

# THE QUEST FOR CATHOLIC IDENTITY FOR CATHOLIC UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES

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## **Introduction**

The complexities and pressures within modern western societies have eroded the perceived relevance of traditional sources of meaning and identity...The construction of meaning and identity is therefore, a critical developmental task...that needs to be well informed and supported by the Church, Catholic and religious education.<sup>1</sup>

There is currently a growing concern in the Catholic Church about the continued but gradual confusion or at best deviation from the age-old understanding of Catholic identity in the face of modern and contemporary ideologies, pressures and complexities of the human knowledge and societal organization.<sup>2</sup> Some even fear that the continuity of this trend could, in the near future, result in significant erosion of the fundamental Catholic identity which in reality, they say, may have seismic implications on the Church's survival.<sup>3</sup>

While this concern is generally shared about the Catholic Church, it is much more expressed about the Catholic Universities and Colleges, some of whom are seen to have

over the years, assumed continually nuanced configurations and identities.<sup>4</sup> This development no doubt, provokes such critical questions as, what is a Catholic University? What should constitute the identity of a Catholic College? What is the nature of a Catholic University and the like.<sup>5</sup> These questions invariably raise a legitimate critical issue of what is and what should be the true and enduring identity of Catholic Colleges and Universities today in the midst of growing technological and scientific advancements, cultural dynamism, societal configurations and incessant social change.<sup>6</sup>

The quest then into the true identity for Catholic Universities and Colleges in the attempt to reassert their fundamental character as citadels of sacred and sound learning, where faith and reason meaningfully interact for the faithful service of the truth (Benedict XVI, 2008) becomes imperative. It is in clear appreciation of this need therefore, that this work embarks on this enquiry, *Quest for Catholic Identity for Catholic Universities and Colleges*. It is its expectation that this enquiry would provoke some critical questions that would help to further understand and effectively engage this issue of the Catholic identity of Catholic Universities in our world today.

### **Quest for Catholic Identity: What is Catholic Identity?**

D'Antonio, Davidson, Hoge & Gautier define “identity” as “a person's sense of self, his or her concept.”<sup>7</sup> (p. 15). Alternatively, it is circumscribed as basically referring to the factor that differentiates one thing from another. That is, the essential characteristics that belong to a person, institute or organization.<sup>8</sup> On this understanding of identity in general, they explain that Catholic Identity can be viewed as the distinctiveness and the uniqueness of the Catholic institutions.<sup>9</sup> In a similar way, Fuller et al., place the meaning of Catholic identity within the frame of the incorporation and expression of three circumscribing principles/characteristics; viz: universality (Catholic), tradition and sacramentality.<sup>10</sup>

These three principles, they observe, though overlapping and interdependent, yet distinctive, constitute the defining strands of Catholicism that confer the Catholic Identity. Thus, to be a Catholic, true to the name, would mean

to be in full accord with the teachings and traditions of the Universal Church and to accept and submit to her hierarchical authority<sup>11</sup> (p.17). This understanding of the Catholic identity, it would appear, places more emphasis on what differentiates than on what binds<sup>12</sup>, which however, would seem to be the leaning for many with the shift of emphasis of the Vatican Council II.<sup>13</sup> It remains, nonetheless, the subsisting conceptualization of the Catholic identity and thus would be adopted as the work's working definition here.

### **Catholic Universities and Colleges: Identity of**

Pope Benedict XVI in his address to *Catholic Educators* in his 2008<sup>14</sup> visit to the United States, states that a University's Catholic identity does not necessarily reside in the number of students it has. But rather it resides in her acceptance and manifest conviction in the mystery of the Word made Man, commitment to the self, both in mind and heart, to God, acceptance of the truth that Christ reveals faithfulness to the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church, and in acts of charity, concern for justice and respect for God. These he avers give fervent expressions to these truths and mystery of the Catholic faith. As such, in the mind of the Pope, the true Catholic Identity of Catholic Universities and Colleges must be found not in its numerical constitution but in its total immersion in the life, values, teachings, celebrations and sacramentality of the Church.

