



3-1-2011

Pursuing Jesuit, Catholic Identity and Mission at U.S. Jesuit Colleges and Universities

S. J, Charles L. Currie

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ce>

Recommended Citation

Currie, S. J. (2011). Pursuing Jesuit, Catholic Identity and Mission at U.S. Jesuit Colleges and Universities. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 14 (3). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.1403072013>

This Focus Section Article is brought to you for free with open access by the School of Education at Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for publication in *Journal of Catholic Education* by the journal's editorial board and has been published on the web by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information about Digital Commons, please contact digitalcommons@lmu.edu. To contact the editorial board of *Journal of Catholic Education*, please email JCE@nd.edu.

Pursuing Jesuit, Catholic Identity and Mission at U.S. Jesuit Colleges and Universities

Charles L. Currie, S.J.

Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities, Washington, D.C.

Where We Have Been

Discussion on just what makes a university Catholic, and how a Catholic university should relate to the Church and the local bishop, date long before *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, and indeed go back to the early universities of Bologna, Paris, Oxford, and Cambridge, including St. Thomas Aquinas and his troubles with the Archbishop of Paris. More recently, we can cite 1949 and the establishment of the International Federation of Catholic Universities (IFCU), in collaboration with the Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education (Gallin, 1992, 1996; Gleason, 1995; Leahy, 1991; O'Brien, 1994; O'Keefe, 1997). Under the leadership of Fr. Theodore Hesburgh, C.S.C., and with the support of Pope Paul VI, IFCU evolved into an organization increasingly independent of the Congregation. This foreshadowed the tensions accompanying the development of *Ex corde Ecclesiae*. Meeting in Tokyo in 1965, IFCU decided to develop a document on the distinctive character of a Catholic university in the context of the recently published Vatican Council II (1965) document *The Church in the Modern World*.

Prior to the 1968 IFCU meeting, a number of delegates met at Land O'Lakes, Wisconsin, to develop the *Land O'Lakes Statement: The Nature of the Contemporary Catholic University* (as cited in O'Keefe, 1997). This statement helped frame the issues that have been the basis for tensions between Church authorities and American Catholic higher education for over 40 years, especially its insistence that

the Catholic university must be a university in the full modern sense of the word, with a strong commitment to and concern for academic freedom, and that this institutional autonomy and academic freedom are essential conditions of life and growth, and indeed of survival for Catholic universities, as for all universities. (O'Keefe, 1997, p. 119)

Critics of the statement often forget that, after this opening paragraph,

the other nine sections were devoted to how Catholic universities could assure that Catholicism would be “perceptibly present and effectively operative” (p. 119).

In 1972, after years of negotiation between Cardinal Garrone, the Prefect of the Congregation for Catholic Education, and the IFCU, the document *The Catholic University in the Modern World* appeared. The document had the reluctant approval of the Congregation because it envisioned “university institutions without statutory bonds linking them to ecclesiastical authorities” (as cited in O’Keefe, 1997, p. 166). This issue of a juridical connection between universities and the Church as essential to a Catholic university would later be a neuralgic issue in the discussions of *Ex corde Ecclesiae*.

Discussions leading to the revision of Canon Law began soon after, in 1976. For the first time, a section on higher education (canons 808–813) was envisioned, and the debate began about a “canonical mission” for theologians (or “mandate,” then *mandatum* as it would later be called). Despite prolonged attempts to eliminate this canon, including a last minute visit to Pope John Paul II, the mandate appeared in the final text; only to be largely ignored until *Ex corde* would resurrect the issue.

By 1985, a draft of a *Schema on Higher Education* appeared, and vigorous discussions on what would become the Apostolic Constitution, *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, had begun. Significant consultation led to a final version of *Ex corde*, issued in August 1990 by Pope John Paul II. The final document had removed many, but not all, of the problematic elements of previous drafts.

