campus, it quickly deteriorates into feelings about first and second-class citizenship, about insiders and outsiders. It tends to concentrate attention on issues that divide rather than on wisdom that unites.

There is another approach to the issue of preserving Catholic identity that I find more helpful and promising in our pluralistic context. I'll call it the dynamic approach. The essential insight behind this approach is the radical conviction that the Catholic tradition is indeed *catholic*, that the Catholic worldview and the Catholic impulse are universal in human life. This insight reflects the New Testament conviction that the God of Jesus Christ is universally revealed in nature and in conscience, so that the special revelation of God in Jesus is not so much a new revelation as it is a crystallization of God's general revelation in all of creation. Analogously,

preserving our Catholic missions may be as much about making explicit the Catholic dynamic that is already at work in teaching and learning as it is about how many Catholic professors we employ or Catholic courses we teach.

An excellent example of the dynamic approach is Fr. John Haughey's recent book, *Where Is Knowing Going?* The Catholic tradition regards the activity of human intelligence—the search for meaning, the construction of narratives that help us make sense of reality, the continued push beyond the boundaries of partial knowledge—as a journey toward God, the source of truth and of meaning. Paraphrasing Augustine: Our minds were made for you, O Lord, and they are restless till they rest in you.

Taking this insight seriously, Haughey has interviewed dozens of faculty—Catholic and non-Catholic—asking them: What is the good you are seeking to accomplish in your academic career? Their answers are interesting; in case after case, they show the attempt by faculty to locate their research and teaching within larger frames of reference, to construct “wholes” of meaning. These wholes often reflect deep personal experiences that drove the faculty into academia in the first place. One faculty member is concerned about the unequal distribution of health care in society and wants to educate and motivate nursing students to level the playing field; a scientist wants to develop thoughtful citizens who carefully consider evidence in making their political choices; a philosopher who has struggled with the problem of evil wants to teach students new ways of thinking about God and faith. Most faculty are pushing beyond their disciplines toward larger wholes; they seek to locate their own projects within larger projects.

Haughey then describes how he brings faculty members together to share their stories and their projects with one another, and how they begin to relate their efforts and to knit their individual projects into larger and larger wholes. On campus after campus, this movement toward the infinite, this Catholic insight about the dynamism of human intelligence, is played out in his workshops. Is there a clue here about a fresh understanding of what Catholic identity could mean at our colleges and universities? Imagine a general education curriculum that is designed to move students from their individual intellectual journeys toward ever larger and more encompassing narratives of meaning; from autobiography through literature and history to theology, for example. Such a curriculum, it seems to me, would be deeply Catholic.

There are other examples of how an academic program can be seen as genuinely Catholic: Education of the whole person, conscience as well as intellect, is Catholic education. Education that integrates knowing and believing—by showing how reason begins in wonder and how unthinking faith can lead to terror—is Catholic education. Education that cultivates moral imagination and practices students in social justice—the two dimensions of love, of whom God is the pure unbounded expression—is Catholic education. In these cases we advance the Catholic tradition by celebrating where it is already at work in our work.

I believe that attention to the spirit and dynamism of the rich Catholic tradition opens new possibilities for understanding how we can claim and advance our missions through general education.

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