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Catholic Identity, University Mission, and Charism of the Founding Order

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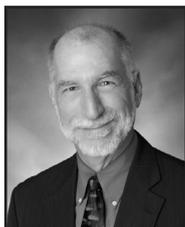
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Good Practice*.

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CATHOLIC IDENTITY, UNIVERSITY MISSION, AND CHARISM OF THE FOUNDING ORDER

Introduction

Since 1878, Duquesne University of the Holy Spirit has offered a Catholic education in the Spiritan tradition from a campus in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Within one long day’s drive, one could set out from Duquesne to visit Carlow University, Saint Vincent College, La Roche College, Wheeling Jesuit University, and the Franciscan University of Steubenville – very different institutions but Catholic universities all. Given their differences, what is it that unites these (or any) Catholic colleges and universities?

At first, we may be inclined to use “mission” and “identity” as nearly interchangeable terms when we discuss Catholic higher education, but a recent series of essays in *Commonweal* illustrated the tension that the two ideas often appear to present in practice. John Garvey and Mark Roche stress the role of an unambiguously Catholic institutional identity, especially in hiring faculty, in shaping a university’s mission. “Building a Catholic faculty is not tribalism,” writes Garvey, “It is a recognition that, in order to create a distinctly Catholic intellectual culture, we need to build an intellectual community governed by a Catholic worldview.”¹ Hiring Catholic faculty can thus be the key to advancing a Catholic institutional ethos while embracing full academic freedom.² David O’Brien argues in response that it is the university’s mission – the questions it seeks to answer and the causes it seeks to address – that should determine its identity as a community of scholars.³ To set Garvey and Roche’s denominational concept of identity as the starting point for advancing a sense of mission would be, in O’Brien’s view, a “return to clericalism and lay irresponsibility,” in that it would allow clergy and bishops to define the mission and identity of the church without the insight of academic leaders.⁴ Both views raise important questions. If Catholic universities should emphasize hiring Catholic faculty, then who sets the standards of their Catholicity? If a self-identified mission guides the formation of the university community, then what does a Catholic university offer the academy that a non-Catholic peer institution might not?

The purpose of this article is to propose an interdependent view of Catholic identity, university mission, *and* charism that accounts for the vibrant variation of form in Catholic higher education. First, we will consider the mission of a university, and its historic relationship to the Christian search for wisdom. Then we will explore what “essential characteristics” might indicate an institution’s Catholic identity. Then we will reflect



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on how three different Catholic universities might discern where their mission, identity, and respective charisms call them in one otherwise similar hypothetical moment wherein each institution needs to hire a new professor. One key concept throughout will be that of an *institutional vocation*. There is a broad and beautiful awareness in today's church that each individual has a unique calling informed by natural talents, a baptismal call, and spiritual gifts. It may serve Catholic organizations well to approach their corporate life through a similar frame of reference. Just as different individuals contribute different gifts to the Body of Christ, so too do different institutions.

University Mission: Christianity and the Search for Wisdom

While universities as we understand them would not arise until the second millennium, the notion of the intellectual life as one possible occasion of communion with Christ is deeply rooted in the Gospels. John's prologue memorably envisions the divine *Logos* "through whom all things were made" assuming a human nature. God's truth, goodness, and beauty are revealed through the whole of creation, perfectly if mysteriously so in the incarnation. To study the truth is to study Christ and to encounter Christ is to encounter, as Pope Francis put it to the Congregation for Catholic Education, "the meaning of life, the cosmos and history."⁵ Likewise, Matthew's Gospel recounts Jesus, just before the ascension, commissioning the apostles, "going therefore, teach ye all nations."⁶ This is the educational mandate that comes from the heart of the Christian calling: both to practice Christ's way of love and to carry his good news to everyone.

