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Church and Society

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Editor

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**“Catholic Identity:
Resolving Conflicting Expectations”***

Fordham University, New York, New York

— April 20, 1991 —————

It is good to be back at Fordham University which provided a forum in 1983 for my first in a series of addresses on the need for a consistent ethic of life. As I prepared that address, I was aware that I would be walking through a minefield. Somehow, I have that same uneasy feeling this afternoon as we discuss the Catholic identity of our institutional ministries in the future and, specifically, how to resolve conflicting expectations. I hasten to add, however, that I am sustained and encouraged by your good will in this endeavor.

I congratulate Fordham on this Sesquicentennial Project which is complex in its vision and scope and vital to the Church. I have a keen interest in the three dimensions of the Church's mission under discussion: higher education, health care, and social services. Besides this interest, I bring a quarter-century of episcopal experience and, naturally, some bias to this conference.

This afternoon I will focus my reflections on three areas: (1) the mixed model of sectarian/secular identity described in the Preliminary Report, (2) the underlying causes of tension and conflicting expectations, and (3) some practical ways of lessening this tension and resolving these conflicting expectations.

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THE MIXED MODEL OF IDENTITY

As the Preliminary Report indicates, a rather substantial majority of all who participated in the Delphi Process assume that the mixed model of identity will prevail in the future, not a strictly denominational or secular one. I fully agree. However, as we all know, despite the general agreement on what the future will look like, the task which lies before us will not be easy.

The history of our nation has many lessons for us. For the most part, the mainline Protestant churches established the first sectarian colleges and universities. There was considerable emphasis on moral rectitude and doctrinal orthodoxy—which led some of them to discriminate against Catholics. More recently, when academic excellence became the supreme value, and freedom of inquiry and expression a hallmark of higher education, the churches gradually ceded the religious identity of their schools. The strictly sectarian model eventually gave way to the secular. Today, those colleges and universities which retain their explicitly Protestant affiliation are largely sponsored by Evangelical and Fundamentalist groups who have chosen the sectarian model. However, to the extent that they do so, they risk losing their voice and credibility in the public forum because the sectarian model, by its very nature, tends to stand in defensive opposition to the world.

Catholic colleges and universities, health care institutions, and social service agencies already live with one foot firmly planted in the Catholic Church and the other in our pluralistic society. It should come as no surprise, then, when the competing vision and value systems of the “tectonic” plates on which they stand are in tension with one another, and shifts in the plates cause tremors which create anxiety and are, at times, seen as threats.

Catholic higher education, health care, and social services face a common dilemma. The bishop and diocese, at times, may consider them too secular, too influenced by government, too involved with business concepts. The public, on the other hand, often considers them too religious, too sectarian. As a result, they find themselves sandwiched between the Church and the public, trying to please both groups.

These *are* vital ministries, integral to the Church's mission. And this mission flows from the Church's identity. Understanding these three ministries as integral to the Church's overall mission, therefore, also helps shape their Catholic identity because both mission and identity are closely related and complement each other. So, our discussion of the Catholic identity and culture of these ministries will be enhanced by defining more precisely their relationship to the Church's mission.

The Preliminary Report indicates that large majorities of those who work in the three ministries are firmly committed to the Catholic iden-

tity of their institutions and view their work precisely as ministry. That accords with my experience as a pastor. I am often impressed by the spirituality and dedication of women and men religious, and of the growing numbers of laymen and laywomen who are assuming positions of leadership in these ministries.

At the same time, these three ministries of the Church are moving toward a mixed model of identity. The clients they serve, the contributors they approach, the staff and governing bodies they rely on include both Catholics and, increasingly, those who are not Catholic. They depend on federal, state, and local governments for such things as charters of incorporation, regulatory statutes, licensing, tax exemption status, and funding. They are also held accountable by government and the public, not only by the Church.

While some may decry the present circumstances and fear what the future holds as we move from a more sectarian to a mixed model of identity, there simply is no turning back now. For the most part, we can no longer effectively carry out the Church's mission by trying to isolate ourselves from the pluralistic society in which we live or impose our views on it. Indeed, the mixed model of identity should help us minister more effectively in the world.

The fathers of the Second Vatican Council clearly pointed out that the Church has to pay closer attention to the fact that it exists *in* the modern world. It does not go to the world, as though it were a fully separate entity. The Church is a community of Jesus' disciples in the midst of the human family. At the same time, the council acknowledged that there is a legitimate secularity in the political, social, and economic orders.

