Catholic Universities and the Church in Crisis
The Crossroads Symposium: A Church in Crisis Moves to the Future
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Good evening. It’s an honor to be with you. This conference — including your participation and presence — is an act of love for the Church and the larger world it serves.

The U.S. Catholic Church is more than all those churches on the street corners and the breadth of evangelization and pastoral ministry they represent.

- With its 6,200 K-12 schools, the Catholic Church is the largest provider of private education in the country.
- It is the nation’s largest private provider of higher education, with our 220 colleges and universities.
- It’s the largest private provider of healthcare in the country, with one out of six Americans getting their healthcare from our systems.
- It’s the largest private provider of poverty services, with one out four Americans in poverty receiving services from Catholic Charities and/or the St. Vincent de Paul Society.
- It’s the largest resettler of refugees, larger than the federal government.
- U.S.-based Catholic Relief Services provides crisis relief – such as in the Bahamas a few weeks ago — for 127 million people in 144 countries on five continents every single year!
- And CRS is just one of the Catholic Church’s 160 international relief organizations, organized by country and coordinated by Caritas International in Rome.
- And if you Google the phrase, ”world’s biggest charitable organization,” you will receive the answer: “The Catholic Church.” You’ll also find that it is the world’s largest non-governmental provider of education and healthcare.

This is an impressive organization by any standard, and one worth fighting for.

I spend my days, of course, thinking about the Church’s higher education ministry. This twin crisis of child protection and leadership failings tugs on my mind both for:

- The ways we ourselves need to ensure the safety of those we welcome to our campuses; and
- How we might bring our many resources to the table to be helpful.
Permit me an observation on each. Permit me also to speak, through this presentation, to all my colleagues in U.S. Catholic higher education. I intend to share these thoughts with them after this symposium concludes.

Non-Fraternization Policies
Let’s look inside Catholic higher education before we look out.

- Thankfully, it’s a relatively safe assumption that our Catholic colleges and universities have adopted policies for protection of children who are on our campuses – whether summer sports camps, child care centers, etc. States have regulations and standards in this regard, and I assume our institutions are in compliance with those. If they are not, there are legal consequences.
- I also assume our institutions are in compliance with the federal requirements of Title IX, where students can report unwelcome sexual harassment or experiences from other students or employees with clear reporting protocols and multi-step processes for adjudicating these. These processes are highly controversial and criticized, but they exist, and our institutions would lose federal funding if they didn’t observe them, so, again, I assume our colleges and universities are in compliance when it comes to sexual harassment reporting procedures.
- I also assume that our universities have the standard set of human resources policies to protect employees from unwelcome sexual harassment in the workplace.

There is a fourth category of behavior when it comes to protecting vulnerable individuals on our campuses where there are NOT any regulations, however. I’m speaking of those fully and mutually consensual relationships between adult students and their faculty or other employees who exercise some form of authority over them. These relationships are legal, but wrong.

This is not a new issue for higher education. (There are no small number of novels predicated on these scenarios.) Some universities have clear fraternization policies for faculty and staff with enrolled students, but many do not. I have no way of knowing the degree to which Catholic universities are any different from other U.S. higher education institutions. I do believe, that IF there is a vulnerable front for the Church’s universities on the matter of inappropriate sexual behavior, this is the most likely front.

One doesn’t need to employ a Catholic ethic to understand the concern; examples are more than sufficient. Imagine a doctoral student and supervisor who have worked closely together, become emotionally close and then amorous. That doctoral director — now a romantic partner — will be asked to approve a candidate’s dissertation, and in time for a recommendation when the student applies for a first faculty position, or to present a paper at a conference where the faculty member has influence, or to be appointed to research teams or projects that would further his or her career.

I understand that amorous relationships develop when two adults work closely together in a scientific lab or a music performance studio. Marriages that lasted a lifetime have come from them, and still it’s wrong and for obvious reasons. Any time one person can affect another person’s life goals, the freedom that should characterize a relationship on both sides can be compromised quickly, with the student afraid to end a relationship or even just shape it in a way that feels mutual and fair.
According to *Inside Higher Ed* (May 24, 2018), increasing numbers of universities have responded to the #MeToo movement to institute non-fraternization policies. The challenge is that not all such policies are equal. NACUA, the National Association of College and University Attorneys, classifies such policies into four different types (NACUA Notes, February 16, 2016):

1. Institutions that ban all amorous and sexual relationships between students and faculty/staff;
2. Those that carve out certain types of relationships, such as faculty with direct oversight of individual students, but not all faculty-student relationships;
3. Those that discourage but do not outright ban such relationships; and
4. Those with no policies whatsoever.

Even a quick online review of existing policies at Catholic universities shows a myriad of approaches, almost certainly a result of the extensive shared-governance procedures of policy-development on individual campuses.

I’m not personally inclined to recommend one approach over another, so much as to ask our Catholic university communities to review their present policies and assure themselves that such policies are in place (and sufficiently robust) to address these situations.