What had always been an opportunity in the Christian life has been articulated more formally over time. One of the more comprehensive treatments comes to us in St. John Paul II's 1998 encyclical *Fides et Ratio*. Therein, the pope and sometime philosophy professor likens faith and reason to "two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth."⁷ He goes on to argue that the two ways of knowing are inseparable in the search for wisdom: reason absent faith becomes nihilistic and faith absent reason becomes superstitious.⁸ This sort of view suggests another, more explicit, way of conceiving the relationship between a Catholic identity and some sort of intellectual calling. Nihilism and superstition oppress people, but, in a profound work of mercy, the wisdom that faith and reason mutually illuminate frees them. This can be true both internally, as when Tennyson's poetry frees someone from the regrets that come with looking back on life's changes, or externally, as when biological research frees the developmentally challenged and their families from social

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exclusion.

Intellectual pursuits can be taken up in a variety of settings, but the one that has emerged most prominently in the Western context is that of the university. Cardinal Newman offers perhaps the best exposition of that mission in the lectures later collected as his *Idea of a University*. For Newman, the constitutive element of any university is ultimately its faculty, because the university has no reason to exist absent its intellectual mission.⁹ The faculty’s autonomy most importantly preserves their freedom of inquiry, which in turn keeps the university a place of continual learning for both students and their instructors. As Newman puts it, knowledge is best acquired through the “collision of mind with mind.”¹⁰ The very mission of a university is to be a community collaboratively engaged in the search for wisdom, wisdom consisting both of the knowledge acquired and of the personal ethical formation that it entails.

Catholic Identity: Structures and Goals

The *Idea* set out a vision as Newman was founding the Catholic University of Ireland, much of it informed by his experiences and critiques of Oxford, which is not only not a Catholic university, but also a university where Catholics were prohibited from teaching for quite some time. Yet Newman considers the theology faculty an indispensable part of realizing the mission of a university, Catholic or not,¹¹ because theology lends all other disciplines an encompassing sense of meaning. If it is so that any university in the fullest sense of the word should maintain a department of theology, then perhaps a Catholic institution is that much more likely to realize the fullness of the university mission. In 1967, a group of clerical academics from the larger Catholic research universities in North America gathered at Land O’ Lakes, Wisconsin, made precisely that claim. Instead of constraining the mission of a university, the Land O’ Lakes statement insists that a Catholic identity reinforces and indeed enhances that mission.¹²

Evoking Newman, the statement’s vision of both a broader academic freedom and of a role for universities as the “critical reflective intelligence”¹³ of the societies they inhabit are mutually enriching. Scholars at Catholic universities, that is, must have the kind of academic freedom and autonomy that Newman envisioned so that the universities can better accomplish their mission precisely for the benefit of the universal church. To have a Catholic identity is to be a part of the Body of Christ, and universities can play the indispensable role of that body’s intellectual parts.

The Land O' Lakes statement also closely coincided with the emergence in earnest of lay leaders in Catholic higher education, especially in these early stages through the formation of lay boards of trustees. With the laity's more prominent role has come the further opportunity to define what constitutes and advances a university's Catholic identity beyond having priests, brothers, or sisters on the faculty and in the administration. The fullest attempt to address the issue comes to us in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, in which St. John Paul II sets communion with the local bishop as the definitive marker of Catholic identity, but also lists four essential characteristics in which that identity is made manifest:

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1. a Christian inspiration not only of individuals but of the university community as such;
2. a continuing reflection in the light of the Catholic faith upon the growing treasury of human knowledge, to which it seeks to contribute by its own research;
3. fidelity to the Christian message as it comes to us through the church;
4. an institutional commitment to the service of the People of God and of the human family in their pilgrimage to the transcendent goal which gives meaning to life.¹⁴

Each of these characteristics is plainly observable throughout the existing tradition of the Catholic university and any of them can be realized just as effectively by a group of committed laity as by a community of professed religious. What their codification offers is an authoritative framework of what really makes a university Catholic, an idea based less on easily measurable externals and more on a deeper sense of animating purpose.