Something very significant happened to the council fathers during the course of Vatican II. A growing awareness developed that the Holy Spirit's influence extends well beyond the confines of the Christian flock to the entire world. This did not take away from the truth which the Church teaches, but it opened the Church to the possibility of discovering elements of the truth which others possess, even as it brings the message of the gospel to the world, even as it provides a moral and ethical framework in which societal issues can be evaluated and challenged.

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World states that the Church has much to learn from the world. The world is a possible partner for dialogue, a mutual exchange. While we may take this for granted, at least on a theological level, it was not always the thinking of the Church or its members; nor do we yet have sufficient experience or expertise to carry on such a dialogue in a way that will realize its full potential.

There are, of course, some dangers to be avoided in our dialogue with the world. To be faithful to the gospel, we cannot be satisfied with an uncritical acceptance of whatever the world offers. But neither should we

be too quick to reject or distrust the world. If our participation in the dialogue is not an accommodation to the world but rather the truth spoken in love, we need not fear that dialogue will jeopardize or dilute the prophetic, countercultural message of the gospel. At the same time, we can anticipate that the conversation will lead us to a new and integral humanism which is thoroughly marked by the image of the new humanity manifested in the risen Lord.

Catholic educators, health care personnel, and social service providers work along the fault line of the Church's dialogue with the world. They are constantly in conversation with it. At times, it is less clear how they encounter the Church each day. Nevertheless, they are in a privileged position to learn from the world and to share that knowledge and insight with the rest of the community of faith. At the same time, they have the opportunity, and the responsibility, to speak the truth in love and to share the values of our Catholic tradition with others. The Holy Spirit works in the world, but there is much in the world that needs redemption, that needs to be challenged in light of the gospel, that needs healing.

Three especially effective pastors recently shared the secret of their success. One said that being an effective minister called for the ability to live with *ambiguity*. Another said it demanded the capacity to cope with *chaos*. And the third said it required the ability to manage the "*mess*."

Ambiguity, chaos, mess. Perhaps this is an apt way to describe what Catholic educators, health care personnel, and social service providers deal with each day. It also describes my own pastoral experience as a bishop, even though I do not encounter the world in quite the same way as others do in these three ministries.

The human context of our work causes many dilemmas and problems. As the Preliminary Report notes, "In a 'messy' world there are many instances of misunderstandings and bad behavior. Even more difficult are those instances in which caring people of faith disagree." That leads me to the second section of my presentation.

THE CAUSES OF CONFLICTING EXPECTATIONS

As I read the Preliminary Report, I made a list of the areas where there was disagreement—often between the bishops and those in the three fields—assuming that this would reveal where the conflicting expectations were to be found. I found twenty-eight instances of disagreement, ten each in only two categories: issues of control and behavioral issues.

Rather than examine these areas of disagreement in detail, it seems more appropriate to address the challenging key question posed in the report: "Are there ways in which the 'mixed' scenario can prevail in the fu-

ture without the instances of rancor which seem to occur so very frequently at the present time to the detriment of both individuals, institutions, and the Church?" Before searching for solutions, it will be helpful to consider some of the underlying causes of the tensions that exist because of conflicting expectations.

First, I am a pastor, not a professor, health care expert, or social service professional. That is not an apology, simply a fact. Many of you are professors, health care experts, or social service professionals, not bishops. That is not an accusation, simply a fact. This means that I may not understand, in the same way as you, all your needs, dilemmas, questions, problems, dreams, presuppositions, or fears. Similarly, you may not understand mine in the same way I do. This, in itself, is a potential source of disagreement, conflict, and alienation. It is also an opportunity to transcend our respective roles and disciplines to learn more about one another.

A second important consideration is that of history. In the past, with the blessing of the local bishops, dedicated religious communities of men and women established, sponsored, and staffed most of the Catholic colleges and universities, as well as Catholic hospitals and other health care institutions in this country. Bishops were seldom involved in these endeavors other than as occasional commencement speakers and celebrants of liturgies to mark special anniversaries or bless new facilities. Bishops generally kept at a distance from religious communities, and vice versa.

Moreover, many of the Catholic social service agencies—Catholic Charities and the St. Vincent de Paul Society, to name only two—were initially established by lay people, with the approval of the local bishop. Again, he often played little or no role in these endeavors. And little, if anything, was expected of him.

