

COLUMNISTS

Church can learn from Catholic colleges

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

In early August, Peter Steinfels, senior religion correspondent for *The New York Times*, addressed a conference on Catholic higher education sponsored by the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities.

Although his presentation focused on the religious identity of Catholic colleges and universities, his observations are pertinent to all Catholic agencies and institutions, including parishes, dioceses and the Catholic Church itself.

In his talk he asked how Catholic colleges and universities are to avoid the fate of several major universities (e.g., Harvard, Duke, Northwestern) that were founded in one or another Protestant tradition, but are now no longer religious.

In an effort to respond to this question Steinfels identified eight elements of a new consensus among Catholic educators:

1. "You can't go home again." There is no returning to the days when Catholic conformity was "enforced by fiat."

2. We have to remember that we're living in a changed intellectual environment, one marked by an emphasis on community, tradition, diversity, and multiculturalism.

3. Catholic identity has to be manifested in an institution's intellectual life as well as in liturgical and pastoral areas.

4. Catholic identity cannot be limited to theology. The enforcement of the strictest rules of orthodoxy on theologians will not necessarily have any ap-



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preciable effect beyond theology departments.

5. The future of Catholic identity in universities and colleges will ultimately rest, not in the hands of the founding religious communities that are shrinking in size, but in those of lay people generally and the faculty in particular.

6. The question of Catholic identity is "inescapably linked to hiring policies." As Notre Dame professor George Marsden, an evangelical Protestant, has warned in his "The Soul of the American University" (1994), if Catholic colleges and universities adopt the policy of simply hiring the best-qualified candidates, it will only be a matter of time before the faculty and the institution lose their distinctive Catholic identity.

7. At the same time, the Catholic institution must be open to many different points of view. Sometimes non-

Catholics bring "critical scholarly insight and good will to the Catholic campus' mission far beyond what many Catholics offer."

8. "The whole process of clarifying and strengthening Catholic identity can be easily undermined by the intervention of nonacademic ecclesiastical authorities. Catholic identity simply cannot be imposed or assured by fiat ... If that cause is associated with nonacademic control over academic matters, the effort is half-lost before it has begun."

Peter Steinfels' helpful observations regarding Catholic higher education are just as applicable to the wider church, including its many pastoral, canonical, and social service agencies and institutions. Thus: 1. Contrary to the historically naive assumptions of certain ultra-conservative and restorationist Catholics, the church can never return to some imagined "golden age" of Catholicism, such as the 13th century, nor even to the pre-Vatican II 1950s, when Catholic conformity was still being imposed from above.

2. We live in a changed intellectual environment, marked by diversity and multiculturalism. As the pope's recent trip to Africa so dramatically demonstrated, Catholicism is not exclusively Western, Latin, or white - in its liturgies, its pastoral practices, or even in its understanding of morality.

3. Catholic identity cannot be preserved, much less enriched, within the church if its intellectual life is stifled or repressed out of fear that traditional methods of controlling thought and behavior will be weakened and the people's faith thereby lost.

4. Concern for Catholic identity can-

not be equated with concern for theological orthodoxy. Mainstream theologians have only limited influence on the wider church anyway, and "orthodox" theologians have even less. Catholic identity is expressed and sustained in the church's liturgy and sacramental life, its catechesis and religious education, and in the Catholic community's living practice of the faith.

5. Catholicism in the next century and the next millennium will not rise or fall primarily, much less exclusively, on the efforts of popes and bishops, but on those of committed and active lay people - most of whom are, and will continue to be, women.

6. The church should be more concerned than ever about the quality and preparation of candidates for entrance into the church. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), therefore, will be an increasingly crucial element in its life.

7. Catholicism cannot survive, much less flourish, if it is not also profoundly ecumenical in outlook and practice.

8. Attempts by the hierarchy to control thought and practice within the church by pre-Vatican II methods will continue to prove counterproductive. If that is the way the church's leadership hopes to maintain Catholic identity in the next century and the next millennium, its hopes are not likely to be fulfilled.

"American Catholicism's array of colleges and universities," Steinfels concludes, "was not created without risk-taking and readiness to venture something new."

The same surely applies to the church itself.

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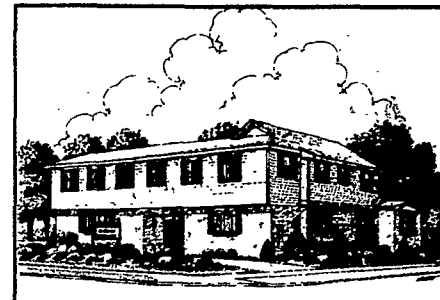
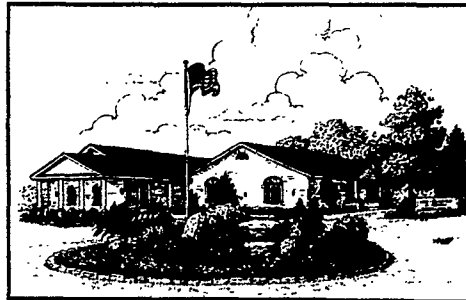


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