In this way, the true identity of the Catholic university and colleges has to involve recognition and commitment to the ecclesial duty to illuminate the light of Christ, demonstrate the harmony between faith and reason and maintain a careful and discreet posture towards methods and discoveries that not only deviate from the principles of the Catholic teaching and cherished values but also that are seen to have controversial ethical implications and coloration.<sup>15</sup> It is in the light of this functional identity that the Catholic Universities and colleges are called to maintain a posture that is in perfect accord with the Church's teachings and positions on issues. Every Catholic university or college is, thus, charged with the inalienable commitment to the service of the truth<sup>16</sup>; to perform some specific functions for the Church

from whose heart it is drawn.<sup>17</sup>

Maintaining the identity of Catholic Universities and Colleges as institutions drawn from the heart of the Church to be an extension of the Church's life, teachings and cherished values and faith has posed current and contentious issue both in the Church and in the institutions themselves. In relatively recent times, the Catholic identity of the Catholic Colleges has been viewed to be gravely undermined in these universities' pursuit of relativism and unrestricted academic freedom, laying claim to their right to independence and autonomy.<sup>18</sup> Coupled with the declining control of the Bishops over these institutions, many faculty members shifted focus from the Catholic tradition "rooted in the liberal arts which was originally seen as tools to train the mind and heart to be able to deal with the big issues of the day and apply Christian faith to them"<sup>19</sup> to opposing alternatives. In some Catholic Colleges and universities, the concept of boundary and distinctive culture which define the Catholic identity are either undermined or totally lost within the campuses of these institutions morphing to places where almost anything goes.<sup>20</sup>

The critical nature of this development<sup>21</sup> especially in the 1970s, 1980s & 1990s, generated such complex questions and issues as: Who can teach the Catholic Theology in the Catholic University? What should be the supervisory role of Bishops in the internal organization of Catholic Colleges and Universities on Campuses? What are the core elements of the Catholic Identity of a Catholic University or College? How much freedom should be allowed faculty members? And what should be the criteria for selection of candidates for honorary degrees in Catholic Colleges and Universities?

To address these issues, Pope John Paul II issued two separate documents: *Sapientia Christiana* and *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* on April 29, 1979 and August 15, 1990 respectively. While in the former, he focuses on ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties that grant ecclesiastical degrees, in the latter, he aims at providing clarity of vision on the purpose and mission of Catholic Colleges and Universities.

The Holy Father defines a Catholic University as:

An academic community which, in a rigorous and critical fashion, assists in the protection and

advancement of human dignity and of a cultural heritage through research, and various services offered to the local, national and international communities. It possesses that institutional autonomy necessary to perform its functions effectively and guarantees its members academic freedom, as long as the rights of the individuals, persons and community are preserved within the confines of truth and common good.<sup>22</sup>

According to him, Catholic universities have four distinctive characteristics that define them uniquely and present them distinctively. These characteristics portray the Catholic university as an institution with an identity that is informed and shaped by:

- 1) A Christian inspiration not only of individuals, but of the university community as such
- 2) A continuing reflection in the light of the Catholic Faith upon the growing treasury of human knowledge, to which it seeks to contribute by its own research
- 3) Fidelity to the Christian message as it comes to us through the Church and
- 4) An institutional commitment to the people of God and of the human family in their pilgrimage to the transcendent goal which gives meaning to life.<sup>23</sup>

These distinctive marks were stipulated as the defining frames for every Catholic University or College and every Catholic University or College was expected to carry or be identified by these marks. In this way, it was thought that the issue of indistinctness and ambiguity about the true character and identity of the Catholic University or College anywhere in the world would be wholly resolved and laid to rest. But did this put the issue of the Catholic identity of Catholic University to rest? It did not seem it did. Developments after the documents continue to indicate that the quest for distinctive and common delineation and understanding of the Catholic identity for Catholic Universities and Colleges

remained very relevant and was still very much alive. We inquire more.

### **Historical Development**

D'Antonio et al.,<sup>24</sup> observe that over the years, the Catholic identity of the average self-identified Catholic in terms of perception of the Catholic identity, identification with the faith and commitment to her cherished and taught values has consistently continued to evolve, variegate and assume new coloration. Just as there has been evolving perception and conceptualization of the identity of the Catholic among Catholic members in general, so also it has been about the Catholic identity of Catholic universities and colleges. Historical consideration, however, of the earliest periods of the existence of Catholic universities does not suggest that the question of the Catholic identity of Catholic universities and colleges was an issue.<sup>25</sup> It was a given that to be identified as Catholic university meant to be immersed in and to uphold unequivocally the known identity and commitment of the Church. Though the place of the origin of university remains unsettled among scholars with some identifying it with the Greeks, and others, Rome, it is, however, clear that the origin of the modern organization of the university system is undeniably traceable to the Catholic Church. It is the Catholic Church which in the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century aided the unity of three Cathedral schools to form a university.<sup>26</sup> Thus, in the early centuries of the existence of this institution, most of the leading universities basically existed as extensions of the Church's life, beliefs and values.

