

Armchair College Fair

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Catholic college educators told next decade crucial to Catholic identity

ST. PAUL, Minn. (CNS) — The next 10 years are crucial for Catholic colleges and universities to recommit themselves to fostering Catholic intellectual life, Commonweal editor Margaret O'Brien Steinfels said last month.

"Catholic intellectual life is central to Catholic identity," Steinfels told a Aug. 3 gathering of 450 leaders of Catholic higher education.

If Catholic colleges and universities do not have that at the core of their mission, whatever else they do to assert their Catholic identity "would be a thin facade," she added.

Steinfels and her husband, *The New York Times* senior religion correspondent Peter Steinfels, urged educators to seize the opportunity that has been opened up by recent years of ferment over Catholic identity and the consensus on some issues that has begun to emerge.

Among others who spoke at the Aug. 3-6 meeting were Cardinal Pio Laghi, prefect of the Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education, and Father J. Bryan Hehir, professor in religion and society at Harvard Divinity School.

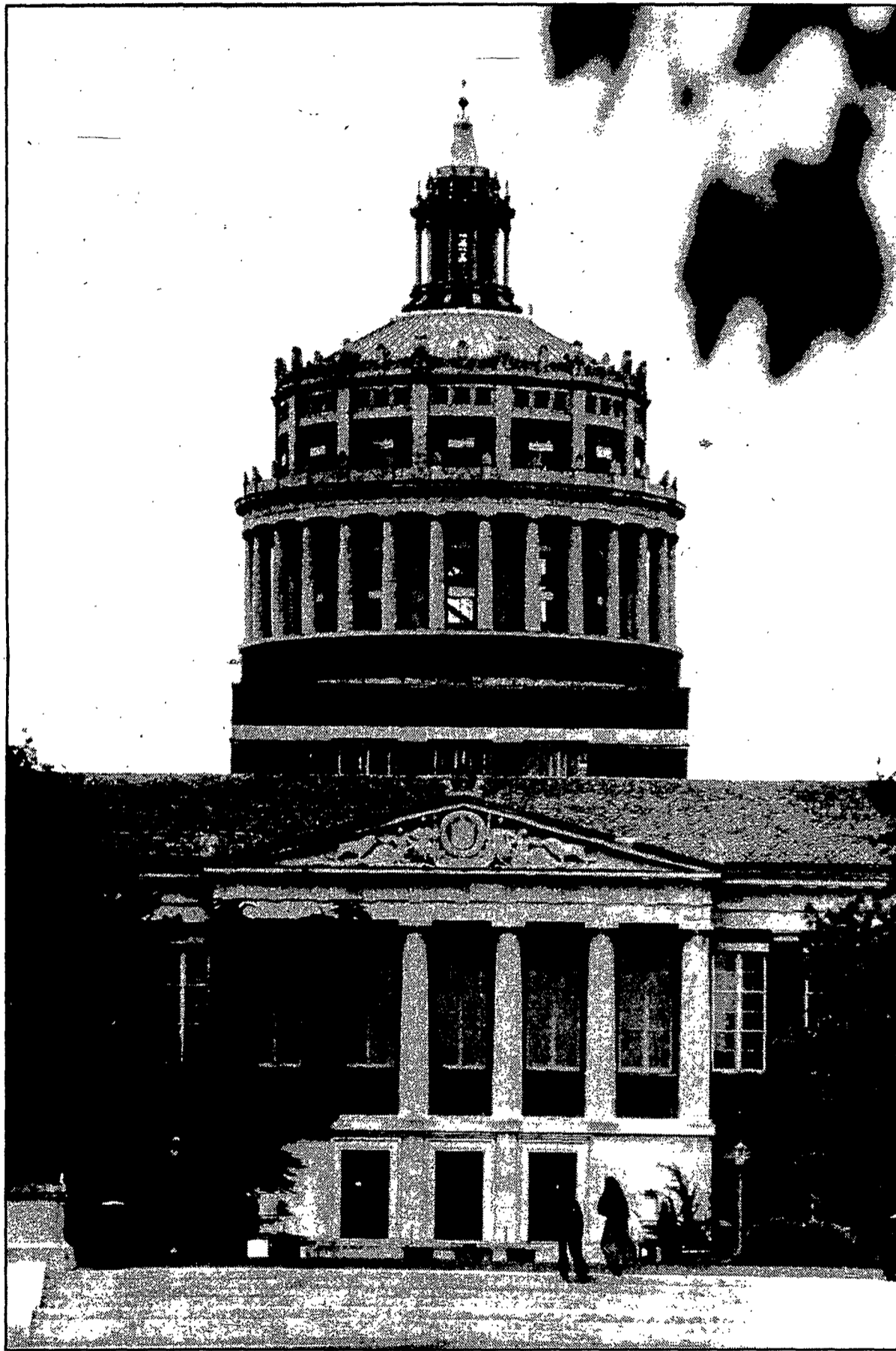
The conference, held at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, drew about 50 presidents and 400 other educators and administrators from more than 130 Catholic colleges and universities.