There are, of course, more concrete structures that may be helpful to universities that embrace a Catholic identity. In Duquesne's case, a predominantly lay (and not exclusively Catholic) Board of Directors handles most major areas of governance, but certain key powers are reserved to a seven-member "Corporation" which consists entirely of religious of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. Similar arrangements exist around the country and, when the "tiers" of the board maintain open and respectful relationships, they solidify a special relationship between the university and the church

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organization out of which it originated. Duquesne is also one of many universities with a mission and identity officer, a senior university leader with dedicated responsibility for finding and implementing the best strategies for how the university's Catholic identity and particular charism inform all aspects of its work.¹⁵ Many mission officers are members of their institutions' founding communities, but most are qualified academics or pastoral professionals who have assumed the task of becoming resident experts and visionaries both for the general characteristics that mark the institution's Catholic identity *and* for the special projects, practices, and programs that embody its charism within that tradition.

So there are clear requirements for what can be considered a Catholic university. Without them, one could make variously entertaining arguments that Texas A&M University (on account of its large population of Catholic students), the University of Southern California (on account of its well-organized cohort of academics engaged with the Catholic intellectual tradition), or the College of William & Mary (on account of its long tradition of graduates entering non-profit service) are Catholic institutions. Yet even with this shared set of essential characteristics and this shared mission of a collaborative search for formative wisdom, Catholic universities come in a veritable kaleidoscope of style. This variation occurs by way of the different charisms that the People of God have received.

Charism: Ever Ancient, Ever New

In the higher education context, we typically use *charism* in reference to one of the many rich traditions of Catholic religious life, but it could also refer to any gift that the Holy Spirit bestows on individuals and groups in order to advance the work of the church in a particular time and place. Sharp as this distinction may at first seem, the more formal notion of charism is always an outgrowth of the less formal one. For an early example, the hallmarks of the Benedictine charism – stability, discipline, the practice of *lectio divina*, etc. – grew out of the specific social needs that the early Western monastic tradition sought to address in the aftermath of the Roman Empire's collapse. Subsequent moments of social change have necessitated new rounds of spiritual renewal and with them come new ways of understanding how to exercise the Holy Spirit's gifts.

As such, the history of the Catholic university is really the history of Catholic religious life. The Crusades, the Medieval Warm Period, and various technological advances would have far-reaching implications for the structure of European society. Fuller networks of trade and movement prompted the now-

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internationalized groups of scholars in Bologna, Paris, and Oxford to organize themselves into the first true universities. In the same way came the twelfth century establishment of mendicant religious orders. The Dominican charism of encountering God through study in some sense presupposes universities, and St. Dominic deliberately set up his earliest large priories near cities that had become such centers of learning, sending out his friars both to deepen their own understanding of the Christian faith in light of the ancient wisdom rediscovered in the Islamic world and to instruct the general public. Though their own rich intellectual tradition was not an immediate development, Franciscan educational ministries also maintain a charism and spirituality borne distinctly of this historical moment. St. Francis and his followers famously eschewed Benedictine stability in order to better serve the poor along the margins of an urbanizing society and to reclaim the simplicity of life that cities seemed to obstruct.

On the eve of the Protestant Reformation, nearly all of the small coterie of universities in Europe were explicitly church-affiliated. With the seemingly inextricable series of events that brought forth the Reformation, along with the printing press and the Society of Jesus, came something like an explosion of the university project. By 1762, Jesuits had established nearly 700 colleges or universities. In 1789, during the suppression period, John Carroll founded the first Catholic institution of higher learning in the United States at Georgetown. Jesuit universities would prove to be a bold expression of the Ignatian spiritual aspiration “that in all things God may be glorified.” Moreover, the radical freedom of inquiry that – not without occasional controversy – continues to characterize Jesuit education is as much an organic outgrowth of St. Ignatius’s Catholic response to the Reformation as are his *Spiritual Exercises*.

The multitude of new religious communities that arose in Europe during the Industrial Revolution and went on to establish universities in the United States reflect a whole array of spiritual responses to economic and political modernity, each of them important in an era when so many different ways of life were simultaneously possible and dependent upon each other. The character of the institutions they founded would continue to reflect their own distinctly modern origins. Priests of the Congregation of Holy Cross established the first Catholic professional school at an American university (Notre Dame Law School) in 1869 and School Sisters of Notre Dame established America’s first Catholic women’s college (now Notre Dame University of Maryland) in 1873. Neither would the

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capacity to read the signs of the times and the Spirit's calling be limited to the ranks of professed religious: The bishops of the United States founded the country's first true Catholic research university (The Catholic University of America) in 1887.

