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Forum: The Resurrection of Catholic higher education?

By Stephen Skojec

When considering the traditional notion of an American Catholic University, several names spring immediately to mind – Notre Dame, Georgetown, Gonzaga, Loyola Marymount, Holy Cross – a small but notable sample of a formidable list of schools with a reputation for academics as well as athletics.

But what of Catholicism? One doesn't have to search the literature of these universities for long to find boasts of their Catholic, Jesuit tradition. Yet an odd trend has emerged from their respective campuses, in the form of active suppression of true Catholic belief and thought. Stranger still is the observable statistic of students emerging from these universities with more anti-Catholic bias than when they entered.

Findings published in the 2001 edition of *Catholic World Report's* "Higher Education Research Institute study" – a study commissioned through the funding of the pro-Vatican education group, the Cardinal Newman Society – showed that in a survey of 38 major "Catholic" universities, a majority of students were emerging as seniors with a much higher incidence of belief in views that directly contradict the teachings of the Catholic Church. The polling data, conducted by researchers at UCLA, shed light on several disturbing areas. While 37.9 percent of Catholic freshman believed abortion should be legal, as seniors, the figure rose to 51.7 percent. Again, 27.5 percent of freshman believed premarital sex was acceptable; as seniors the number increased to 48 percent. As freshman, 52.4 percent of students approved of legal marriage for homosexuals. As seniors, the margin increased to 69.5 percent.

The study sheds light on two critical elements – the fact that such a high number of students are drawn to and enter these "Catholic" universities with anti-Catholic beliefs, and the extent to which those beliefs are fostered during their education. Add to these the widely reported abuses of the Catholic mission in these universities - from the promotion of "alternative lifestyles" and the removal of crucifixes from classrooms, to the blatant teaching of heresy in theology departments and open hostility on the part of students and faculty toward orthodox Catholic speakers – and the outlook for the old

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guard of the Catholic academic institutions in the U.S. is unsettling.

How have Catholic universities strayed so far from their origins? In large part, the answer to this question can be found in a declaration made by the universities in question themselves. In 1967, a group of Catholic university presidents and administrators issued a document entitled, *The Nature of the Catholic University*, known as the "Land O' Lakes" statement. In defiance to the Catholic tradition of Magisterial authority over all its institutions, the statement declares, "The Catholic university must have a true autonomy and academic freedom in the face of authority of whatever kind, lay or clerical, external to the academic community itself." In this statement, a clear move is made by the participants to shrug off the imposition of authority by the Catholic Magisterium, which requires the teaching of the faith *per se*, not as a matter of subjective opinion. Done under the guise of freedom of speech and "academic freedom", a characteristically American argument is made against the tradition of the Catholic Church, in whose name the offending parties are teaching error.

But another trend has arisen to combat this movement away from the authority of Rome. Throughout the country, small Catholic colleges have begun forming, drawing students from across the nation to be educated in the arts, sciences and the faith within the sanctuary of orthodoxy. Among these colleges are those that stand out as the key players. Thomas Aquinas College, Thomas More College Christendom College, and the new kids on the block, Ave Maria College and Ave Maria School of Law. Each of these schools have come into being for the express purpose of resurrecting the heritage of Catholic education as orthodox, rooted in faith and loyal to the Pope.

In contrast to the philosophy of the "Land O' Lakes" statement, these young Catholic colleges, all founded after the statement was issued, have embraced a more recent document on Catholic education – Pope John Paul II's encyclical, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* ("From the Heart of the Church"). *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* requires that Catholic university presidents take an oath of fidelity to the Magisterium, and that all professors at Catholic institutions of higher education have a *mandatum* from their bishop to teach the faith. Above and beyond this adherence to the Church's vision of the university, each college has a unique character that has helped it to attain prominence in modern Catholic education.

Thomas Aquinas College, located in Santa Paula, California, is known by its students as "T.A.C." The oldest of the group, it was officially incorporated in 1969 while using the facilities of the Dominican College of San Rafael. The college went through a long and tumultuous

struggle both financially and in the transition of its residence before its first permanent building was opened on its current campus in 1978. Though the school would continue to be built slowly over the next two decades, its mission from the early days was clear. "American Catholics are becoming increasingly aware of the growing tendency of Catholic colleges to secularize themselves - that is, to loosen their connection with the teaching Church and to diminish deliberately their Catholic character." This statement began the work *A Proposal for the Fulfillment of Catholic Liberal Education*, the founding document for Thomas Aquinas College. The document was the fruit of discussion amongst Catholic philosophy professors that were concerned about the state of Catholic education. They felt that even a return to early American education would not be sufficient. Instead, they wanted to rekindle the academic spirit of ancient Greece, and the mission of the European medieval university. They wanted to return "not to the 1950's, but the 1350's".

Because of this, they decided to focus on a great books program, rather than a common curriculum. Instead of textbooks, they read the works of the greatest minds of Western civilization, from "Aristotle, Homer and Euclid to St. Thomas Aquinas, T. S. Eliot and Albert Einstein." There are no lectures, only classroom discussions, described as a "sustained conversation in tutorials, seminars, and laboratories guided by tutors who assist students in the work of reading, analyzing, and evaluating the great works which are central in the collected wisdom of Civilization." Classes follow the Socratic method, and class sizes are kept below twenty students. The curriculum at T.A.C. is an expansive one, with no majors, minors or electives. Each student undertakes a comprehensive learning experience that covers the arts and sciences and provides an "integrated vision of the whole of life and learning."

Thomas More College, in Merrimack, New Hampshire, was founded in 1978 to provide a liberal arts education in the Catholic tradition. Rather than a utilitarian approach to knowledge or skills, Thomas More undertook the approach of the gradual transformation of its students as they studied the formative elements of Western Civilization. Students are encouraged to think critically, independently, and originally, with a focus on expression through speaking and writing.

