

**The Confidence of Catholic Higher Education (Presented to the Annual Meeting of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, 5 February 2006)**

“The Challenge of Continuity with Diversity:

In the 1970’s Avery Dulles, now Cardinal argued that the mystery of the Church could be grasped more adequately by examining its various aspects rather than by forcing them “into a single synthetic vision on the level of articulate, categorical thought.”[1] He wrote: **“The most distinctive feature of Catholicism, in my opinion, is not its insistence on the institutional but rather its wholeness or balance.... I am of the opinion that the Catholic Church, in the name of its ‘catholicity,’ must at all costs avoid falling into a sectarian mentality.** Being ‘catholic,’ this Church must be open to all God’s truth, no matter who utters it.”[2]

The image which Dulles provided for the Church fits well for those institutions “born from the heart of the Church.”[3] Within the constellation of Catholic colleges and universities are many models, distinguished by more than their size and structures. Having been the Dean of the Franciscan School of Theology, the President of the College of Saint Benedict, and now, the President of the University of San Diego, **I understand first-hand how a variety of traditions, theological perspectives, and educational philosophies give shape to Catholic Higher Education.** The educational experiences of our students, as these are mediated through many such models, improves the landscape of all of higher education as it enriches the Church herself. **By demonstrating that the pluralism of our institutions is the sine qua non of an authentic Catholic education, we will have moved the argument about Catholic identity forward and advanced our ability to leverage the variety of our institutional models on behalf of a greater good.** In a truly Catholic world, sensitive as it is to history, culture and charism, one size does not fit all. **One of our challenges is to articulate internally and externally what the benefits of institutional pluralism truly are.**[4]

**Perhaps the most difficult choice of all, for most of us, is to choose freedom; that is, to think of academic freedom, not only as a tradition within American higher education, but also as one of the core values of Christian education.** While, on one hand, Catholic colleges and universities share a common legacy of multiple intellectual traditions, **they also share a Christian anthropology that values freedom, human agency, desire, will and the relationship between faith and reason.**[6] A university which takes seriously its freedom, takes seriously its educational mission on behalf of the *cura personalis*. [7] In that regard, an education that, first, acknowledges the spiritual dimension of the human person and, secondly, urges the exercise of human agency for the commonweal is, indeed, an education suited for a Catholic institution with a global mission.

The choice to educate for the exercise of responsible freedom implies that a dimension of the curriculum and, where possible, the formative influences of student life consider the desires, will, and affections. Students engage not only the repository of wisdom and belief but also examine the ethics of “choice,” encountering the inherent contradictions of our own human experience: that knowing what we “can” do often differs from what we “choose” to do. Studying the ethics of choice and the impact of choices on other persons, other cultures presume competencies and attributes of our entire faculty,

especially those in the sciences, philosophy, and theology.[8] **Those public intellectuals who treasure the compatibility of faith and reason have a particular opportunity to create a new public square, immune to the extremes of secularism or sectarianism, where these and related questions can be debated freely.**

In this brief presentation, I have suggested several challenges that loom large within our institutions: **the desirability of reclaiming and advancing the pluralism within Catholic higher education, especially the advantages of bringing different philosophical and theological perspectives to bear on global issues**; the impact of choices we make that might strengthen our potential for advancing a national agenda that links globalization with social justice; and the **advantages of educating from the perspective of a Christian anthropology that values freedom and the consequences of educational choices to promote human agency for the good of others.**

These are challenges and opportunities co-existing with so many other serious problems that often tempt us to “Duck, Cover.” As Catholic colleges and universities we are graced with an “embarrassment of riches” that come to us from our own tradition, **enough to emerge from the Fall Out shelters and take up our mission with confidence.”**

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Convocation 2008

**[Paraphrasing an author:] Education is presumed to nurture an appreciation of diversity**; the more schooling, the greater the respect for works of literature and art, different cultures, and various types of music. Certainly, well-educated Americans see themselves as worldly, nuanced, and **comfortable with difference. Education also should make us curious about—even eager to hear—different political points of view.** But it doesn't. The more educated Americans become—and the richer—the less likely they are to discuss politics with those who have different points of view.... Americans who are poor and nonwhite are more likely than those who are rich and white to be exposed to political disagreement. In the United States today, people who haven't graduated from high school have the most diverse groups of political discussion mates. Those who have suffered through graduate school have the most homogeneous political lives.

If you grant the author this premise and judge his evidence against that of your own experience, then you might well understand why **a university—even this university—may, on one hand, publicly proclaim its commitment to diversity, and, at the same time, struggle with conversations about this.** In fact, I've seen the documents that chronicle sincere efforts to create a more diverse and inclusive community; heard the stories of long-term faculty, administrators, staff, and alumni; and examined my own five years of experience against measurable advances in recruiting and retaining a more diverse student body, faculty, staff, and administration. Since 1990, we have added about 1500 students to our total enrollment and during the same period nearly doubled the percentage of students of color—from 15% to 26%. This suggests real progress and a sincere commitment to the goals and values we proclaim.