It was not until 1871, following Darwin's publication of *The Descent of Man*, that some questions began to emerge as to what should be the true identity of the Catholic Universities. The call for reform of the Church's teaching to conform with modern science and sociology, the review of the content of the universities' curriculum and the general crisis that this publication provoked led to the issuance of two papal documents: *Testem Benevolentiae Nostrae* of Pope Leo XII, 1899 and *Paschendi Dominici Gregis* of Pope St Pius V, 1907. Both documents condemned the call and posture and described them as heretical and an attempt at the

enthronement of relativism. Since then, there has arisen series of declarations and postures, especially after Vatican II that has continually kept alive the critical question of the Catholic identity of Catholic universities and colleges.

For example, the *Eugenic Movement* that spanned from 1899 to the 1960s on the basis of which many prominent universities and colleges' professors and luminaries like *Fr John A O' Brien*, C.S.C “publicly criticized Church teaching on sexual morality and advocated their reform to conform to the times”<sup>27</sup> are still fresh in modern memories. In 1967, there was the *Notre Dame* statement, or the *Land O'Lakes* declaration, where the autonomy and independence of the universities from both lay and clerical authorities was asserted and enshrined. As a result, many of the universities and colleges engaged in activities that consistently raised question about the authenticity of their catholic identity. By 1972, many universities who were not part of the Land O' Lakes declaration adopted it; such that any appeal for an unreserved commitment to the fundamentals of the Catholic faith became considerably ineffective in most of these institutions. The Land O' Lakes declaration won admiration in many quarters that in 1976, the National Catholic Education Association of the United States (NCEA) adopted it and made it an official document. The Vatican however, never gave its approval<sup>28</sup>.

This trend took a different turn in 1990 as observed earlier. Some professors of theology in some Catholic universities and colleges did not only make statements that ran contrary to some Catholic teachings but also attempted to publicly debunk the principles on which the tenets of these teachings sprung and stood. We have, for instance the case of Fr. Macquarie of Marquette University who in his sacred Choices declared abortion, as an option, a sacred choice.<sup>29</sup> This spurred the instance and issuance of the *Ex Corde* referenced earlier to address the issue. These examples are some historical cases in point that suggest that the question of the Catholic identity of Catholic universities and colleges has been and continue to be an issue of critical concern for the Church. While these controversies seem to have expression in lands geographically distant from the African continent, their

possible or potential influence in the African continent in the near or distant future cannot be totally occluded. Be that as it may, the reality and recurrence of these developments evoke a lot of critical questions that demand urgent attention and extensive consideration. We note a few.

### **Critical Questions**

It would appear that the Papal document of Pope John Paul II, *Ex Corde* resolved this issue of the true identity of Catholic universities and colleges. But recent developments in these institutions, like the continued hosting of the “Coming Out Week” and the publication of “*Vagina Monologues*, both by Notre Dame University, which have been criticized as opposed to Catholic teachings on sexual morality, protection of human life and contraception, indicate clearly that this issue is far from being laid to rest. Hence, the more reasons that the following questions remain critical: Who can teach the Catholic Theology in a Catholic University? What should be the supervisory role of the Bishops in the internal organization of Catholic Colleges and Universities? Who should be invited to speak in their campuses? What constitutes appropriate activities on campuses? What are the core elements of the catholic identity of a Catholic university or college? How much freedom should be allowed faculty members? And what should be the criteria for selection of candidates for honorary degrees in Catholic Colleges and Universities?

### **Conclusion**

The paper has attempted to point out that finding or carving the right and enduring definition and circumscription of the actual identify of Catholic universities and colleges, remains a critical issue that appears to continue to demand attention and resolution. In so doing it observed that this attention and/or resolution that it apparently demands may be not effectively pursued and engaged if recourse to and clear understanding of the antecedents of the developments in the existence and intervention for this issue are not included in the effort. That is why this work took an intellectual journey into the development and progression of this issue over time

and highlighted efforts made to bring the final denouement to the issue. It was also able to show how these efforts of intervention and response do not seem to have quelled or surmounted the issue.

