

Address to the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities
January 31, 2010
Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick

Catholic Higher Education as an Apostolate of Intellectual Charity

First of all – with deepest sincerity and gratitude – I want to thank you for this extraordinary honor. I appreciate that only two bishops have received this award before me. I prefer not to speculate on that, but to move ahead with deep gratitude for your kindness in so graciously overestimating my talents and so generously overlooking my shortcomings as an educator, as a former university President and also as someone who has been given the opportunity for leadership in the Church and has not always provided it as courageously, as wisely, or as thoughtfully as I should. My almost five years as President of The Catholic University of Puerto Rico – at that time as fledgling institution with some 6,000 students spread out over five campuses and a faculty originating in at least a dozen different nations and representing many religious communities – was a very wonderful time in my life and I will always be grateful for it.

By the way, it might give you a smile to learn how I was informed of my nomination as President of the university. I was 34 years old, having finished my doctorate in sociology and having at the same time served as Chaplain of the university, Dean of Students, and Director of Development. I was in California with the then President of The Catholic University of America, Bishop William McDonald, looking for funds – of course – and hoping to use the presence of the

university's bishop-president to reinvigorate the alumni and find some friendly former students who could make a huge donation.

One afternoon during this visit I received a call from New York and found on the other end the Coadjutor Archbishop of New York, John Maguire. I was a priest of the Archdiocese of New York, as you may know. Archbishop Maguire began the conversation directly. He said, "Ted, I have great news for you! The members of the Board of The Catholic University of Puerto Rico have asked Cardinal Spellman to release you that you might serve as President of the University there and I am happy to tell you – the Archbishop continued – that His Eminence has graciously agreed. Congratulations." That was basically the end of the conversation. Ah, those were the good old days! There was no discussion of salary – actually, I took a cut – there was no discussion of my willingness and, in fact, there was no discussion at all. I went down the corridor to the room in the hotel where Bishop McDonald was staying and told him what had happened. He said, "You will tell them no, of course." I said, "Your Excellency, I don't think you can do that in New York." And that was the end of two rather important conversations in my life.

Of course, so much time has passed since those days. I count the years and realize that this happened 45 years ago when I was 34. I have seen Catholic education wax and wane and wax over the past half century. I remember the times when a college President only had to spend two-thirds of his or her time in fundraising and even the more ancient times when many of the faculty was still of the opinion that it was theoretically possible for a university President to remain

academically respectable. Those were the days when a lay trustee from the area who was told what I earned for a year, nodded gravely and said to his interlocutor, "I thought that is what he earned for a month." You will be happy to know that even after he learned the true story, nothing happened. He may have thought I was being overpaid. And he may have been right!

There are probably as many stories about educators as there are about lawyers, but since I am being honored by the educators I thought it would be more prudent for me to tell a story about actors. Then I will tell you one about professional fundraisers, always prudently trying to keep on the right side of the audience!

I have indeed seen many changes in the life of our Catholic colleges and universities. Over the last half century, as a former President, as priest and bishop, I have been awed by the brilliance and the character of so many of those who serve Catholic institutions, especially in leadership positions. I have constantly been edified by your dedication to the academic apostolate, to a deep understanding of your multiple responsibilities and in a very special sense for your willingness to take on what is so often a thankless job for the good of society, for the good of your community, for the good of the students and their families and for the good of the Church. I believe you are truly engaged in the apostolate of academic charity!

I believe that bishops should be optimistic about the work of Catholic higher education, because if we are not, it can indicate a lack of trust in the Lord, Who has called all of us, educators and educatees alike, into the wondrous and wonderful

mystery of His truth and His love. I am convinced that it is a great gift which you have received from the Lord in this apostolic responsibility and I believe too, that through your loving service and those of many others who work with you as faculty, as staff, as research persons and as the academic community of learners, the golden days of American Catholic education are still ahead of us.

The golden days of the past have brought us here. They were sometimes difficult days as we look back at them. They were days of struggle. They saw the closing of many Catholic institutions of higher education. They saw difficulties and misunderstandings and conflicts with the state and alas, sometimes with the ecclesiastical authorities. But there have been many wonderful days and wonderful moments and many of us have lived through them all and have reason to be grateful, and reason to be confident!