Jointly sponsored by the university and the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, it was focused on the theme of "Diverse Expressions of Catholic Identity" in Catholic higher education.

"A Catholic intellectual is not an oxymoron," Margaret O'Brien Steinfels said. She argued that Catholicism has a long, robust tradition of dialogue and critical engagement with culture.

It is up to Catholic higher education to maintain and pass on that tradition of Catholic intellectualism, she said, but it may soon be lost unless the question of Catholic identity is "honestly addressed and definitively taken on as a commitment and core project of institutions that hope to remain Catholic."

"You are attending a gathering that is potentially as important as Land O'Lakes," Peter Steinfels told the educators. In 1967 a small group of top Catholic university leaders meeting in Land O'Lakes, Wis., issued a landmark statement on the nature of Catholic higher education that has been a major point of reference for develop-



ments since then, including official Vatican documents on the subject.

"Three decades after the last refocusing of energy and creativity in Catholic higher education, and in the spirit of those earlier leaders, you are challenged to invent something new," he said.

"Catholic identity in institutions of higher education must be manifest in their intellectual life as well as in their liturgical celebration," he said.

Father Hehir, speaking at the

closing session of the meeting, said that what is at stake in Catholic higher education is not just the identity of the institutions themselves or their service to the church, but the place of Catholicism in U.S. culture.

Catholic colleges and universities, health care institutions and social service organizations make Catholics the largest non-profit presence in the United States, he said.

The three together need to bring more of the moral and ethical principles of their faith

to bear on American culture, he said.

"Catholic colleges and universities have some obligation to set the architecture for the discussion of Catholic identity with all three groups," he said.

Father Hehir said the debate in recent years over the Catholic identity of colleges and universities has yielded a valuable consensus about that identity.

That debate was occasioned by "Ex Corde Ecclesiae," Pope John Paul II's 1990 constitution on Catholic universities, and ef-

orts to find appropriate ways to implement that document in the U.S. context.

"The product of the last four or five years has been to make clear the complexity of the situation," Father Hehir said.

He said he has seen the discussion evolve from one in which participants started with their differences to one in which they start with their commonalities and begin to appreciate their differences and the richness of diversity within Catholicism.

He described the Second Vatican Council's teaching on the church in the modern world, which envisioned the church in service to and in dialogue with culture, as central to an understanding of the mission of Catholic higher education.

"There was the conviction (in Vatican II) that the church has something to teach the world and the church has something to learn from the world," he said. "Where else but in Catholic colleges and universities would this take place?"

On a wide range of public issues, from social ethics to bioethics, from war and peace to religion and society, Catholics "have something to say to a culture," he said.

Cardinal Laghi, addressing the role of Catholic higher education should have in the church, said, "The vision of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* is that the church calls upon the Catholic university to share in its mission."

"The presence of the church in the world of the university takes place, then, in a way which is appropriate to the nature of the university in its rendering a public service," he said.

Peter Steinfels warned the educators that if they do not tackle head-on some practical obstacles to a clear Catholic identity, they could lose the battle by default.

One he cited was the need to confront the issue of "the place in hiring (faculty) of religious commitment and religious interests in research and teaching."

If a church-related institution adopts a policy of hiring simply "the best qualified candidates" with no reference to religious tradition or interest, he said, that institution risks losing its religious identity.

He stressed that this does not mean that a Catholic institution hires only Catholics, but that it hires people who are committed to its religious mission and prepared to carry it out.

Contributing to this story were Bob Zyskowski and Pat Norby in St. Paul.