I realize that policies governing such relationships are subject to traditional shared governance reviews, where faculty governance bodies can delay and even scuttle such proposed policies in committee. Administrators necessarily choose their battles, and without campus pressure supporting this, they often focus their efforts on other matters. My own observation is that this is an opportune moment – whether because of the #MeToo movement or because of the Church’s scandals – for presidents, trustees, sponsors, and, yes, the university community itself to insist that any such lacuna in our policies and procedures be addressed.

If we in Catholic higher education are going to be critical of other sectors of the Catholic Church, we need to be sure our house is in order, as well.

**Ways We Might Help**

Our own house acknowledged, this dual crisis for the Church offers Catholic higher education a rare and needed moment for leadership. There are powerful ways universities can help.

The National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management convened an important conversation last month, inviting some of our university presidents to review ways that our institutions might be of assistance in the dual challenge of creating safer environments for children and supporting a change to its leadership culture so that never again would such scandal be kept secret. The presidents’ brainstorming was wide-ranging:

- Catholic universities host and sometimes organize a broad variety of diocesan programming.
- Some of our institutions house experts in corporate culture, child development, organizational behavior, restorative justice, counseling, criminal justice, law, and numerous other professional
subjects. Those experts can be deployed as consultants; they can be asked to create studies that might provide more insight; they can be used as key experts on diocesan oversight committees; and more.

- There are existing programs in Church Management and these could spread.
- Some presidents reminded us that they host seminary education on their campuses and wonder if they could do more to help improve seminary culture, curriculum, and training.
- There are sometimes university representatives on key diocesan boards and often on parish commissions.
- Universities can convene symposia; panels offer a mechanism for people to speak and facilitate listening to what they have to say, as well as bring solid data to better inform the conversation.

The presidents further imagined that we might:

- Provide classes, workshops, and other learning opportunities for bishops and pastoral leaders, both clerical and lay.
- Use business and other faculty – as well as students – to provide chancery and parish assessments, audits or accounting services (possibly with Leadership Roundtable tools) to help them strengthen their financial and management practices.
- Lead efforts to convene and even train lay leaders in the local diocese so that they may play an ever more constructive role in reforms.
- Commission, convene, and house national studies that provide sunshine and insight on these topics.

Those are but a few of the ideas that flew through the room over five hours. And it was no accident that it was the universities who were invited that day. Universities jealously guard their academic freedom, that is, their ability to think freely, research freely, follow truth wherever it leads, and share the results far and wide so that others might benefit from what we’ve found. As such, most Catholic universities enjoy a certain arm’s length distance from Church leadership that has sometimes worried Church leadership. Now, however, that healthy distance is a prerequisite for anyone to trust reform work that is being done and, ironically, has become a gift and opportunity for the Church.

It’s no accident, I think, that some of our lay presidents – like Tom Mengler (St. Mary’s University, Texas), John Hurley (Canisius), and Francesco Cesareo (Assumption College, who chairs the National Review Board for the Protection of Children and Young People) have been chosen to lead and participate in these efforts. As lay leaders in the church, they have independence and credibility. They are educated, smart, experienced leaders who can speak outside the mechanisms of control that pervade the clerical world. And, they love the Church. For this moment in Church history, lay professionals’ independence is a strength and a gift. So too with most Catholic universities. Collectively, they enjoy a well-earned reputation for independence of thought, and rigorous, disciplined, data-informed thought at that.

And so, my second encouragement to all of Catholic higher education today: **STEP INTO THE FRAY, even more than you have so far.** Put your extraordinary intellectual resources and your well-earned credibility to work. Maybe one of the ideas generated by the Leadership Roundtable will grab your energies. Maybe you’ll devise something else. But DIVE IN. Don’t wish the Church well from the
sidelines, settle for small token efforts, or worse, pray for the Church at Mass as if that’s our “contribution.” Rather, bring everything a university has to this – the single largest issue facing the Church in our lifetime.

Be a university FOR the Church, not just in or of the Church.

Be a university for this moment.

**Be the Church You Are**

Finally, embrace your identity as CHURCH for our students, staffs, and larger community. There was a reason I began by tipping my hat to more than simply the parishes. Like Catholic healthcare and Catholic Charities, Catholic higher education is a ministry of the Church. It IS the Church. One part, to be sure, but it is the Church. At this moment, it is more important than ever that you continue to show students this face of the Church, one they already love, even as they see other parts that need fixing. Help them make the connection.

It’s all too tempting to put our heads down and avoid using the word “Catholic” as a descriptor during a time of embarrassment and scandal. Our students need, more than ever, to visibly see that our lives and institutions are motivated and enriched by faith. They need to see a Church they can believe in. Be that for them in this moment.

May students meet kindness, concern, love, conviction, determination to improve the world and be a blessing to the larger world. In short, may everyone who passes through our doors find the love and heart of Christ, whatever their faith and whatever the faith of those who work alongside us.

And so, I ask you today to be sure EVERYONE is safe in your institutions. STEP even further into the fray of Church reform, bringing all the resources of a university to bear. Be the Church at its best.

Thank you for your good hearts and for your love for Catholic higher education and for the Church itself. May God bless you abundantly, and through you, may God bless a world and a Church in need.