Those of us who were working in higher education at the time welcomed the Decree of the Second Vatican Council on Christian Education of October 1965. *Gravissimum Educationis* was a challenging document, positive, thoughtful and optimistic in its outlook for the future. As I read it over once again, I was struck by the fact that here as in so many other documents of the Second Vatican Council, a vast number of footnotes refer to the writings and teaching of the Venerable Pius XII. His great love of Catholic higher education and his understanding of it were the foundations on which the educational teaching of the Second Vatican Council so often found its basis and its challenge.

Of course, it was in the euphoria that followed the Council that many of the successor documents by educators came to light. In those heady days, when so many saw an unrivaled second spring in the life of education and at the time of the sixties when the whole world moved toward a new rather unrealistic spirit of excitement and experiment that many things were said and written which may have been more eloquent than based on the solid reality of the needs and hopes of our times.

Among such documents, one might think of the Land O' Lakes Statement, which provided not only ripples on a placid sea of education, but perhaps whitecaps and near tsunamis as well. We can look back today on some of its statements, especially those which seem to call for a total absence of any authority outside the academic community itself and as essential to the integrity of a university an absolute freedom from any restraints. I am not sure – in fact, I rather doubt – that this radical interpretation of the language of the document was in keeping with the mind of most of the signers. They included several of the great leaders of American Catholic education and some others who were not so great. And they sought to grasp what they saw as the light from the Council in the context of the light from a civil society. And even though it is clear to us now that certain parts of that document are foreign to the traditional concept of Catholic education and, as such, really untenable, it is also true that there are some paragraphs in the document which make its Catholic life and Catholic purpose very clear. I quote from the document the following texts:

“The Catholic university participates in the total university life of our time, has the same functions as all other true universities and, in general, offers the same services to society. The Catholic university [however] adds to the basic idea of a modern university distinctive characteristics which round out and fulfill that idea. Distinctively, then, the Catholic university must be an institution, a community of learners or a community of scholars in which Catholicism is perceptively present and effectively operative.”

A little further on in the statement, the Land O’Lakes authors talk about interdisciplinary dialogue in the university and express a very important role in this plan for Catholic theology. I quote: “To carry out this primary task properly, there must be a constant discussion within the university community in which theology confronts all the rest of modern culture and all the areas of intellectual study which it includes.” Later on, having insisted that the theological disciplines are “essential to the integrity of a university,” the document talks about success in the dialogue with culture, and among the areas that guarantee that success it cites the presence of Christian scholars in the non-theological areas, who not only are interested in and competent in their own field, but also have a personal interest in this cross disciplinary confrontation. The document ends with a call that echoes today and continues to challenge us. “In fine, the Catholic university of the future will be a true modern university, but specifically Catholic in profound and creative ways for the service of society and the people of God.” I believe that the signers of

the document would find these quotations to be among the most important and they are certainly very much echoed in the documents of the Church since that time.

The document *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* also has been analyzed and reported on over the past few years in many, many ways, but I think that my own Archbishop, Donald Wuerl, in a statement on Catholic higher education which appeared in one of his columns puts *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* very much in the proper context and in the line of solid ecclesiastical teaching. With typical clarity, the Archbishop writes, “*Ex Corde Ecclesiae* opened up for Catholic institutions of higher learning a pathway through all of the complexity of modern university structure and activity to begin to refocus on what it means to be an institution that is not only academically excellent and engaged in the broader culture, but one that does so specifically from its Catholic identity and heritage.” Archbishop Wuerl’s carefully worded analysis of this powerful official document in the present teaching of the Church clearly moves us away from the often controversial implications of previous documents, including that of Land O’Lakes, and sets the teaching of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* where the Great John Paul II wanted it to be, at the very heart of the Church’s understanding of the role of Catholic higher education.

One of the positive results of these earlier and pioneering documents was the birth of new channels of dialogue with Church agencies. Indeed, cooperation between the Bishops’ Conference and the Presidents of Catholic universities throughout the country was recognized in the establishment of a sub-committee of bishops to foster the relationships and to try to be helpful to both sides.

The Task Force on dealing with political leaders also met with university Presidents on a number of occasions both face to face and through written conversations and in so many cases reached an understanding of how academic freedom and fidelity to one's roots can be worked out in the complex and difficult structures of this rampantly partisan society in which we live.

I cannot speak for the other bishops. God knows, I gave up trying that years ago! But I do believe that for most bishops who are privileged to have a Catholic institution of higher education in their dioceses, this is not only a challenge, but a great pride and an indication of the importance of the Catholic community in the formulation of the future.

