



Big Day

Eighth graders from Our Mother of Sorrows School in Greece and their teacher Tom McCall listen to Rochester Museum and Science Center instructor of natural science Robert Cooper. Students from Our Mother of Sorrows were at the museum for a "Big Day", a day-long visit where the various museum disciplines are studied. Cooper is shown above with taxidermy specimens used as part of the museum's natural science program. Close to 4,000 students from parochial schools in the diocese have visited the museum this year.

The Church 1976



Fr. Andrew Greeley

Business is apparently going on as usual at the Catholic universities. There is a particularly malodorous tenure fight in the theology department at Notre Dame, in which the Holy Cross religious order has played a dubious role. And, in a recent article in "The Commonweal," historian David O'Brien describes a similar incident at Holy Cross College in which the Jesuits overruled the recommendations of the school's tenure committee.

Now I don't believe in tenure. Its only purpose is to protect faculty from other faculty, and there are better ways of doing that. But if you're going to have tenure and you are going to set up committees to grant it, you've got to respect the decisions these committees make.

Catholic schools aren't the only ones who overrule tenure recommendations behind closed doors. The University of Chicago does it, too. But Catholic schools look especially bad when they do it, particularly when the religious community is involved in such shenanigans.

So the claim of the religious orders to be getting out of the business of running the schools from behind the scenes looks something less than persuasive.

In the middle of Prof. O'Brien's article there is a passing reference which points at another basic problem of Catholic higher education. The improvement of the quality of education, he tells us, requires more faculty power. Now that statement simply is not true. As anyone who has worked in higher educational reform knows (and I worked at it for about five years), the faculty, however liberal they may be politically, are diehard reactionaries when it comes to educational change. The exact opposite of Prof. O'Brien's dictum is the truth: the more faculty power you have the less educational improvement you will get.

During the last decade, the Catholic colleges and universities have tried to model themselves more and more after the rest of American higher education. Faculties have received more power (though the religious orders still lurk in the background) but there is no evidence that the quality of instruction has improved and none that the quality of research output has changed at all.

There are, for example, not yet any first-rate theology departments in Catholic universities (and if a Catholic university doesn't have one of those, what is its reason for existing?), and there are no social research centers (either general or specifically concentrating on Catholic problems) worth looking at twice. So, why have Catholic colleges and universities?

The answer is to provide decent undergraduate education, I guess. Many certainly do that, but that doesn't justify calling themselves universities.

Part of the problem is that during the '60s, the Catholic schools staffed themselves with the off-scourings of the great secular graduate schools. I shudder when I think of some of the neurotic mediocrities that I saw foisted on unsuspecting Catholic deans. Now these characters are entrenched and have faculty power. There is no room for the much higher quality Ph.D.'s who are now available—and who are, incidentally, more likely to be Catholics. Besides, those who have faculty power are threatened by young people who are both competent and productive—a real challenge to most faculties at Catholic institutions.

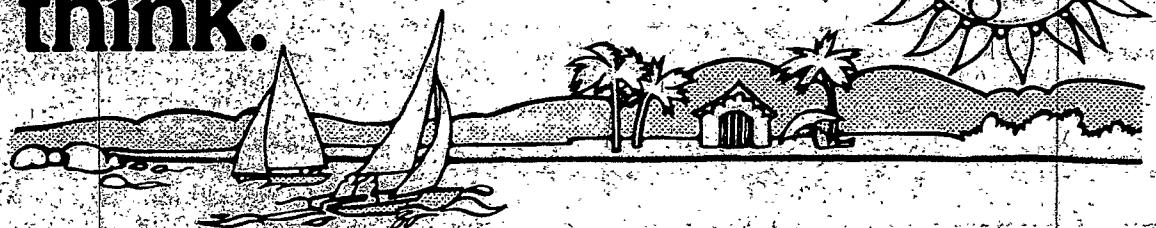
Worst of all is the notion that there is no specific Catholic contribution to make to American higher education—hence the pride at how non-Catholic in student body, faculty, attitude, and interest a school can become. One urban Catholic woman's college proudly boasted a number of years ago that it was no longer a Catholic college at all. So the Catholic ethnics who had been making major sacrifices to send their daughters (almost all of them first-generation college attenders) to a Catholic school said to heck with it, and now the college barely survives.

Cliche, timidity, mediocrity, incorrigible meddling from the religious orders—nothing much has changed in ten years except maybe the content of the cliches and the arrogance of the mediocrity.

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