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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

God and Man at Notre Dame

By KENNETH L. WOODWARD

POPE BENEDICT XVI will give several speeches during his visit to the United States, but the most consequential for American Catholics may be his address to the presidents of Catholic colleges and universities tomorrow.

Benedict has shown himself concerned about preserving the specifically Roman Catholic identity of all Catholic institutions, particularly those in higher education. His predecessor, John Paul II, tried to do this by insisting that Catholic theology professors sign a document called a mandatum affirming their fidelity to the papal teaching. Conservative Catholics are counting on Benedict to enforce this approach.

Yet, because Benedict is at heart a professor, I hope that he recognizes that fidelity to church teachings cannot be coerced.

No question, a Catholic university should be identifiably Catholic. But the problem of institutional identity goes far beyond litmus tests for theologians.

Arguments over the "identity crisis" on Catholic campuses have been going on for 50 years — long enough to realize that there is no single thing that makes a Catholic university Catholic. Indeed, the question of Catholic identity has as much to do with the changes in Catholic students and their parents as it does with faculty members and administrations.

In the early 1960s, half of all Catholic children attended Catholic grade and high schools. The 10 percent or so who went on to college had some 300 Catholic colleges and universities to choose from — more, in fact, than in the rest of the world combined. Catholics were expected to attend one of these; those who wanted to attend, say, an Ivy League college often had to get permission from their pastor.

Today few Catholic students or parents are likely to choose a Catholic university if Princeton or Stanford is an option. A Catholic higher education, in other words, is less prized by many Catholic parents — including complaining conservatives — than the name on the college diploma.

Another difference is this: Well into the 1960s, Catholic college freshmen arrived with a knowledge of the basics of their religion — enough, at least, to question the answers they were given as children or, among the brighter students, to be challenged in theology classes toward a more mature grasp of their faith.

Most of today's Catholic students, however, have no such grounding. Even the graduates of Catholic high schools, theology professors complain, have to be taught the fundamentals. As one Methodist theologian at Notre Dame wryly put it, "Before I teach my course on marriage I have to tell them first what their own church has to say on the subject."

No question, Catholic colleges were more "Catholic" then than they are today. Most were small campuses with a liberal-arts curriculum, making it easy to weave theology into the classroom mix. Most teachers were Catholic and many were priests and nuns.

The '60s changed all that. In 1966, the American Council on Education issued a study that failed to uncover a single Catholic university with a "distinguished or even strong" graduate department. This prompted Msgr. John Tracy Ellis, a leading American Catholic historian, to suggest a radical consolidation: American Catholics should support no more than three Catholic universities, one on each coast and one in between.

Ellis knew it would never happen, given the independence of each university. Yet his pronouncement prompted a contest

among Catholic universities in the hope of surviving the final cut. The rush was on to upgrade faculty and facilities, which meant competing for the best teachers and students regardless of religion. Then there was the Second Vatican Council's urging Catholics to embrace the modern world. This prompted many priests and nuns to abandon Catholic institutions to work "in the world," further accelerating the need for lay faculty members. Faculty strikes over academic freedom at Catholic universities led many to turn control over to lay-dominated boards of trustees.

Led by the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, the longtime president of Notre Dame, Catholic educators redefined the relationship between church and university. As Father Hesburgh adroitly put it, a Catholic university is the place "where the church does its thinking." Learning, in other words, is not indoctrination.

Since those transformative years, the number of Catholic colleges and universities has declined by a third. Some secularized, cutting all ties to the church, in order to survive. Others, especially those for women, closed their doors for lack of applicants. Many more grew through compromise: though nominally Catholic, they offered theology as not much more than a series of selections in a menu of course options.

America can still boast of a monopoly of the world's best Catholic educational institutions. Some are small liberal-arts colleges that have preserved or reinvented classical Catholic humanism. Others are more sectarian, fashioned in reaction to the demand for orthodoxy by John Paul II. A few universities like Notre Dame (my alma mater) have attained elite status while remaining manifestly Catholic.

I hope Pope Benedict will keep this diversity in mind when tomorrow he discusses the issue of institutional identity. I hope, too, that someone in his entourage will point out that there are more Catholic students at many of the big public universities in the Midwest than at any Catholic college. They are there by choice, their own or that of their parents.

What these students and their teachers need is a vision of what it means to be an educated Catholic, not just a lecture on preserving Catholic institutional identity. If Benedict can manage that, his words will be worth remembering.

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