Some time ago, while I was flying on a plane to Australia, I turned on the music channel since I had probably seen all the movies that were worthwhile by that time. Kenny Rogers, the great country singer, was belting out some great melodies and I suddenly realized that the lyrics were rather apt descriptions that I would like to see present whenever bishops and the universities meet. The first is a song that I would hope the local Catholic college and university would always be able to say about the Church itself. It's that song entitled "She Believes in Me" and I think when all is said and done we really do and are so grateful for the work that is undertaken. Oh, there are moments when temporary crises and differences of opinion – and even serious problems – can arise, but I would think that when the bishop looks at the great gift of having a Catholic college or university in his diocese he would sing that other great Kenny Rogers' song, "You Are So Beautiful to Me."

It is basically our hope that that beauty will not be just skin deep, but be the appreciation of what the Land O' Lakes statement calls "a profoundly Catholic presence for the service of society and the people of God." And it is in that background that I joyfully accepted this important honor which you presented last evening.

I have been privileged to serve in dioceses which were graced by important Catholic colleges and universities and I thank God for that privilege. I have always felt that the bishop had to be a part of the university, not that he would be the one to give commands or establish policies which really depend on the leadership of the university itself, but he would always be present in a meaningful way. I have had such great good fortune in finding that, wherever I have been called to serve. In one university, every time I would go to visit it at the start of my ministry, I was told how welcome I was. I would always respond, "You really don't need to welcome me since I am part of the family." The bishop is always part of the family of a Catholic institution and therefore there is no need to use the word "welcome" when he comes to campus. It took many months, but ultimately instead of saying "We welcome our Archbishop," they changed it to say "We are very glad to have our Archbishop back with us again." I think to reach that stage is an important step because then the bishop's presence is a constant reminder among many others of the deep commitment to Catholic teaching and Catholic thought that the institution needs to continue to develop.

Of course, every one of us probably has our own concept of the essential elements of Catholic higher education. I have mine and I have spoken about this for many years, even since the time I served as President of a university. I believe that there are three essential elements to a Catholic institution. First is that it be authentically Catholic. There is truth in packaging present here. Another that it be constantly striving for academic excellence and the third is that it always be open to the poor.

I believe that this is very much the thought of His Holiness Pope Benedict as he spoke so clearly and forcefully to Catholic educators a year and a half ago here in Washington. Many of you were there and can once again hear his clear and yet very down to earth and realistic assessment. You remember his words: “First and foremost, every Catholic educational institution is a place to encounter the Living God Who in Jesus Christ reveals His transforming love and truth.” In this quotation from his encyclical *Spe Salvi*, the Pope puts it on the line for each and every one of us. If we do not believe that a Catholic educational institution is a place where young men and women, and those not so young, encounter the Living God Who in Jesus Christ reveals His transforming love and truth, we may indeed be in the wrong career. This encounter obviously may take many forms and nuances, especially when so many of our students and faculty are not of our faith, but the essential possibility of such an encounter, must, it seems to me, always be present.

The Holy Father returns to that question later on in his talk, when again with charity and with vigor he proclaims his message. Here he comments not only on the Catholicism but on the need of the university to reach out to those in need. I remind you of his words and I quote: “It is the question of conviction. Do we really believe that only in the mystery of the Word made flesh does the mystery of man truly become clear? Are we ready to commit our entire self – intellect and will, mind and heart – to God?” The Pope goes on with his key questions and touches again another one of those essential elements that I presented to you earlier. “Is the faith tangible in our universities and schools? Is it given fervent expression liturgically, sacramentally, through prayer, acts of charity, a concern for justice, and respect for God’s creation? Only in this way do we really bear witness to the meaning of who we are and what we uphold.” As the Holy Father continues to offer us guidance – perhaps surprisingly, not new or difficult rules, but basically what we have learned from the very beginning of our vocation as Catholic educators – “Truth speaks to the individual in his or her entirety, inviting us to respond with our whole being. This optimistic vision is found in our Christian faith because such faith has been granted the vision of the *Logos*, God’s creative Reason, which in the Incarnation, is revealed as Goodness itself.”

And so, the principles are clear to us and they have always been clear to us. It is not some new teaching. It is found in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. It is found in the teaching of the Church from that moment on and, indeed, going back to the Gospel. If there were Catholic universities when Jesus walked the

roads of the Holy Land, you and I know He would say the same thing. That is our greatness. That is our privilege. That is our responsibility.