Since the Second Vatican Council, the most salient trend in the relationship between religious life and higher education has not been in the establishment of new communities, but in the formation of laypeople to carry on the charisms that have already helped build institutions. Nearly all of the *new* Catholic universities founded in the United States since the Council have been the work of independently organized laypeople, often working in partnership with leaders from the business community. When Bishop Walter Curtis founded Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut in 1963, he was utterly clear that the new institution would be, inspired by the Council's renewed embrace of the universal call to holiness, independent of the Diocese of Bridgeport and governed entirely by laity. In an even more innovative approach, Domino's Pizza magnate Thomas Monaghan founded Ave Maria University in 2007 on the notion that the laity were just as capable of advancing a robust, even provocative Catholic identity as were clergy and religious.

All of these institutions through the centuries have shared the mission of a university and a distinctly Catholic identity. They take a variety of shapes and forms, however, because their founders took that common mission and that common identity and, imbued with the charisms that made them the irreplaceable disciples they were, responded to the unique circumstances that they were positioned to address. It was not the identity that guided changes in the mission, nor the mission that demanded changes in the identity. Rather it was the identity, the mission, and these charisms that helped these institutions' many founders discern the special historical vocation of the one institution that they were founding.

Institutional Vocation: A Faculty-Hiring Scenario

In addition to *The Idea of a University* and his incisive academic theology, Cardinal Newman has also graced the People of God with a profound body of spiritual writings. One idea that he frequently revisits is that of God's mysterious, personal call to each believer. "God has created me to do him some definite service; he has committed some work to me which he has not committed to another," Newman writes in an 1848 meditation on God as Creator, "I never may know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next."¹⁶ Each Catholic university, like each baptized Christian, must at some point confront the question of what precise call God has given it the

opportunity to answer. To examine how different charisms may shape the vocations of institutions that share a Catholic identity and a university mission, let us consider the hypothetical case of three Catholic colleges near the southern shore of Lake Erie that are all looking to fill a tenure-track position in the diplomatic history of the United States. Whatever their differences, each institution has a robust mission office and a healthy relationship between the administration and the founding community. Accordingly, each institution makes a considerably different hire, not because of some lack of commitment to mission or identity, but because of a keen sense of how they are called to embody their mission and identity in the context of their own institutional vocation.

The first institution, Great Lakes Catholic College, has around 1,500 undergraduates with small master's programs in philosophy and theology. Since its founding in 1965, Great Lakes has maintained a special relationship with a lay movement that emphasizes "total reliance on God," and students, who are almost all Catholic, agree to a strict code of conduct. Though blessed with a number of wealthy benefactors who attended other universities, Great Lakes is perhaps best known for the many high-quality catechists, lay ministers, high school theology teachers, priests, and sisters among its graduates. When the time comes to fill the spot on the history faculty, plenty of the college's stakeholders have rather conservative expectations, but the university mission demands the hiring of a genuine scholar who will engage students in a mature journey of discovery. The historian hired is the Catholic granddaughter of Cuban exiles who recently completed her PhD. at Baylor University. Though her rather heroic interpretation of American anti-communism during the Cold War might prove controversial on a secular campus, her teaching and research are impeccably serious. During the interview process, she also relates her enthusiasm about participating actively in the vibrant Catholic culture at Great Lakes.

Meanwhile, Stella Maris University has roughly 1,200 traditional undergraduates, plus 400 adult learners and part-time commuter students, and another 200 MBA and MEd. students. Catholic symbolism and ritual are hard to miss in the university's branding and campus environment, but actively practicing Catholics probably make up around 30 percent of the racially and economically diverse student body and half of the faculty. The Sisters who founded Stella Maris as a women's college in 1925 are still represented through the Board of Fellows and the full-time mission officer, but the president is a former senior student affairs officer from a larger Jesuit university on the East Coast. A major guiding principle

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Stella Maris instead hires a young black woman who is both deeply versed in the under-represented cultural narratives of the poor and minority communities that the university seeks to serve and, while indicating no religious affiliation of her own, respectful of the university's identity.