“Part I: Identity and Mission” presented a magnanimous vision of the Catholic university that included many of the ideas from *Land O’Lakes* and *The Catholic University in the Modern World*. “Part II: General Norms” reflected the concern for control dating back to 1949, and laid the basis for complementary specific ordinances to be developed by local bishops’ conferences to fit regional concerns (John Paul II, 1990).

Readers would recognize in *Ex corde* that the characteristics cited for a Catholic university were almost the same as those described in the 1972 document *The Catholic University in the Modern World*.

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. (John Paul II, 1990, n.13)

Unfortunately, for the next 9 years much of the conversation focused on Part II and the norms developed by the U.S. bishops, especially the requirement of a *mandatum* for theologians, while the grand vision of Part I, which had met widespread and even enthusiastic acceptance, receded into the background. Colleges and universities spent time and energy on the defensive, distracting them from the more important task of trying to realize *Ex corde's* magnanimous ideals of a Catholic university in rich dialogue with culture and the place where the Church does its thinking. Interestingly, Pope Benedict XVI (2008), in his recent affirming and encouraging address to Catholic educators, did not mention *Ex corde*, but did offer a similar positive and challenging role for the Catholic university to relate faith and reason, Gospel and culture.

In the mid-1990s, while the *mandatum* discussions were going on, several hundred Catholic educators gathered at the University of St. Thomas, attempting to move the discussion of Catholic mission and identity away from a debate about juridical relationships and toward mission-inspired work for social and civil responsibility, with a commitment to research and teaching in Catholic studies.

Despite the worst fears of standoff between bishops and theologians and bishops and universities, the past 10 years have witnessed mostly good relationships, with the *mandatum* being handled quietly as both bishops and institutions demonstrated mutual respect and understanding. There has probably been more helpful contact among bishops, theologians, and presidents than ever before. Colleges and universities have been able to concentrate on attempts to realize the Catholic identity envisioned by the first part of *Ex corde*.

Other Stimuli

Concurrently with the origins and then the development of the issue of Catholic identity, Catholic colleges and universities in the United States were undergoing massive and sweeping changes in response to a whole range of a number of other stimuli. Let me cite three.

Monsignor John Tracy Ellis's famous query in 1955, "Where are the Cath-

olic intellectual leaders?” was the most prominent of many voices critical of the quality of Catholic higher education. Despite the pockets of quality that did exist in a number of the colleges and universities, these criticisms by and large struck home. They stimulated dramatic efforts to improve the academic and institutional quality of Jesuit and Catholic colleges and universities in the United States.

A second major stimulus for change was the Second Vatican Council. The Council’s (1965) document, *The Church in the Modern World*, proposed a whole new ecclesiology moving the Church from the serene, lordly mountaintop of certitude and clarity down into the messy valley of human challenges, risks, and ambiguities, a move that to this day leaves many uncomfortable, if not openly resistant. In fact, one might say that many of today’s tensions and struggles are ecclesiological. The council also created new opportunities for lay leadership by emphasizing the responsibility identified with one’s baptism, and celebrated a new openness to dialogue, ecumenism, and diversity. Our campuses responded quickly and enthusiastically to these new emphases.

A third stimulus for change was the major growth encouraged by readily available federal dollars for construction on campus and for student financial aid. Colleges and universities grew dramatically in size, complexity, and diversity.

Responding to all of these challenges and opportunities, Catholic, and specifically Jesuit colleges and universities, have made dramatic strides in the past 40 years in academic and institutional quality, professionalism, and lay leadership that have led to new respect among their peer institutions. The most severe critics would claim that, in the process of making this very obvious progress, our colleges and universities have lost or are losing their identity as Jesuit and Catholic. Others see many opportunities for a vigorous, engaged Catholic identity and mission to transform not only the American Church but American higher education.