Yet, I think most would agree that we can do better. **On our campus, there are students who continue to be hurt by the insensitive remarks about their race or ethnicity. On our campus, there are students who feel invisible or, worse, ostracized because of their socio-economic condition. On our campus, there are people who are stung by homophobia.** On our campus, there are men and women diminished by the glares and sexist comments of others. On our campus, there are faculty harboring resentments and bearing wounds endured years ago by the rejection, disrespect, or worse, indifference of their colleagues. On our campus there are staff and—yes—even administrators who become objectified objects of derision, not for what they do, but for who they are.

**... if we are committed to the Mission and Values that we proclaim as a University, then we also must be honest about our resolve to live these on our campus more perfectly.**

**Our effort to develop even more congruity between what we say and what we do informed the language of our first Strategic Direction that we “become more culturally diverse and culturally competent.”** To make that concrete faculty, staff, students, and administrators created the Presidential Advisory Board on Inclusion and Diversity. As part of its initial work last academic year, it created a statement that aims high. It begins: “The University of San Diego believes academic excellence requires a learning community that is characterized by inclusive engagement with diverse people and perspectives. The benefits of a rich, diverse learning community are most likely realized when institutions demonstrate high levels of commitment to inclusion and diversity. ... “ [from “Presidential Advisory Board on Inclusion and Diversity Statement on Diversity and Inclusion”]

To this end, we will spend the up-coming year inviting each of you; in fact, urging each of you to participate in activities sponsored by PABID that are designed to **promote awareness and assist each of us in discovering how best we can achieve, on our campus, greater diversity and inclusion.**

How will we know ourselves as better than we are, as closer to the ideal community? In my view, there are three commitments that will surely help us along the way.

First, let us teach our students **by what we say and how we act that we honor the uniqueness of every person whom we encounter.** By committing to a deep respect for the dignity of each individual, we abandon the tendency to define ourselves or others primarily by categories; **immunizing ourselves against the epidemic of “identity politics”.** ...

If our mission is, above all, to educate, what better way to prepare our students for the diverse and global societies that need them than by modeling here with and among them conversation, exchange, dialogue marked by “intellectual charity.” **If our public and personal discourse proceeds from a genuine interest in the “other” and a respect for his or her ideas, attitudes, experiences, and responsibilities, then we come closer to building a university where the exercise of “academic freedom” implies more than freedom that protects me from coercion or censorship; it is a freedom exercised for the benefit of others, to enhance their growth, development, their contribution to the greater good.** As educators, we are called to be ambassadors of hope and optimism. Who better than us to share this with each other, with our students and, through them, with the world?

Finally, **we must reckon with the truth “on our campus” that we are more than a group of academics teaching, researching, administering within our own spheres of influence; we are also a “political” community with all that this implies.** In this regard, at its best, our respect for each individual, expressed through mutual respect and civil discourse, develops the common and public good. How are we, a university--with our diversity of perspectives, beliefs, and experiences--also a community that not only teaches peace but makes peace? **What commitments do we make to eradicate injustice on our campus, heal wounds on our campus, break down barriers of suspicion and mistrust on our campus, develop our own and inspire in others confidence to speak and to be heard with respect and civility?**

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### **A Perspective on Catholic Higher Education Forty Years after Vatican II and the Land 'O Lakes Statement**

Thus, the history of Catholic Higher Education suggests that it enjoys a far more expansive and dynamic character that exposes the limitations of a precise, formal, or absolute mission and identity of Catholic universities. Why? **Because one dominant mark of a Catholic university is its openness to an intellectual exchange with the world, its ability to learn from the society in which it lives, and its development within a specific historical, theological, and contextual situation.** All of this, of course, was both affirmed and confirmed by the Second Vatican Council. **The notion that there exists some immutable, absolute standard for what constitutes an authentic Catholic university defies its historical, theological, and contextual development.**

... My point is that the strength, the genius, and the contributions of Catholic universities are not necessarily weakened as authority shifts from clerical to lay; as the demographics and culture become increasingly diverse and correspondingly less homogenous. In fact, a significant mark of a Catholic university is precisely the ease with which it moves freely within its dynamic relationships with Church and Society.

When one considers the identity or character of Catholic universities in situ; that is, within the context of their relationships both to the Church and the World, it broadens the scope of our discussion in, at least, three ways.

First, it underscores the dynamic and ever-changing nature of these relationships, offering Catholic universities the opportunity to assume leadership in transmitting and creating the intellectual and artistic capital that enriches these relationships through their graduates, their scholarship, and their service. **Because Catholic universities relate well with all who stand along the continuum where faith and reason interact, they offer common ground for the free exchange between the sacred and secular.**

**Second, because Catholic universities are at the fulcrum of the Church and Society and in relationship with both, they bear a special responsibility to hold these in tandem and in tension, offering and**

**receiving from both anything and all that contributes to the enhancement of these communities, including criticism, but also returning the fruit of their labors.** This implies a nimbleness, flexibility, and adaptability; in other words, **the exercise of responsible freedom to engage on all fronts and under any circumstances the issues, problems, and challenges of the times.** To this end, Catholic universities have the particular advantage of drawing upon the full array of inherited wisdom and tradition, with **a special competency in tapping the various intellectual, social, moral, and spiritual traditions of the Catholic Church.**