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in the Sisters' charism is the idea of "helping the poor to help themselves." One finalist for the history position is an ex-Catholic scholar who openly condemns not only the United States but also the Catholic Church as colonial oppressors. Stella Maris instead hires a young black woman who is both deeply versed in the under-represented cultural narratives of the poor and minority communities that the university seeks to serve and, while indicating no religious affiliation of her own, respectful of the university's identity. During the interview process, she recalls how impressed she was with her Catholic colleagues in PhD. studies at the University of Toronto and expresses interest in engaging with the Catholic intellectual and social traditions as an exciting new dimension of her work.

Finally, Columbus University has more than 4,000 undergraduates, of whom more than 70 percent are at least casually practicing Catholics. Columbus has an R3 Carnegie classification (it grants doctoral degrees and engages in "moderate research activity" RI grants doctoral degrees and engages in highest research activity) with a more diverse group of faculty and graduate students and is the home of a basketball team noted for a recent, unexpected Sweet Sixteen appearance. Founded in 1892, Columbus has a regional reputation both for preparing Catholics for careers in fields like business, medicine, and law and for forming community leaders of all backgrounds in a moral vision based on the dignity of the human person. A young, dynamic president from the founding order of missionary priests has recently emphasized building Columbus's global presence and has spearheaded the creation of several specialized centers and institutes. The historian that Columbus hires is a Mormon assistant professor at a public university in California whose publications on European involvement with the Civil War have garnered significant and positive scholarly attention in the few years since he finished his PhD. at Brown University. During the interview process, he mentions how excited he would be both to work in an environment that "takes faith seriously" and to study with other experts at Columbus's new Center for Religion and Politics.

Considered together with the "open source" elements of university mission and Catholic identity, each of these hypothetical institutions maintains a distinct perspective. The lay movement's charism indicates an institutional vocation of forming students for work on the proverbial frontlines of parish life. The Sisters' charism indicates an institutional vocation of working with marginalized communities so that they might take ownership of their freedom and dignity. The missionaries' charism indicates an institutional vocation of bringing the Catholic ethos to bear on all the contingent pieces of an American research university. This faculty-hiring decision was

just one of countless decisions that each college had to make, guided by the interdependent considerations of university mission, Catholic identity, and particular charism. In this way, each institution, while hard to mistake for either of the others, is a Catholic university in the fullest sense.

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Discussion

A university mission is the collaborative search for knowledge and ethical formation. A Catholic identity is an identity in communion with the Body of Christ. The mission enriches the identity with a space to carry out Christ’s educational mandate and the identity enriches the mission with the cumulative body of Catholic intellectual, social, and spiritual traditions. The charisms by which the People of God respond to the needs and circumstances of a particular time and place inform countless ways of integrating that mission and that identity, and so we see the whole variety of institutional vocations.

“Catholic academic institutions,” Pope Francis told the Vatican’s Congregation for Catholic Education in 2014, “cannot isolate themselves from the world, they must know how to enter bravely into the areopagus of current culture and open dialogue, conscious of the gift that they can offer to everyone.”¹⁷ Elaborating on the Pope’s remarks, John Cavadini poses two ideal-typical concepts of what a university is: a place of “dialogue” and a place of “witness.” In Cavadini’s estimation, the successful Catholic university is not so much the one that strikes a “balance” between dialogue and witness but the one that finds some way to fully embrace both roles.¹⁸ If Catholics have been commissioned to go and teach *all* people the good news of Christ, then it stands to reason that this project will take a variety of different forms. In any event, it is neither a self-determined mission that should define identity nor a prior identity that guarantees some purity of mission. Catholic identity and university mission are two distinct and essential projects that Christian educators should be eager to take up and that, along with a keen sense of the Holy Spirit’s peculiar gifts in a given time and place, indicate just what kind of holy endeavor God has called this irreplaceable university to be. To know that calling is to have the surest lodestar for the university’s decisions.

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Endnotes

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