

Catholic Identity in Education: A Long Way to Go

By Dr. Jeff Mirus



I was happy to see Pope Benedict return to the theme of [Catholic identity in Catholic educational institutions](#) in his May 5th *ad limina* address to a group of American bishops. The battle for the Faith in Catholic higher education throughout the world was joined by Pope John Paul II in [Ex Corde Ecclesiae](#) in 1990. In 1996, the American bishops issued [specific norms and guidelines](#) for implementation of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* in the United States.

For an overview of the norms, and the excuses which stand in their way, see my early 2011 commentary, [Ex Corde Ecclesiae in the United States](#). For an important organization dedicated to the implementation of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, see [The Cardinal Newman Society](#). Unfortunately, while many positive changes have taken place over the past twenty-two years, the pace of change remains agonizingly slow. Pope Benedict acknowledged this in his address: “Much,” he said, “remains to be done.”

Much does remain to be done, especially in implementing Canon 812, which requires all Catholics who teach in the theological disciplines in Catholic universities and colleges to have a “mandatum” (in effect, a formal license to teach) from the local bishop. The theological disciplines include not only formal theology, but Scripture, Canon Law and Church history. Universities include all Catholic institutions of higher learning.

I recall in this connection that, when Warren Carroll, myself and several colleagues founded Christendom College back in 1977, we set things up so that every member of the faculty had to take an oath of fidelity to the Magisterium of the Church as a condition of employment. But because the great majority of Catholic universities have been unwilling to impose such basic Catholic fidelity even on theologians, Canon 812 requires the individual faculty members to get the required approval from the local bishop, though many have not done so. There is no guarantee, of course, that a bishop will withhold the *mandatum* if a professor does not adhere to the Magisterium. Moreover, not all bishops have cared enough to insist on the *mandatum* at all. And of course some who have pressed the matter have been unsuccessful in bringing theologians in powerful universities to heel.

Of course, orthodoxy in the theology department is not by itself sufficient to establish a true Catholic identity in a Catholic university, though it is certainly a minimum requirement. As Benedict expressed it this week:

[T]he essential task of authentic education at every level is not simply that of passing on knowledge, essential as this is, but also of shaping hearts.... It follows that the question of Catholic identity...entails much more than the teaching of religion or the mere presence of a chaplaincy on campus. All too often, it seems, Catholic schools and colleges have failed to challenge students to reappropriate their faith as part of the exciting intellectual discoveries which mark the experience of higher education.

The Pope explains what every good Catholic parent knows, that “new students find themselves dissociated from the family, school and community support systems that previously facilitated the transmission of the faith.” And because this is the case:

In every aspect of their education, students need to be encouraged to articulate a vision of the harmony of faith and reason capable of guiding a life-long pursuit of knowledge and virtue. As ever, an essential role in this process is played by teachers who inspire others by their evident love of Christ, their witness of sound devotion and their commitment to that *sapientia Christiana* which integrates faith and life, intellectual passion and reverence for the splendor of truth both human and divine.

My recent review of Alasdair MacIntyre’s *God, Philosophy, Universities* (see [Why Philosophy Matters](#)) explains the secular fragmentation which has largely destroyed the mission of the university over the past few hundred years. Another reflection on that book, [Augustine: Reason and Faith, Philosophy and God](#), explains exactly why the Pope sees Christianity as indispensable to that mission and to the quest for human understanding. Or, as he himself put it in his recent address: “The Christian commitment to learning, which gave birth to the medieval universities, was based upon this conviction that the one God, as the source of all truth and goodness, is likewise the source of the intellect’s passionate desire to know and the will’s yearning for fulfillment in love.”

But in most mainstream Catholic universities today, the faculty and administration, insofar as they claim to be Catholic at all, are devoted to a deficient secular vision of competitive excellence. Along with their own personal rebellion against God, this leads them to adopt Modernism as a way pretend that a culture-bound education is somehow Catholic. Only a day before the Pope’s *ad limina* address, I wrote about how Modernism poisons everything

Catholic in [Modernism hits the Jackpot, and Loses...Again](#). If this essay helps explain what Benedict and the American bishops are up against, so much the better.

But we need look no further for a telling case in point than the recent news about Bishop Robert McManus of Worcester, Massachusetts. Bishop McManus had the courage to instruct Anna Maria College to withdraw its commencement speech invitation to Victoria Reggie Kennedy (Senator Edward Kennedy's widow) because of her rejection of Catholic teaching on the sanctity of human life. That this was even necessary indicates the nature of the problem. Yet the aftermath is even more telling. It turns out that there is so much resentment in the College ranks over this, that the administration has [asked the Bishop not to attend the commencement exercises](#), because he would be a distraction. That is, he will be a focal point of opposition.

I rest my case. Pope Benedict knows the score, and it is not a comfortable score for the home team. Taken as a group, Catholic universities and colleges really do have a very long way to go.