

Document challenges Catholic universities

By Jerry Filteau
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON (CNS) — In his new apostolic constitution on Catholic higher education, Pope John Paul II said a Catholic university must be both "a community of scholars" and "an academic institution in which Catholicism is vitally present and operative."

He recognized both "institutional autonomy" and "academic freedom" as hallmarks of a Catholic university but said that "respect for Catholic doctrine" is "essentially linked" to the Catholic identity of such an institution.

Released Sept. 25 under the title *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* or "From the Heart of the Church," the new papal text was immediately hailed by Catholic higher education leaders in the United States as a positive, challenging document.

At the heart of the text — the issue over which a serious debate raged for the previous five years — was the question of who has primary responsibility for assuring a Catholic university's identity as "Catholic": church authorities or those who govern the university?

According to a 1985 draft version distributed by the Vatican to bishops and educators, the answer was church authorities. No institution of higher learning could be called "Catholic" unless it had a "juridical" relationship placing it under some form of direct control by a canonical church authority, according to the draft.

The final document by the pope, however, came down decisively on the other side of that question. "The responsibility for maintaining and strengthening the Catholic identity of the university rests primarily with the university itself," he said.

The papal document recognized as "Catholic" not only those universities linked to the church "by a formal, constitutive and statutory bond," but also those tied to the church "by reason of an institutional commitment made by those responsible for (their governance)."

Closely connected to the question of how a university's Catholic identity is maintained were the issues of how academic

freedom and institutional autonomy would be treated in the document and how the mandate from church authority to teach theology — required by the Code of Canon Law — would be treated.

Educators who had criticized earlier drafts of the document on those issues expressed satisfaction with the final text issued by the pope.

The papal document's seven norms governing some 950 Catholic colleges and universities around the world were seen by U.S. education leaders as carefully nuanced laws, challenging Catholic institutions to clarify and strengthen their Catholic identity in ways that would also advance their academic mission as colleges and universities.

Preceding the norms was a strong statement on the philosophy of Catholic higher education. It viewed the Catholic university as a unique place for academic research and professional education infused by religious and ethical values, for an ongoing dialogue between faith and culture, and for meeting the challenges of increased specialization and fragmentation of knowledge through interdisciplinary study.

The apostolic constitution is also the first formal papal statement on Catholic universities to describe work for justice and peace and the teaching of social justice as an integral part of a Catholic university's mission.

"The document is a call to renewal for those who believe in the distinctive character of a Catholic university or other institution of higher learning," said Ursuline Sister Alice Gallin, executive director of the Washington-based Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities. The association coordinated responses to earlier drafts of the papal document by leaders of the 235 Catholic institutions of higher learning in the United States.

Sister Gallin noted the "extensive dialogue" with Catholic bishops and educators which the Vatican's Congregation for Catholic Education pursued between its preliminary draft in 1985 and the pope's final document five years later.

The educators and bishops severely criticized the first draft and an improved

but still inadequate second draft circulated in 1988. In early 1989, the Vatican congregation convened a large international meeting of bishops and educators to discuss the direction of the document, and the papal constitution that resulted took all their major recommendations into account.

"I believe that the results testify to the value of the consultative process that was used," Sister Gallin said.

She called the document's approach to academic freedom and institutional autonomy "very acceptable" to U.S. Catholic institutions.

At a press conference in Rome, Archbishop Pio Laghi, head of the Vatican education congregation and former papal pro-nuncio to the United States, said the approach of the document is that "the adjective 'Catholic' does not diminish the academic-scientific character and the specific goal of a university."

"We expect that it be Catholic and free," he said. "The task is to coordinate

the two."

Several U.S. educators said the real challenge to U.S. institutions lies not so much in implementing the legal norms as in measuring up to the challenge of vision and mission that Pope John Paul presented to the world's Catholic colleges and universities.

Jesuit Father William J. Byron, president of The Catholic University of America, said the papal document challenges Catholic institutions to be at the center of the dialogue between faith and culture and to look critically at "the dominant values and symbols" of the culture around it.

Marianist Brother Raymond Fitz, president of the University of Dayton in Ohio, also cited among the main challenges of the document the pope's emphasis on a faith-culture dialogue and his recognition of "the real importance of integrating knowledge."



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