The Jesuit Dimension of This History

Jesuit colleges and universities were very much part of the same realities and pressures affecting their peer Catholic institutions. Encouraged by an influential canon law position, the “McGrath thesis,” and influenced by Vatican II’s insistence on the important role of the laity, Jesuit communities took the major step of incorporating separately from the college or university and turning over institutional control to a predominately lay board. This step was taken with no

little angst on the part of those who saw this as too readily handing over a precious asset for which they had given their lives.

The 32nd General Congregation of the Jesuits in 1975 created a major new agenda for Jesuit colleges and universities when, in its Decree 4, it stated that “The mission of the Society of Jesus today is the service of faith, of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement” (n. 48, 2), emphasizing that every Jesuit and every Jesuit institution had to be committed to a faith that does justice, a commitment that has been restated and clarified in each succeeding General Congregation.

In the 1980s, there were various efforts to explore what today we call our Jesuit, Catholic identity, including a meeting on Jesuit-lay collaboration at Creighton University in 1988. Assembly 1989: Jesuit Ministry in Higher Education at Georgetown University brought together the largest group of Jesuits and colleges engaged in higher education, with Fr. Kolvenbach delivering the keynote address. The very successful assembly led not only to the National Seminar on Jesuit Higher Education and its semi-annual publication, *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*, but to subsequent gatherings of campus representatives engaged in “identity and mission” activities. In 1993, mission and identity coordinators formed an Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities (AJCU) conference that meets annually to share ideas, concerns, and best practices.

One of the great influences on contemporary Jesuit colleges and universities was the brutal murder of six Jesuits and their co-workers at the Universidad Centroamericana, the UCA in El Salvador on November 16, 1989. This was an attack on Jesuits and on a Jesuit university committed to what Fr. Ignacio Ellacuria, the rector and main target of the assassins, called a “new kind of university” reflecting the Jesuit commitment to a faith that does justice, and deeply committed to the “national reality” of poverty and oppression. This commitment was made as a university, engaged in teaching, research, and “social projection.” Evidence of the impact on our campuses of what happened that night is seen not only in memorials, but more importantly in the many ways in which that event has influenced how our universities teach, do research, and educate our students.

On the 25th anniversary of General Congregation 32 and its Decree 4 in October 2000, Fr. Kolvenbach’s memorable address raised the commitment to justice to a new level of seriousness and clarity. This address has had an almost unprecedented impact on our institutions, leading to more engaged pedagogy and the commitment to educate our students for solidarity with a

globalizing world.

Mission and Identity Best Practices

Our identity is who we are; our mission is what we do. Some of our colleagues prefer to talk more about “mission” than about “identity,” noting that while they do not or cannot share our Jesuit, Catholic identity, they happily share the mission that resonates with their own identity. Identity can be seen as something static, closed, and even coercive. Mission is seen as more dynamic, open, and inviting. Appleyard and Gray (2000) point out that both terms are objectionable if they suggest exclusion, while both are acceptable if they suggest there are many forms of identity and many ways to contribute to the mission that can embody the spirit of Jesuit education. Our campuses are increasingly sensitive to this, e.g., by operationalizing identity and mission in terms of experiences that women and men of different faith traditions and backgrounds can share. It is no secret that on each of our campuses, Christians of other faiths, non-Christians, and non-believers often resonate very strongly with what we are trying to do—at times more strongly than some of our Catholic colleges.

The AJCU (2008) has conducted three surveys, in 1997, 2004, and 2008, of mission and identity activity on our campuses. Frs. Appleyard and Gray published their excellent review article in the fall 2000 issue of *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*. A review of the AJCU reports, the Appleyard and Gray article, and the discussions at the annual meetings of mission and identity coordinators shows an obvious and significant development in the sophistication and effectiveness of this activity on each of our 28 campuses.