More recently, however, there has been a change in the Church's understanding of bishops' responsibilities. The documents of the Second Vatican Council and postconciliar writings have consistently pointed out that the diocesan bishop is to serve all the people of the local church, including religious. When the Holy Father mandated a study of religious life in the U.S., we carried it out over a three-year period in the Archdiocese of Chicago. I attended many sessions during which the women and men religious and I discussed our hopes and fears about how I could better serve them while respecting their diverse charisms and internal authority.

This has implications for bishops' relations with Catholic institutions of higher education, health care, and social services today. While many bishops still play little or no role in the Catholic health care and/or social service institutions within their dioceses, the Preliminary Report suggests that many in these two ministries—both religious and lay—expect the local bishop to become more involved in their work. As the report also suggests, this is much less true of many Catholic educators!

Today, all three ministries are seen more clearly as ministries of the entire Church, not merely of the specific institutions themselves. This also implies that, as pastor of the local church, the bishop also has a role to play. The trick is to define that role more precisely and in a way that serves and supports the ministries while linking them with the local church. It must be a genuine, creative partnership that will give the bishop an opportunity to serve the people who engage in these ministries rather than merely react to problems which arise. It would also give the people in these ministries an opportunity to contribute more effectively to the Church's mission.

One of the primary tasks of a bishop is to teach. While this has always been so, it has taken on increasing importance in our fast-changing, pluralistic society. The crucial question for me is not *whether*, as a bishop, I should teach or even *what* I should teach. My basic concern is *how* I can pass on the Church's authentic teaching in the most effective, credible way. As you know, the best teachers are those who learn from their students. In fact, the best learning environment is often one in which teachers and students search together for the truth. That is my goal when I exercise my teaching office, especially in relation to Catholic higher education, health care, and social services.

As a pastor, I also have certain concerns. Let me give you some examples. Loyola University's teachers, students, and alumni are often members of the Archdiocese of Chicago. The university provides ministerial training for persons who either staff, or will staff in the future, many of our parishes and institutions. The Catholic staff and patients of Chicago's Mercy Hospital are also members of our local church; the same is true of Catholic Charities' staff, supporters, and clients. As archbishop, I have certain responsibilities in regard to the people I have been sent to serve. That is why I cannot ignore or disassociate myself from everything that happens at Loyola, Mercy, or Catholic Charities. The same is true of DePaul University and the other Catholic colleges, as well as the many health care institutions of the area.

But neither can I, nor should I try to, involve myself in *everything* that happens at these institutions. This means that I must be able to trust their administrators and staff to maintain the Catholic culture and identity required for fidelity to their mission. But when *should* I be involved in these institutions as the local bishop? The Preliminary Report shows considerable disagreement on this point, and I will not attempt to reconcile these differences here. However, in the third section of my presentation, I want to offer some recommendations as to how this issue may be resolved.

Let me give you a specific example of my concern as a pastor and a teacher. Last year, Father Matthew Lamb published an insightful article in *America* magazine, entitled, "Will There Be Catholic Theology in the

United States?" One of his basic theses was that, today, Catholic students at, and graduates of, non-Catholic divinity schools often lack an adequate background in Catholic theology and formation in the faith. This will have a serious long-term impact on their subsequent teaching, especially in Catholic institutions. Who will faithfully present the Church's teaching and tradition to the next generation of Catholic students? This is of great concern to the local church and the diocesan bishop. If I am to be faithful to my episcopal office, I must be aware of the potentially negative consequences of this turn of events. I hasten to add, of course, that the presidents and deans of Catholic colleges and universities share that responsibility.

While there are many other causes of the tension that arises from conflicting expectations, let me turn to my third set of reflections on how we might resolve conflicting expectations.

RESOLVING CONFLICTING EXPECTATIONS

First, we must get to know and respect one another—as persons, as professionals.

I personally meet with the presidents of the Catholic colleges and universities in metropolitan Chicago each year at informal luncheons hosted by one of the presidents. In a relaxed atmosphere, usually without a formal agenda, we discuss issues of mutual concern. My experience suggests that, when educators get to know their bishop and vice versa, a climate of mutual respect, trust, and understanding usually develops. The presidents then feel free to contact the bishop about specific issues, and he feels the same, and this indeed happens throughout the year. Thorny problems can often be resolved before they are allowed to explode in public, causing rancor and eroding the public's confidence in the Church and its institutions.

