

The Contribution of Catholic Higher Education to the American Experience

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I am honored by the invitation to speak with you today. I have admired the Lilly Fellows Program since its inception, and I am amazed at what our friends at Valparaiso have accomplished. Like you I am personally grateful for their leadership in reopening the long frozen conversation about religion and American intellectual and academic life. At Holy Cross we have a Mission Statement that speaks of our College as a community of conversation about basic human questions of meaning and mutual obligation. As such, we regard critical attention to religious questions as an essential feature of liberal arts education. And, within that framework, we acknowledge a special obligation to attend to Catholic intellectual life while we draw on Catholic and Jesuit resources in our shared engagement with those fundamental questions of faith and justice. I am proud of that statement, and I believe it expresses at an institutional level the ideals of the Lilly Fellows Program and its founders.

I am particularly grateful to be assigned this topic of Catholic higher education and American civic life because I have in recent years been more than preoccupied---my friends would say obsessed-- with the public responsibilities of my own Catholic community. In addition, I am proud to say that I am a Catholic Americanist, a title perhaps unfamiliar to many in the room. Most simply it means that I believe that our American experience properly tests our faith quite as properly as our faith tests our American culture. More broadly, my brand of Catholic Americanism arises from the judgment that the Catholic experience in the United States has been a story of success, not failure, a story of liberation from poverty and marginalization, not a story of passive surrender to an alien culture. Catholic aspirations gave and still give birth to rich, diverse sub-cultures. Those in turn are permeated by the surrounding culture, at least in part because of the very American aspirations of Catholics themselves. They "become American" by choice, and as a result, and this will be our point today, they share responsibility for this land, which is truly their own. I am one of them. So my title today should perhaps not be "Catholic Higher Education's Contribution to the American Experience" but "Catholic Higher Education as American Experience and American Responsibility".

So, where to begin? On September 22, 2006, my wife and I were at the half way point of an eight day commitment to care for two of our remarkable grandchildren while their parents vacationed in Florida. I had fallen asleep on the family couch while thinking about preparing this presentation for the Lilly Fellows Program. I dreamed. In my dream Alan Wolfe of Boston

College's Center for Religion and American Public Life invited me to visit a seminar discussing religion, politics and Catholic higher education. After fretting about what to say, I decided I would simply enter the seminar, hold aloft a copy of Robert Ellsberg's "reading a day" book *All Saints* and tell the BC scholars: "Here is all you have to know!" There my dream ended. I awoke convinced that this is what I should tell you here in Cincinnati today. Ellsberg's "cloud of witnesses" range from Hebrew prophets, not all from ancient times, through traditional Christian saints, with exciting stories, to modern resisters, pacifists and rebels, not all of them Christian, or canonized, but all united by their dedication to the beloved community we Christians call the reign of God. We agree that Christian higher education, like all higher education, could be measured by the lives of its graduates, citizens and, perhaps, disciples. In both cases, citizenship and discipleship, they, our graduates, and we, their friends and mentors, are called to be saints, I would add American saints.

The question for the day, then, is the role of Catholic and other church-related higher educational institutions in developing American saints. Let's think about that, together.

First, some history. The story of American Catholic higher education has been well told by historians Philip Gleason and Alice Gallin, O.S.U., both good friends of the Lilly Fellows Program. Gleason's definitive history covers the period before the second Vatican Council while Sr. Alice tells the story of the years since, years in which she herself has been a key history maker. Gleason's Catholic colleges and universities took shape within the American Catholic subculture where they assisted the movement of American Catholics into the centers of American society and culture, all the while finding their distinctive rationale by "contending with modernity" in its American forms. They were American, without question, but they were Catholic because they were, as they were told to be, "certain and set apart" from secular

prevailing standards of academic freedom; later they would not altogether happily accept professional standards of academic governance. The revolution of separate incorporation

that advocates of the model of responsible public Catholicism embodied in American Catholic higher education have found themselves on the defensive as important church leaders have identified particular moral issues as definitive of faithful Catholic discipleship. Their defensiveness reveals the key point I want to make today: that modern Catholic higher education's contribution to American life, its Catholic as well as academic contribution, depends upon the presence in some form of Americanism. Our capacity in Catholic colleges and universities to empower one another and our students to live a Christian vocation, as disciples and citizens, turns on our answer to the American question: what do we make of the American experience, and of our own inescapable American-ness?