The early and very basic orientation and educational programs have developed into a whole range of strategies that now include:

- The development of more ambitious mission statements with greater clarity on the Jesuit, Catholic component of the institutional mission;
- Programs to acquaint boards of trustees to their responsibility for identity and mission and to help them discharge that responsibility;
- More extensive and effective orientation programs for new faculty and staff, as well as ongoing educational programs, discussions, seminars, etc. The influence of Fr. Gray and his sensitivity to campus culture and welcoming approach to all members of the campus community are evident. This is reflected in the *Communal Reflection*

on the Jesuit Mission in Higher Education: A Way of Proceeding (Jesuit Conference, 2002), a collaborative effort of provincials, presidents, and rectors bearing Fr. Gray's distinguishing mark;

- Increasing integration of identity and mission issues into the curriculum and co-curriculum (e.g., in curricular changes, living-learning courses, immersion experiences, and justice programs);
- Increasingly widespread experiences of the Spiritual Exercises;
- Vastly improved resources, including printed, audiovisual, and online materials made available, for example, by Boston College, Creighton University, St. Louis University, and Xavier University, and most recently in George Traub's (2008a, 2008b) two volumes from Loyola University Press;
- Hiring for mission initiatives that are sensitive to the particular campus culture, while helping to recruit women and men who are both fully qualified and committed to the identity and mission of the institution;
- Increasingly effective and multi-dimensional campus ministry programs, as campus ministry, mission and identity, and Jesuit community initiatives work more collaboratively.

The intent of all these efforts is to develop a sufficient number of effective people strategically placed and capable of influencing the whole culture of the institution to reflect its Jesuit, Catholic identity and mission.

In addition to the programs tailored for individual campuses, a number of regional and national collaborative efforts are under way to foster our Jesuit, Catholic identity. They include the Heartland-Delta Conferences and Faculty Conversations, the Western Conversations, and the recently inaugurated Eastern Conversations. The AJCU Leadership Development Seminar, now entering its 8th year, has enrolled over 200 leaders and potential leaders currently working in AJCU schools in a program meant to develop women and men committed to mission-driven, effective leadership. The Ignatian Colleagues Program offers an in-depth experience of mission through four components: the development of a cohort, an experience of the Spiritual Exercises, an immersion experience, and an online course on the history and spirituality of Jesuit higher education.

All of this activity reflects a seriousness about fostering the Jesuit, Catholic dimension of our colleges and universities that runs counter to the charges

that, deliberately or through inattention, we have lost or are losing our identity. Of course, not only our critics but we ourselves can ask whether all of this is enough now and into the future. Considering the reality that more and more of our new faculty and staff arrive on our campuses with little to no experience of “Jesuit” or “Catholic,” and that many of our lay colleagues most familiar with these traditions are retiring, we clearly have a formidable task ahead. The pessimism of a Marsden (1994) or Burtchaell (1998) seems excessive, but their fears provide a healthy antidote to naïve optimism that everything will work out just fine. Hence the importance of more and better forms of assessing the effectiveness of these efforts.

“Catholic” and “Jesuit”

Clearly, there are different understandings about what it means to be a Catholic college or university today. This can be related to different ecclesiologies or understandings of (and comfort levels with) what the Church is about. At one extreme is a Church kept relatively pure and unsullied by limiting interaction with the world around it. One tends to see threats of “secularizing” influences and behaviors everywhere, and to have a very clearly defined notion of the Church (and its institutions) that one seeks to protect. At the other extreme is a Church so deeply embedded in the surrounding culture as to be almost indistinguishable from it.

Most of us live somewhere in between, being comfortable with the healthy, if challenging interaction with our surrounding culture that *Ex corde Ecclesiae* (John Paul II, 1990) describes as the role of the Catholic college or university:

[a Catholic university] is...a primary and privileged place for a fruitful dialogue between the Gospel and culture....A faith that places itself at the margin of what is human, of what is therefore culture, would be a faith unfaithful to the fullness of what the Word of God manifests and reveals, a decapitated faith, worse still, a faith in the process of self-annihilation. (n.44)

There is not the same polarity in talking about “Jesuit” as there is about “Catholic,” but there are differences about what is truly “Jesuit” or “Ignatian,” what the recent congregations really meant, whether we have gone too far with our pursuit of a faith that does justice, especially in a Jesuit academic setting, and whether we have sold the “family business” in a bargain sale.