We all realize that there are new turns in the road and new challenges. The Catholic education of today must include things that were not great priorities earlier. Perhaps it is our fault that they were not, but perhaps we were more interested in other things as we strove to build up our system and to make it competitive with the rest of the world. Today's university has to understand the political culture of our time. It has to learn and has to learn carefully and compassionately and courageously. There are new challenges to face – the diminishing of the respect for life and human dignity, the breakup of society, the lack of unity in our political parties, in our societal structures, and, dare I say it, even among some voices of the Church in our country.

There are extra burdens that we must carry. We must learn about ecology and teach our students – and our faculty – of the ecological warnings that nature is giving us. We must train people to work for peace, to understand peace, to study the ways of peace in our society. We need to talk about unity, unity in society, unity in families and unity in our Church. We must seek for civility, civility in the way we handle our proclamation of the truths we hold dear, the way we enter controversies, in the way we seek to teach what is right and true and beautiful and good. If we do not find civility in the manner of our education, we have already lost one of the great battles of our time. Is it worth the effort? I am sure it is.

I go back once again to the poignant lyrics of a country western song. The title of it is “What Would it Hurt?” It talks about the relationship between spouses or perhaps between any two people whose long-time relationship needs to be rekindled. What would it hurt, the song says, if once in a while you were to bring me a rose, what would it hurt if you would open a door for me, what would it hurt if you called me once in a while from work. If we adopt those rules in our married life – I speak to those who are married among us – you know it would be helpful. Can we not use this as a relationship between the Catholic university and the Church? What would it hurt if you were to bring me a rose? What would it hurt if once in a while we would say to the bishop of the diocese in which we are in, What do you need for us to do? Can we open an institute about Catholic catechetics in our diocese? Can we open an institute about Catholic social teaching? Would you want us to open a program for the preparation of deacons or of liturgical ministers? How could we help the local Church with all the facilities which we have to offer?

The second question is, What would it hurt if you called me once in a while from work? If the President of the college or university and the bishop got together once in a while, a few times a year for a dinner or just a gathering, to talk about the work of the university and the needs of the diocese, what would it hurt? Wouldn't it be great if that could be a kind of relationship that was formed so that when new ideas came up on either side they would think about relating to each other and finding out how the tremendous potential both in a diocesan organization and in an

institution of higher education could work together to see what were the new challenges and how each could help the other.

The last question is the easy one. What would it hurt if you would open a door for me? What would it hurt if you invite the bishop once in a while to meet the faculty, to give a talk to the students, to establish a lecture series in the bishop's honor or in his name, where together you would decide what were the things a faculty would like to hear or a student body needed to hear and jointly pick a distinguished speaker who might be part of the celebration, inviting the bishop to speak at that time, to present the lecturer, or to comment after the lecture was over. What would it hurt if you opened a door for him to come and be a more present part of the life of the institution? What would it hurt if we did all these things? I think it would not hurt too much at all and we would build up a relationship and a total and wonderful new opportunity of mutual cooperation, mutual understanding, and mutual trust. I make these suggestions, knowing that most of you are already doing this, but it's good to hear that these are worthwhile initiatives and should never be abandoned or diminished in importance.

When all is said and done, there is one thing that I do believe is lacking in a lot of higher education today. We can describe it in many ways, and sometimes it is hard to put a finger on the heart of it all. I think it could be called passion. We need to send out young men and women into the world with passion, a passion for what they believe, a passion for the good that they must do, a passion to reach out to the poor and the hurting and the wounded, a passion to reach out for the lost and

bring them home, a passion to proclaim that truth that we are so proud to be teaching, a passion to redeem society and family life and honesty and ethics and civility in our society. Unless we are sending these young men and women out from your institutions filled with that kind of fire, I am afraid we are not doing what we must begin to do.

I know it's easy for me to talk because I'm retired, but as I look back at our nation and look back at the clouds which cover us and the shadows through which we must walk, I look to see Catholic educators, dedicated to an apostolate of intellectual charity, enkindling the lights of that same passion in their student body and in the great faculty and in the benefactors, and lighting those lights to the fullest so that they cast out the gloom of our day. Pope Benedict, toward the end of his message, talks about this passion and I quote him: "Once their passion for the fullness and unity of truth has been awakened, young people will surely relish the discovery that the question of what they can know opens up the vast adventure of what they ought to do." And in that context, whatever their faith tradition may be, as they face the ultimate questions of life and love and destiny, they may have the tools to build a better world, not just for a time, but for always. Come! Let us find that passion ourselves!

Thank you very much, and God bless you.