Third, Catholic universities, by virtue of their relational character and development within both the Church and Society always benefit—in fact need—the full participation of both. Thus, **these universities become microcosms of Church and Society in relationship and partnership, where sameness is not a virtue; diversity of belief, perspective, experience, and expertise is.** Clergy, religious, and laity; believer and non-believer; young and old; the learned and the neophyte; **men and women of every race, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation---all who make up the People of God in Church and Society-- belong at the deliberative table of the Catholic university.**

... Catholic Universities, in particular, proceed from the heart of the Church and from the heart of the world (*ex corde ecclesiae et ex corde orbis*), **standing at the intersection of Church and society.** The central documents of the Second Vatican Council advance this concept by acknowledging and respecting the role of hierarchical discernment that takes seriously the discovery of the fullness of truth **through dialogue and exchange with the world.** Here **the formative influence of culture, the role of the laity in its contribution to the faith,** and the Church's constant advance "toward the plenitude of divine truth" is carefully delineated in *Dei Verbum*, 8; *Lumen Gentium*, 12-14; *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 2-4. This model is communal and interactive, not formulaic and abstract.

By recasting the perspective on Catholic **universities in terms of a "contextual" identity of dynamic relationships instead of a more formal "definitional" identity of immutable and fixed ideas, we begin to understand their potential as leaven within both Church and Society, accelerating progress on behalf of the human community which is also in service to the Gospel.**

Over forty years ago, the Council Fathers and the drafters of the Land O' Lakes Statement read the "signs of the times" and responded accordingly. The signs of our own times suggest that Catholic universities may be particularly suited to engage many urgent challenges, like those posed by globalization.

... All of this implies, of course, continuing efforts to develop the desire and the competencies of faculty and others within our universities, so that they can embrace the many challenges of this educational mission with all its ambiguities. **At their best, these faith-based, academic communities—neither totally ecclesiastical nor totally secular—stand at the crossroads of Church and society, exercising responsible freedom on behalf of both.** With this perspective, forty years after the Council and the gathering at Land O' Lakes, Catholic universities remain well positioned to read and respond to the signs of the times.

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## Leadership Challenges for Presidents of Catholic Colleges and Universities

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I've been an active member of the association for fourteen years and, like many of you veterans, gather annually to share the on-going narrative of our willing and, often, not-so-willing participation in the Catholic college and university version of the culture wars, with their various skirmishes mounted by the disaffected—both internal and external forces— **ready to claim the high moral ground for their campaigns to impose upon our institutions a peculiar version of their own identity politics.** Each group carries its own battle flags and comes to us from the right and from the left. Some attacks are bold, direct, and in the open; some come by stealth and intrigue. Some are led by their highest ranking superiors; others are more cowardly infiltrators who wreck havoc with misinformation, and propaganda. As the image implies, college and university presidents—particularly presidents of Catholic colleges and universities in the United States in our era—must be good strategists, knowing when and how to negotiate, arbitrate, mediate, or decide on tactics for a defensive campaign or offensive assault.

... many dedicated lay professionals who may be interested in leadership positions in our institutions have not themselves benefitted from the theological education, religious formation, or ecclesiastical immersion that help current presidents of Catholic colleges and universities articulate informed and reasonably successful arguments for how and why their institutions behave. **And, if at the heart of our mission is some demonstrable and personal integration of “faith and reason,” it is helpful that the leaders themselves are so integrated and give public witness to this.** There are men and women already working in our institutions who have the potential to become great administrators and leaders, but they are not stepping forward, in many cases, because they lack confidence in their own preparation to lead faith-based institutions like ours. **We need to encourage them and provide a broad array of opportunities for their encounters with theology and ecclesial culture.**

Second. Let's be honest, for many years now it has been easier to talk about our institutions in terms of the values and influences of the sponsoring congregation and, thus, avoid the litmus test created and applied by self-proclaimed experts on the “authentically Catholic.” **Public perception about Catholic colleges and universities has also been heavily infected by debilitating images of a Church obsessed with anything that has to do with “sex” and a strain of “new Puritanism” that tolerates the core tensions and ambiguities inherent in the intellectual life not at all.** Our efforts and that of the association can offer, at the very least, a partial antidote to this by **retrieving and proclaiming a centuries old truth about Catholic universities: they are now, as they were in the 12th century, inherently controversial, messy places where scholars argue relentlessly, challenge authority and the status quo, push their students with dogged determination to think critically, master their disciplines, and encounter confidently the world as it is: imperfect, in a word, human.** Thus, at its best, what distinguishes our tradition from others is that we educate our students not merely to live successfully in a dynamic, ever-changing universe but do so filled with hope and optimism. And the reason we can do

this is because we take the Incarnation seriously. At the same time, I wonder who on our campuses understands and can articulate this? If these are few and far between, what are we doing about it?