Despite the many differences in history, culture, and location, there is an

impressive consistency and coherence in the Jesuit characteristics found in the mission statements of the 28 AJCU schools. The minimum number of times the following 10 descriptors were found in 28 AJCU mission statements was 16. Seven of the descriptors were found in more than 20 mission statements. The 10 descriptors (the number of citations) are:

- Jesuit/Catholic (28)
- Educating the Whole Person (25)
- International/Global (23)
- Service (23)
- Fostering/Promoting Justice (22)
- Academic Excellence (21)
- Ethical/Moral Concern (21)
- Leadership (18)
- Liberal Arts (17)
- Care for the Individual Person (16)

“Jesuit” Without Jesuits?

The reality is clear; at least in the short term we are running out of Jesuits. That may or may not change in 15-20 years, but we already know the number of Jesuits in the pipeline and it is not enough to come near to replacing Jesuits who are and will be retiring. The 10 Jesuit provinces are in the process of contracting to five. Morey and Piderit (2006) point out one obvious consequence of this: We are losing those who have embodied the stories and traditions of our colleges and universities. Are we replacing them with women and men who can keep those stories and traditions alive and well? Various commentators have been saying for at least 15 years that we have a window of 5 to 10 years to pass along the tradition effectively.

Ignatian spirituality, a spirituality developed by a layman for lay women and men, offers special strengths for doing this. It is a spirituality that resonates not only with lay colleagues, but also with life on our campuses, with its world-affirming emphasis on seeking God in all things, its restless and magnanimous pursuit of the *magis*, its special concerns for the individual persona as a focus of attention, its focus on Christ as the contagious model for our adulthood, its commitment to partnerships, and its linking faith with the pursuit of justice. Because this vision will be necessary to keep alive the Jesuit or Ignatian identity in our schools, it is especially encouraging to see the increasing numbers of lay

colleagues participating in the Spiritual Exercises from which this vision comes.

Making “Jesuit” and “Catholic” Come Contagiously Alive

Our colleague, Monika Hellwig (as cited in Steinfels, 2003), would often point out that we are not trying to recover something that has been lost, some neatly packaged, precisely described and circumscribed identity, or even a museum piece. Rather, we are trying to create something that has never existed: a Jesuit, Catholic identity combining Ignatian spirituality, the Catholic intellectual tradition, and Catholic Social Teaching, all forged with diverse colleagues, in a pluralistic, postmodern university setting, while facing all of the challenges of a globalizing world.

The magnanimous vision of the first part of *Ex corde* reflects this world-view, as does Pope Benedict’s (2008) recent address to Catholic educators, when he emphasized that Catholic identity for universities is not a question of statistics nor a question of orthodoxy; rather, colleges and universities are privileged places for a dynamic dialogue between faith and reason, Gospel and culture, with the dialogue reaching out to embrace the whole world, especially the world of the poor and disadvantaged. The recent Jesuit General Congregation and the words of our new Superior General echo the same message.

All the excellent activity to foster our Jesuit, Catholic identity and mission on our campuses, including a vibrant campus ministry, is not enough unless these efforts are part of a larger coordinated effort to make Catholic intellectual life and Catholic social teaching “perceptibly present and effectively operative” in our colleges and universities.

It is encouraging to see the development of Catholic Studies programs of various kinds on more than half of our campuses, more and more faculty research on teaching that reflects a Jesuit, Catholic identity in the selection of research topics and curricular content, in student living and learning communities, and in the ever increasing immersion experiences, not only for students, but for faculty, administrators, and trustees. In the spirit of the *magis*, there is much more we can and need to do.

