

The Catholic college and pastoral leadership in the Church: A partnership

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*The Catholic College and Pastoral Leadership in the Church:
A Partnership*

Synopsis

The author, President of the College of the Holy Cross, identifies ways in which the community of Catholic colleges and universities can help the Church explore critical areas of authority, moral teaching and the relation of the Church to the world at large.

About the Author

The Reverend **Michael McFarland, SJ** is the President of The College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts. He delivered these remarks at the opening of a year-long initiative, sponsored by the College, titled *Beyond Brokenness: Healing, Renewal and the Church*

Once we have dealt with the victims of abuse, past, present and future, who must always be our first priority, we must be concerned about the American Catholic Church, which has been so badly damaged, in its members, laity and clergy alike, and also in its life as a community and its standing in society. This scandal is like an earthquake that has exposed three intersecting fault lines, which we knew existed before it happened, but did not give the attention they deserved. They were the weaknesses that gave way under pressure. The three fissures are:

1. Authority
2. The credibility of the Church's moral teaching, especially on sexuality
3. The relation of the Church to the world beyond its boundaries and control.

These cracks have to be stabilized if we are to have any hope of rebuilding on that foundation.

My argument here is that Catholic colleges and universities can and do serve as the laboratories where we explore these three issues, learn about the challenges they raise, and develop the resources needed to address them.

Authority. The Roman Catholic Church is hierarchical in structure, and those in the clerical state play a special role in that structure. That is not going to change. However, there is a danger when those in the hierarchy hold power too closely and lose touch with those they are supposed to serve. In the current crisis in the Church, there is a widespread feeling, not without reason, that those in charge put the needs of victims second to protecting their own, in part because there was no one in power who would identify with the victims and their families. There was some acknowledgement of this by the bishops at their Dallas meeting when they set up an independent, lay-run commission to investigate the problem; and dioceses like Worcester have set up offices staffed with lay people to help deal with the crisis. To regain the trust of many of its members, including some of those who have traditionally been the most loyal, the Church must work toward more openness and accountability and give lay people more of a voice in leadership, in ways that are consistent with our character and traditions.

Catholic colleges and universities, including those like Holy Cross that were founded, staffed and for most of their history tightly controlled by religious orders, have over the last thirty-five years made a transition

to strong lay leadership. Like most Catholic colleges and universities, we are run by an independent board of trustees, made up mostly of lay people. Moreover, most of the administration and faculty are now lay. The transition has not been without its problems; but it has been largely successful. No one is more committed to maintaining the Catholic and Jesuit identity of Holy Cross than our trustees. At the same time, our trustees have brought a wealth of wisdom and practical experience and knowledge; and they have a good sense of what is needed to prepare our students to deal with the issues they will face after graduation, while still being grounded in a strong set of principles and values. The trustees and the administration make sure that we are a well-run organization that exercises responsible stewardship of its resources, and, most important, that we have the procedures and practices in place to protect the rights and well-being of all our constituents, especially students and employees. Our faculty bring the best of modern learning and scholarship and a deep devotion to teaching and the care of students, while being genuinely engaged with the mission of the school.

The keys, we have learned, to the successful sharing of power are education, dialogue and trust. Bringing people from outside the Jesuit order into significant positions of leadership has meant that we have had to be much more intentional about defining and articulating our mission. That has been very beneficial. It has caused us to reconnect with our tradition and to think more deeply about how to bring it to bear on the challenges we face today. We have also had to learn to appreciate the knowledge, experience and gifts our lay colleagues have brought to their work. We are a much better institution in every way because of them. Finally, we have learned that if we are careful in selecting our leadership and are committed to an ongoing dialogue about our mission and how to live it out, we can trust that leadership to be both faithful and creative in carrying out the mission.

Sexuality and the moral teaching of the Church. The scandal and the reaction to it have shown that the Church's moral teachings, especially about sexuality, are not getting through in many cases. The perception that significant numbers of those who are supposed to be the premier witnesses to that teaching are not following it themselves, makes the situation even worse. I am not saying that the Church's teaching is wrong. Some do; but that is not my position. I am saying that it is often misunderstood and misapplied. Some interpret it much too narrowly, some much too loosely. Both do great harm to the Church's mission of building a faithful and healthy moral consciousness, both among its own people and in the society at large. Furthermore the Church's moral teaching has to be put in a language and a context that makes sense to people today. It is not enough to say: "Here are the rules; follow them or you will go to hell." Even if that is true, it does not do a lot of good if people do not believe it; and by and large they do not. By suppressing honest discussion of sexuality and refusing to listen to other peoples' experiences and points of view, all we do is weaken our credibility and marginalize our message. Furthermore, we have to approach these problems with understanding and compassion. Given that as an institution we have had some very significant and very public failures, we cannot be too harsh in our judgments of others.

We need to continue to work to understand our own traditions and moral teachings, while bringing them into contact with contemporary experience and the best of secular learning. Only then can we reestablish an authoritative voice on sexuality and moral matters in general. That is what Catholic colleges and universities are set up to do. It is by no means an easy task, given the volatility of the subject matter and the wide gap between Gospel teachings and contemporary attitudes. I know we struggle with it here. But we have taken on the task, here at Holy Cross, at Boston College, and at other places. The Church needs us to succeed.

Relations with the world outside the Church. The crisis has brought the Church into a very public conflict with many outside institutions, including the media, civil authorities and the courts, and victims' advocates, as well as the general public. The scandal is a legitimate story and cries out for criminal and civil remedies, so one cannot fault these secular institutions for challenging the Church and some of its representatives on their conduct. However, the relish with which the media have followed the scandal seems to indicate that there was something less than a cordial relationship previously, at least in some places like Boston. It seems that in the eyes of many the Church expected and received a free pass in areas where it should have been held accountable, while regularly lecturing others on their moral failings. Now, of course, the resentments are even deeper on both sides. Admittedly, there are some aspects of contemporary secular society and its values that the Church should not accept. Nevertheless, all of us are a

part of that society, receive a great deal from it, and owe it a certain respect and accountability. We need to return to a more civil and productive dialogue to rebuild trust and support mutual understanding and respect, even as we delve into our differences. Catholic colleges and universities have an essential role to play in that dialogue. It is central to our mission to explore the interfaces between faith and culture, church and society.

I am not at all suggesting that we colleges and universities have all the answers, and the pastoral leadership of the Church just needs to listen to us in order to solve all its problems. We are struggling with these issues ourselves; but it is that struggle and the deeper understanding that comes from it that we can offer as a resource. While being committed to the service of the Church, we have the freedom, the openness and the diversity to examine everything anew, to think critically, to bring to bear the best of both secular and sacred learning, and to explore new ways of thinking and being. It is precisely that combination of loyalty and independence that makes us valuable to the pastoral leadership as it seeks to rebuild and renew the Church in response to the present crisis.

For further reflection

Consult <http://www.holycross.edu/departments/crec/website/hcresponds/index.htm> for more information on The College of the Holy Cross's initiative.