Shortly after I came to Chicago, I called a meeting of the chief executive officers of all the Catholic hospitals in the archdiocese and representatives of the religious congregations which sponsor them. Unlike New York, the archdiocese does not own any of the twenty-two Catholic hospitals. We talked about mutual concerns—including their survival in a fiercely competitive environment—and, eventually, we formed the Catholic Health Alliance for Metropolitan Chicago. I meet with the fifteen representatives of the sponsoring communities three times a year. My personal representative sits on the Board of the Alliance which has twenty-three members. Again, we are getting to know and trust one another. Ongoing communication makes it less likely that disagreement over issues will divide us and spill over into public controversy.

I am also very involved with the Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago, which is an integral part of our archdiocesan structure. I appoint

its board of directors as my delegates to plan and monitor Charities' operations and the distribution of all its funds. It also has an advisory board of about three hundred members, who serve on nearly twenty committees. While I am, in effect, the chief executive officer and have the jurisdictional authority to do so, in practice, I simply cannot make decisions on my own or chart Charities' course independently. The members of both boards are Catholic professionals, and I listen carefully to their counsel. Together, we have developed an agency which touches the lives of over 500,000 people each year.

I have used these personal examples simply to show that the approach I recommend is both feasible and effective. It works. But it takes a lot of determination and patience to make it work! However, the results are well worth the effort.

Second, besides getting to know and respect one another, bishops and people in the three ministries need to engage in honest dialogue about their mutual concerns. I am thinking, in particular, about some of the issues of control and behavior in the Preliminary Report, issues about the Church's juridical control of institutional ministries, the connection of these ministries with the local church, the tolerance of evil in these ministries.

There are many other important issues of mutual concern. For example, how do we maintain a Catholic culture in a pluralistic society? How do we infuse institutions with a Catholic culture, especially as they move toward a mixed model of identity? How far can we compromise in individual cases, especially when a conflict of values sets the parameters of the dilemma or dispute? As sponsorship of our institutions by religious congregations takes on new forms in the future, how can we maintain authorization by, and accountability to, the Church? How should the Church deal with modern ethical dilemmas in a pluralistic society? How can we arrive at a mutually acceptable understanding of academic freedom? How can bishops better serve Catholic colleges and universities, health care facilities, and social service agencies? How can these institutional ministries better serve the cause of justice in the world?

As I noted at the outset, the task before us is not easy. It may be helpful to recall that nearly a quarter century has passed since a group of twenty-six distinguished American Catholics, including my good friend and mentor, the late Archbishop Paul J. Hallinan, met at Land O'Lakes, Wisconsin, to redefine the Catholic identity of our institutions of higher learning in the wake of Vatican II. Today, we are still struggling with the same fundamental questions.

There are other things we can do to lessen the tension and resolve conflicting expectations.

It would be very helpful, for example, if five or six Catholic universities throughout the nation would offer seminars and similar academic pro-

grams to help new lay leaders of Catholic schools, hospitals, and social service agencies to understand in greater depth the basic components of Catholic culture, identity, and mission.

In the resolution of conflict, it would also be helpful to keep in mind the distinction which the U.S. bishops made in their pastoral letter on war and peace, where they distinguished between moral principles and their concrete application. The further one moves from principles into concrete application, the more likely it is that people of good faith will have different opinions. This may help explain why many bishops in Western Europe—for example, in France and Great Britain—often leave the concrete application of the principles to those engaged in higher education, health care, and social services.

Catholic institutions of higher learning could establish a chair or make other provisions to ensure that students have access to spiritual formation in addition to academic instruction. Catholic hospitals could work more closely with the parishes of the local church in reaching out to the surrounding community. Catholic social service agencies could work more closely with parishes and the local church to identify leaders, define goals, and deliver social services. In all three ministries, administrators' job descriptions could include an explicit acknowledgment of their responsibility to preserve the Catholic culture of their institutions.

The list of things we can do to lessen the tension and resolve conflicting expectations is limited only by our lack of creativity or resolve. I know we have the necessary creativity; I pray that we do not lack the needed resolve.

* * *

The challenges before us are real. They call us to find new ways to act in accord with our Catholic tradition. They call us to share our expertise and experience with one another. They invite us to embrace “the joy and hope, the grief and anguish” of the people of our day. They invite us to reach out to the world, willing to live with ambiguity, chaos, and “mess.”

Let us proceed with a deep love for the people we serve, a heightened sensitivity for one another’s needs, and renewed appreciation of what we can do for and with one another. Through this collaboration, your vital ministries will nurture their precious Catholic identity, and they, in turn, will invigorate the Church’s mission. Toward that goal, let us proceed with willing hearts and diligent prayer.