In this way, the paper noted how the issue continues to haunt or linger and yawn for more and urgent action to forestall greater harm that its continued presence can trigger and/or engender. It is the expectation of this paper that unambiguous delineation of the identity of the Catholic university or college is needed and the need to insist on compliance to the determined character and defining marks of the Catholic identity of the Catholic University or College for it to be properly and unquestionably so calls for urgent and specific action. To this end, it has been the intention of this paper to provoke and spur relevant efforts to put final analysis, conclusion and clarification to the issue of what can be properly known as Catholic University and/or College and totally lay this issue to rest.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Rossiter, G. & Tinsey, W. *Search for Meaning and Identity*. Brisbane: ACU, 2002, p. 1

<sup>2</sup>D'Antonio, W.V., Davidson, J.D., Hoge, D.R& Gautier, M. L. *American Catholic Today: New Realities of their Faith and their Church*: New York: ASHEED AND WARD BOOK, 2007.

<sup>3</sup>Hendershot, A. Obama and the alternative magisterium: How Catholic Universities and Colleges played a role in Electing him, despite the Pope's message to them about Fidelity to the Church's Teaching, March, 2009.

McIntire, M. V. From orthodoxy to heresy: The secularizing of Catholic universities. *New Oxford Review* 75 (8) pp. 26-31. Retrieved March 9, 2014 from Pro Quest *Catholic World Report*, pp. 19-22., 20008.

<sup>4</sup>Pace, E. "Universities" *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 15. New York: Robert Appleton, 1912.

<sup>5</sup>The question of the indistinctness or nebulousness of the delineation of the identity of what is Catholic in the Catholic College or University comes to mind. The need for close engagement, determination and clarification for what should present for an institution that must go by the qualification "Catholic" is called for, and the resolution of this may be urgent.

<sup>6</sup>Fullan, M. *Leading in a Culture of Change*. San Francisco CA: Jossey-Bass, 2007.

- <sup>7</sup>D'Antonio, W.V. et al., Opera cit. (p.15)
- <sup>8</sup>*Encarta World English Dictionary* Microsoft Corporation, 2005
- <sup>9</sup>D'Antonio, W.V. et al., Opera Cit. (p.17)
- <sup>10</sup>Fuller, J. L., & Eamon, M. *Irish and Catholic? Towards an Understanding of Identity*. Dublin: Columbia Press, 2006.
- <sup>11</sup>Ibid, p.17
- <sup>12</sup>Agnus, I. *Identity and Justice*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008.
- <sup>13</sup>D'Antonio, W.V. et al., Op. cit.
- <sup>14</sup>Benedict XVI. Meeting with Catholic educators: Address of His Holiness, Benedict XVI." In L.T. Cameron, R.G. Henning & P.I. Vaccari (eds.) *Christ Our Hope: Pope Benedict XVI's Visit to the United States and Visit to the United Nations*. Washington DC: EDITIONS DU SIGNE, 2008.
- <sup>15</sup>Pope John Paul II. On Catholic Universities: Ex Corde Ecclesiae. Washington D. C. : United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, 1990, no. 12. Latter versions exist. The contents of the latter versions do not markedly defer on the issues referenced herein from the contents of this earlier version.
- <sup>16</sup>United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Education. *Catholic Identity in Our Colleges and Universities: A Collection of Defining Documents*. Washington DC: USCCB, 2006.
- <sup>17</sup>On Catholic Universities: Ex Corde Ecclesiae, Op. cit.
- <sup>18</sup>Hendershot, A. (2009, March) Op. cit.
- McIntire, M. V., Op. cit.
- <sup>19</sup>Morey, M. M. & Piderit, J. J. *Catholic Higher Education a Culture in Crisis*: New York: Oxford Press, 2006, p. 4.
- <sup>20</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>21</sup>The variegation in opinion about what Catholic identity should be generated a lot of questions about what actually should stand as the unifying strand for what can be truly claimed the catholic identity as typified in Institutions of leaning.
- <sup>22</sup>Pope John Paul II. On Catholic Universities: Ex Corde Ecclesiae, op. cit. no 12.
- <sup>23</sup>Ibid. no 13
- <sup>24</sup>D'Antonio, W.V. et al., Op. cit.
- <sup>25</sup>McIntire, M. V., Op. cit.
- <sup>26</sup>Pace, E. "Universities" *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 15. Op. cit.
- <sup>27</sup>McIntire, M. V., Op. cit., p. 28
- <sup>28</sup>Legan, J. P. *Catholic Universities in the Church and Society: A Culture in Crisis*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- <sup>29</sup>Hendershot, A., Op. Cit.