The "Catholic Answers" to that question we now hear are far from Americanist. They profess to be integrally Catholic and therefore counter-cultural. So far, on campus and off, American optimism has softened the hard edge of such counter-cultural distancing from America. Up until now Catholic critiques of American life have had a peculiarly American style: denounce the culture but don't miss lunch! But we can expect renewed "Catholic Answers" to take on a more serious tone, for its themes correspond to those set forth by the new Pope. As theologian Joseph Komonchak puts it, Benedict XVI believes that the faith must be presented as counter-cultural. It should appeal to the widespread sense of disillusionment with what modernity has promised but failed to deliver. It will appeal by "presenting the Christian vision in its totality as a comprehensive structure of meaning that at nearly every point breaks with the taken for granted attitudes, strategies and habits of contemporary culture". We hear echoes of the Holy Father's ideas in influential places. Cardinal Francis George is among the leaders of those bishops who are realigning the American church in a stance of opposition to modernity in general and to much of American society in particular. He told Pope John Paul II that "the Church in the United States

get back to church. Americanization without Americanism, a sense that our shared story has meaning, will always look, and be, wishy-washy.

What a generation of church leaders from Fr. Hesburgh through Cardinal Bernardin instinctively recognized was a point made years ago by Jesuit sociologist John Coleman: for a pluralist democracy to work it need more than a language that respects diversity and seeks a public moral consensus. Its people must love it. The common good, our common good, must be a genuine good. The public square is not naked but a common achievement allowing all to flourish. In the absence of such Americanism, the bilingualism required of Christians in pluralist democracy becomes not simply wishy-washy but impotent and indecisive, caught in the whiplash between civil religion at one end and pseudo-prophetic sectarianism at the other.

Let's take the queue

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church can at times seem burdensome, challenging, but at times disrespecting, our professional and civic obligations. So, in our human way, we sometimes minimize its importance in order to avoid conflict. But on our better days we try to turn the Catholic and Jesuit heritage, and our living connections with the church and the Society of Jesus, into assets that enrich our vocations. But, with the church as with the government, collaboration is a two way street and external authorities do not always make it easy for us, and we at times may not make it easy for them.

There is a specific form of solidarity required by each line of responsibility. Public and social solidarity means that we take with full seriousness our historic location in this place, among these people at this moment in history. Our academic work is located within a horizon that embraces what the Vatican Council called “the joys and the hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the men and women of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted”.

Similarly, our Catholic responsibilities point to an ecclesial solidarity as our academic work participates in the whole church’s service to the human family, touching not just Catholics but everything and everybody. Thus while we resist external control, our colleges and universities and those of us who practice our vocations within them, affirm our share of responsibility for the life and work of the church.

And far less securely established is an academic and intellectual solidarity that regards the “us against them” of countercultural religion with the same suspicion it directs at tribes and nations. Intellectual solidarity regards that we regard the problems facing all serious scholars and teachers as our problems as well. Here at BC in the work of people like David Hollenbach and Michael Buckley and Lisa Cahill and Jim O’Toole and your one time colleague Mary Brabeck, to name some people whose work I know and admire, you

they might have enjoyed at school or on a summer or overseas service project? Will they find a community of conscience and commitment in the workplace? Will they find it in your religious congregation or in mine? Where will they turn when they are asked for the first time to share in

know. In short, for friends at BC and Holy Cross: a lot is at stake. The mission and identity questions really do matter.

I have tried to argue an Americanist case. Michael Harrington's characterization of the impact of his Jesuit education was that "ideas have consequences". Harrington was not referring to a pragmatic epistemology or Ignatian discernment but to something altogether different: Jesuit priests who lived strange lives of poverty, chastity and obedience, and devoted themselves to their students day and night, because they actually believed the ideas they taught in class. If something is true, you are supposed to live that truth. So for we American Catholics. This is our land, indeed, and these are our people and, as the result of our remarkable history, we as a people and as a community can choose whether to embrace our American responsibilities, or reconstruct a subculture defined by distance and difference. The future is, as it has always been, in our hands.