In 1993, the Fellowship of Catholic scholars asked the presidents of Catholic colleges the question, "what is Catholic about a Catholic college?" In response, Dr. Peter Sampo, president of Thomas More, stated that the purpose of a Catholic college "is not to save souls since such presumption would make it a rival to the Church, a competing magisterium rather than an obedient follower of the Church's teaching. Its purpose is

not to save the Church since the Church is to save us. Were its purpose to save a culture or a civilization, it would take on an impossible task." Instead, he wrote, "A college must do its work of transforming the lives of its students primarily through the artifact of the curriculum. The curriculum takes its cue from Catholicism in the sense that it has time for discussing only the most significant human experiences: pilgrimage, suffering, community, death and resurrection, to list a few. Indeed, the curriculum prefigures fundamental experiences that students will undergo throughout their lives.... God calls us His 'image and likeness,'... The kind of education that helps free a person to answer this call has traditionally been called liberal. It embodies the type of learning started in college but meant to be completed in the world--it is the work of a life. It is also the kind of education that causes joy to well up in the soul of the student because the soul recognizes and approves the inner transforming growth that takes place through learning."

Christendom College, founded in 1977 in Front Royal, Virginia, makes no mystery of its pedagogical purpose. In the literature regarding the history of the college, the "Land O' Lakes" statement is referenced specifically as setting the stage for the foundation of the school. "What followed [the statement] was a wholesale loss of Catholic identity in these institutions. Core Curricula were gutted and theology courses watered down. The very existence of objective truth was in many cases denied. The culture cried that God was dead, and the universities became oracles of boundless information and little wisdom." Founded by Dr. Warren H. Carroll, PhD – a Columbia University graduate with an insatiable thirst for history and a dream of building a true Catholic college, the aim of Christendom was clear from its founding documents. "The only rightful purpose of education is to know the truth and to live by it. The purpose of Catholic education is therefore to learn and to live by the truth revealed by Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, 'the Way, the Truth, and the Life,' as preserved in the deposit of faith and authentically interpreted in the Magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church, founded by Christ, of which the Pope is the visible head. That central body of divine truth illumines all other truth and shows us its essential unity in every area of thought and life. Only an education which integrates the truths of the Catholic faith throughout the curriculum is a fully Catholic education."

Ave Maria has two faces – a liberal arts college and law school. Both are located in Michigan, with plans to evolve the college into a University and community in Naples, Florida. Behind both institutions is Tom Monaghan, founder and former owner of Domino's Pizza. It was Monaghan's vision, drive and funding – including a personal investment of \$200 million dollars –

that made possible the most recent additions to Catholic education in America.

Founded in 1998 and 1999 respectively, the college and the law school are committed to the synthesis of faith and reason. Monaghan, a devout Catholic, said that "For 25 years, I've felt the need for a school with more spirituality," Regarding the reason he started his own school, he makes mention of the problem with current Catholic universities. "The reason God created us was to earn heaven, so we could be with him, and my goal is to help more people get to heaven. You can't follow the rules of God unless you know what they are and why they are. At some Catholic universities, students graduate with their religious faith more shaky than when they arrive."

Ave Maria college has drawn professors and faculty from other, larger Catholic Universities like Franciscan University of Steubenville, and their new Chancellor, Fr. Joseph Fessio, S.J., is the founder of Ignatius Press and the former Saint Ignatius Institute at the University of San Francisco. Dr. William J. Bennett, President Reagan's education secretary and author of *The Book of Virtues*, has also voiced his support for the school. "I'm a Catholic; I'm a great admirer of Tom Monaghan; and a good case can be made for a traditional, strongly proud Catholic university," he said, "There's a lot of Catholic universities that you wouldn't know were Catholic."

The Ave Maria school of law is "committed to educating lawyers for law and life." Already accredited by the American Bar Association before the graduation of its inaugural class, the law school is gaining a reputation for academic rigor. Twenty-five percent of the incoming students have scored in the top ten percent on the LSAT. The school has also drawn the attention of many of the top minds in contemporary law. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas gave the inaugural address at the school, and Supreme Court nominee Robert Bork is a tenured faculty member and recent convert to the Catholic faith. What sets Ave Maria school of law apart? According to the school's published philosophy, "Ave Maria offers state-of-the-art facilities and technologies, and a curriculum enriched by a grounding in natural law and the enduring truths of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Graduates are prepared to practice law with the highest level of skill and professionalism in law firms, public service, business, higher education, the judiciary, and national, state, and local government."

It is clear that the new breed of Catholic colleges have two aims in mind – loyalty to the Magisterium and teaching of the Catholic Church, and the formation of their students through superior quality education. The combination is drawing both the attention of the faithful throughout the nation and the world, as the diversity of

the student bodies of these schools shows, and the animus of the old guard Catholic schools. Time and again, the purpose of these new schools have come under attack by faculty at institutions such as Notre Dame or the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities. But the complaints can't silence the results. High graduation rates and test scores, coupled with favor from the Bishops and even from Rome have demonstrated that, at least in the eyes of the Catholic Church, "academic freedom" can only exist at the service of truth and the teaching of the real Catholic faith.

Ave Maria college's mission statement states best the motivation behind this new breed of Catholic schools. They exist "to further teaching, research and learning in the abiding tradition of Catholic thought in both national and international settings. The College takes as its mission the sponsorship of a liberal arts education curriculum dedicated, as articulated in the apostolic constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, to the advancement of human culture, the promotion of dialogue between faith and reason, the formation of men and women in the intellectual and moral virtues of the Catholic faith, and to the development of professional and pre-professional programs in response to local and societal needs."