Looking Ahead: The Future

At the recent General Congregation, Fr. General Nicolás, and the Congregation itself, accepted the challenge from Pope Benedict to “explore new horizons and reach new social, cultural, and religious frontiers....These frontiers that

can be places of conflict and tension” (GC 35, D.1, n.2, 6). The pope entrusted the Society (and Jesuit colleagues) to “build bridges of understanding and dialogue, according to the best tradition of the Society” (GC 35, D. 1, n.2, 6).

All the good work our colleges and universities have done and are doing to foster our Jesuit, Catholic identity, and to make come alive the best of Catholic intellectual life and Catholic social teaching, has prepared us for this challenge.

Peter Steinfels (2003) adds a note of caution:

Ultimately, there is in fact no panacea, no silver bullet, no once-and-for-all solution to ensure the Catholic identity of Catholic higher education. Episcopally credentialed theologians, new institutes, programs in Catholic Studies, inner-city service projects, peace and justice programs, faculty retreats, faculty seminars, student retreats, ethics across the curriculum, special chairs, prestigious lecture series—no one thing will do it, but rather a constant alertness to opportunities, initiatives on many fronts, with some successes, some failures, no quitting. (p. 160)

For those who ask “are we still Jesuit and Catholic?” we can respond that we are very seriously and intentionally engaged in an ongoing quest to realize the promise of being Jesuit and Catholic today and into the future—no easy task, but a magnanimous venture. With the strengths we have built in our schools, we have opportunities (and responsibilities) to participate in the transformation, not only of our schools, but our Church, nation, and world.

References

- Appleyard, J. A., & Gray, H. (2000). Tracking the mission and identity question: Three decades of inquiry and three models of interpretation. *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*, 18(4), 4-15.
- Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities. (2008). *Mission and identity activity at Jesuit colleges and universities in the United States*. Retrieved from <http://www.ajcunet.edu/Mission-and-Identity>
- Benedict XVI. (2008, April). Address to Catholic educators at the Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C.
- Burtchaell, J. T. (1998). *The dying of the light: The disengagement of colleges and universities from their Christian churches*. Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans.
- Documents of the thirty-second general congregation of the Society of Jesus*. (1975). Washington, D.C.: The Jesuit Conference.
- Documents of the thirty-fifth general congregation of the Society of Jesus*. (2008). Washington, D.C.: The Jesuit Conference.
- Ellis, J. T. (1955). American Catholics and the intellectual life. *Thought*, 30(118), 351-388.
- Gallin, A. (Ed.). (1992). *American Catholic higher education: Essential documents 1967-1990*.

- Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Gallin, A. (1996). *Independence and new partnerships in Catholic higher education*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Gleason, P. (1995). *Contending with modernity: Catholic higher education and the twentieth century*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Jesuit Conference. (2002). *Communal reflection on the Jesuit mission in higher education: A way of proceeding*. Washington, D.C.: Author.
- John Paul II. (1990). *Ex corde ecclesiae* [On Catholic universities]. Retrieved from the Vatican website: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_15081990_ex-corde-ecclesiae_en.html
- Leahy, W. P. (1991). *Adapting to America: Catholics, Jesuits, and higher education in the twentieth century*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.
- Marsden, G. M. (1994). *The soul of the American university: From Protestant establishment to established nonbelief*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Morey, M. M., & Piderit, J. J. (2006). *Catholic higher education: A culture in crisis*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- O'Brien, D. J. (1994). *From the heart of the American church: Catholic higher education and American culture*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- O'Keefe, J. M. (Ed.). (1997). *Catholic education at the turn of the new century*. New York, NY: Garland.
- Steinfels, P. (2003). *A people adrift: The crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Traub, G. W. (Ed.). (2008a). *A Jesuit education reader*. Chicago, IL: Loyola Press.
- Traub, G. W. (Ed.). (2008b). *An Ignatian spirituality reader*. Chicago, IL: Loyola Press.
- Vatican Council II. (1965). *Gaudium et spes* [The church in the modern world]. Retrieved from the Vatican website: http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html

Rev. Charles L. Currie, S.J. is the president of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities.