

Notre Dame and the Future of Catholic Higher Education

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Dedicated to Ralph McInerny (1929-2010)

Introduction

I begin with a passage in which the author describes his own reaction, growing up as a child in a small Bavarian village in the mid-1930s, to the slow-but-sure National Socialist takeover of the parochial schools:

“The battle against parochial schools began to be waged. The still existing bond between school and Church was now to be dissolved, and the school’s spiritual foundation was no longer to be the Christian faith but the ideology of the Führer. With great intensity the bishops led the battle for the preservation of parochial schools and for the upholding of the concordat, and the pastoral letters on this subject that our pastor read in church made a deep impression on me. Already then it dawned on me that, with their insistence on preserving institutions, these letters in part misread the reality. I mean that merely to guarantee institutions is useless if there are no people to support those institutions from inner conviction To be sure, teachers could be found who had deep convictions of faith But in the older generations there existed an anti-clerical resentment [and] in the younger generation there were convinced Nazis. So in both these cases it was inane to insist on an institutionally guaranteed Christianity.” ([Milestones](#), p. 15)

The author, as some of you have undoubtedly guessed, is Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI. The institutions he is talking about were being “hollowed out from within,” to use Chesterton’s turn of phrase, and Ratzinger suggests that the bishops should have at a certain point abandoned their attempt to save the Catholic schools as institutions and embarked instead on a more creative course to provide the sort of Catholic intellectual formation that the schools had been created to ensure. My conviction is that we find ourselves in a similar situation today in America with respect to much of what passes itself off as Catholic higher education.

I’m going to set these sentiments aside for the moment and return to them at the end of my talk.

In the meantime I want to describe briefly the events that began on March 20, 2009, when the University of Notre Dame announced that it would be honoring President Obama at its commencement ceremonies, and continued until graduation day, May 17. Those eight weeks witnessed a many-pronged protest against the university’s actions by a surprising

number of bishops, including the local ordinary; by a group of exceptionally zealous and well-organized students; by a handful of faculty in support of the students; and by many, many others outside the university proper, including alumni, nationally known pro-life leaders, and above all, thousands upon thousands of ordinary American Catholics who saw the situation through the eyes of a deep faith in Jesus Christ and in His message of hope and conversion.

After recounting the events, I will give a brief analysis of how Notre Dame came to be in conflict with the segment of the American Catholic population that has taken its inspiration from Pope John Paul II and from Pope Benedict, both before and after his election as Pope.

These two sections will parallel my Introduction to Charles Rice's book [*What Happened to Notre Dame?*](#), in which I characterized present-day Notre Dame as something like "a public school in a Catholic neighborhood." I will supplement the material in that Introduction (a) by replying to retrospective interpretations of the Spring 2009 protests by two present-day leaders of 'Catholic higher education' and (b) by commenting on a now-famous article that helped trigger the revolution of Catholic higher education in the 1960s.

Finally, I will return briefly and inchoatively to the more general question of the prospects for the future of Catholic higher education in the United States. The main thrust of this section will be that faithful Catholics, and especially bishops, should recognize that we, like German Catholics in the 1930s, are at a point where entrenched ways of thinking about Catholic education are impeding the work of Christ and His Church and need to yield to innovative ways of thinking.

Why I was not scandalized

Unlike many others, I personally was not scandalized by my university's decision to honor President Obama, despite the fact that in the short time since his inauguration the President had, as promised beforehand, taken several steps to promote the practice of abortion and embryonic stem-cell research and had, in addition, darkly suggested that he was prepared to roll back conscience protections for Catholics and others working in the medical and health care professions.

The reason I was not scandalized was that I had, as a member of the philosophy department at Notre Dame, lived through the last thirty years of those historical trends that Charles Rice ably identifies in his book: the university's steadily intensifying and often frustrated aspiration to be regarded as a major player on the American educational scene; the concomitant segregation of faith from reason; the deterioration of the core curriculum for undergraduates into a series of disjointed 'course distribution requirements' guided by no comprehensive conception of how to produce intellectually mature Catholics; the all too easy transition from a faculty dominated by 'progressive' Catholics who took their faith seriously to a faculty more and more dominated by people largely ignorant of the Catholic

faith and especially of its intellectual dimensions; the marginalization of faculty who professed allegiance to, or even admiration for, the present-day successors of the Apostles; and a succession of high-level administrators lacking in a philosophical vision of Catholic higher education and intent on diffusing throughout the university a pragmatic mentality at once both bureaucratic and corporate. In addition to these trends, there had been a series of ‘incidents’—stretching from the Land O’Lakes Statement and the university’s coziness with the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations in the mid-1960s to the tiresomely recurring debate over the *Vagina Monologues* in the first decade of the 21st century—which had served to put more and more strain on the relationship between the university and the Church it claimed to be serving.

All of this, and more, had long ago led me to a personal *modus vivendi* in my attitude toward the university. Notre Dame is a wonderful place, and I am deeply grateful to have spent most of my adult life here. It is a university as universities go these days (therein lies another tale), and it is in some obvious sense Catholic. What it is not—and has not been since I have been here—is a Catholic university, i.e., an institution of higher learning where the Catholic faith pervades and enriches, and is itself enriched by, the intellectual life on campus. What it is instead is a national private university that is more open to Catholic faith and practice than any other national private university I know of. Or, as I like to put it in a less formal idiom, Notre Dame today is something like a public school in a Catholic neighborhood.

This might sound shocking to some, but it is, I submit, what the vast majority of present-day administrators, faculty members, students, and alumni *mean* when they sincerely, though mistakenly, claim that Notre Dame is a Catholic university. For they assume without much thought that the Catholic character of the university is borne almost entirely by features of the ‘neighborhood’ that are not peculiar to the distinctive educational and scholarly mission of a university, e.g., by the university’s sacramental life and associated activities such as retreats, bible study groups, sacramental preparation courses, etc.; by various good works and service projects; by a set of faith-inspired rules governing campus life, e.g., single-sex dorms, parietals, restrictions on parties and alcohol consumption, various regulations governing the nature and funding of student organizations, etc.; and by the sheer number of ‘outdoor’ and ‘indoor’ manifestations of Catholicism such as the statue of Our Lady atop the Golden Dome, Sacred Heart Basilica, the Grotto, the “Touchdown Jesus” mural, chapels in every dorm and in many of academic buildings as well, and scores of religious sculptures scattered all over the ‘neighborhood’. It is here in the ‘neighborhood’ that virtually all of a student’s moral and spiritual formation, if any, will take place. This is where ‘faith’ resides on campus; this is where the ‘heart is educated’, to employ one of the catchphrases that the university uses to promote itself.

The classroom or laboratory, by contrast, is a wholly different venue, despite the presence of crucifixes. This is the ‘public school’ part of Notre Dame and the locus, by and large, solely of specialized intellectual formation. This is where ‘reason’ resides on campus and where ‘the mind is educated’; and, as things stand, it has little or nothing to do with Catholicism.

To be sure, there are a number of professors, both inside and outside the theology department, who self-consciously think of themselves as Catholic (or, as the case may be, Christian or Jewish) intellectuals and who can, in combination with one another, provide a student who chooses his or her courses very carefully with something resembling a Catholic education. Moreover, there are more professors of this sort than one would ordinarily expect to find at a national private university in the United States. Nevertheless, they constitute only a small percentage of the total faculty, and their conviction that a Catholic student's intellectual life should be fully integrated with his or her Catholic beliefs and practices is very much a minority view. Most faculty members would, to the contrary, be deeply disturbed by the prospect of having doctrinally orthodox Catholicism intrude itself into the classroom in any way at all.

Given this background, it should be easy to understand why I was not scandalized by the university's decision to honor President Obama. I have come to expect that the teachers and administrators of the public school will periodically decide to tweak the noses of the 'unenlightened' among their Catholic neighbors. That's just the way it often is with public schools in Catholic neighborhoods.

The Protest

I now turn to the protest itself. I want to begin by correcting some retrospective interpretations of that protest that are utterly implausible, despite the fact that their purveyors occupy positions of leadership in (purportedly) Catholic higher education.

In an interview with the Catholic News Service in early 2010, the president of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities claimed that the Notre Dame commencement brouhaha was mainly a partisan political reaction against President Obama and that "the situation that arose at Notre Dame created the first national flash point for a whole lot of people who wanted to comment specifically on Barack Obama to do that at the expense of the commencement at Notre Dame" ([*Today's Catholic*, Feb. 7, 2010, p.4](#)).

What this interpretation conveniently overlooks is that the commencement protest was explicitly and self-consciously directed against *Notre Dame* and *not* against the President. It was not President Obama who was being tepid in his commitments or ambiguous about what he stood for or would fight for. It was not President Obama who was speaking out of both sides of his mouth regarding the protection of innocent unborn life. It was not President Obama who was sycophantically hankering after the respect of his secular "aspirational peers," as we say at Notre Dame. The protest arose not from any partisan political agenda, but from the depths of the Catholic Faith and as the expression of a genuine *sensus fidelium*. And it was aimed at the infidelity and hypocrisy of some powerful (in the worldly sense) Catholics who were expected to know better. The distorted interpretation under discussion indicates that such Catholics haven't yet learned their lesson. In the end, the attempt on the part of the reigning powers to characterize the protest as merely political is just part of a deceitful and self-serving strategy aimed at

forestalling embarrassing questions about the institutional infidelity of Notre Dame and many other supposedly Catholic institutions of higher learning.

Again, in a May 2010 interview with the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Notre Dame's president in effect accused the previous year's protestors of having exhibited a "[scorched-earth strategy toward disagreement](#)," implying that he himself had been criticized because he had welcomed a President with whom he disagreed on many issues and because he had failed to condemn him. This reading of "the signs of the times" can only be characterized as obtuse to the point of being laughable. Once again, the protest was clearly directed exclusively against Notre Dame and its administrators, and it was directed against them not because they *welcomed* or *failed to condemn* President Obama, but because they *chose to honor* him. You don't have to be a trained philosopher to grasp *that* distinction.

In any case, instead of the brief outcry anticipated by university administrators, the announcement of the honor to be conferred on President Obama evoked a very long and very spirited protest, one that kept making news almost continuously during the eight weeks between March 20 and May 17. This protest had many prongs:

- Bishop John D'Arcy, the local ordinary, had found out about the invitation to President Obama only hours before the March 20 announcement that the President would in fact be coming to Notre Dame. On March 29 he issued a press release rebuking the university for having chosen "prestige over truth." In addition, he pointed out that the university's intention to honor President Obama was a violation of a 2004 statement in which the American bishops asked that Catholic institutions "not honor those who act in defiance of our fundamental moral principles."
- On March 28 Cardinal Francis George of Chicago, the President of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, made the extemporaneous comment, caught on video and soon afterwards broadcast on the internet, that the invitation to President Obama was "an extreme embarrassment to Catholics" and that "Notre Dame didn't understand what it means to be Catholic when they issued this invitation." This was followed, over the course of the next seven weeks, by a series of public statements by some 83 individual American bishops taking the university's administration to task, sometimes in extremely harsh terms.
- ND Response, a coalition of eleven student groups brought together by their opposition to the university's decision to honor President Obama, sponsored a series of protest events and organized an alternative program for commencement weekend. (The alternative commencement on May 17 drew a crowd of about 3,000, including many young people and many young families.) Several of the individual students associated with ND Response kept appearing on national television and radio explaining the reasons for their protest, and doing it very well.
- On April 8 ten priests of the Congregation of Holy Cross, Notre Dame's founding

religious order, published a letter deploring both the university's decision and "especially the fissure that the invitation to President Obama has opened between Notre Dame and its local ordinary and many of his fellow bishops." This letter stood in marked contrast to the absence of any public protest against the university or public support for the bishop from the leaders of the Congregation.

- Alumni groups were formed to protest the university's decision and to urge Notre Dame alumni to withhold contributions from the university. One beneficiary of the publicity surrounding the commencement controversy was Project Sycamore, a group of alumni and friends of the university that had been created in 2006 in reaction to some of the trends noted above. During the weeks of the protest, this group's email list grew by leaps and bounds.
- In late March the Cardinal Newman Society, a watchdog organization dedicated in part to exposing violations of Catholic thought and practice by professedly Catholic colleges and universities, started an on-line petition protesting Notre Dame's action. The petition had garnered a remarkable 360,000 signatures by May 17.
- The "Notre Dame scandal" was featured prominently, with plenty of commentary, on popular Catholic blogs and was the subject of many columns critical of the university that appeared on the websites of *The Wall Street Journal*, *National Review*, *First Things* and other conservative-leaning journals.
- There were 'unwelcome' outside protesters as well, themselves scornful of what they felt was too tepid a reaction by Bishop D'Arcy and ND Response. One enterprising fellow, who sneered that ND Response and other campus critics of the Obama invitation were no better than "pro-life pacifists," paid to have an advertising plane drone around the campus airspace for a few hours every day with a trailer depicting a tenth week abortion. While the bishop and ND Response repudiated the rhetoric of these outsider protests, many of us still have vivid images of harmless-looking people, including a priest and a nun, being arrested, it seemed, for doing nothing more than walking down Notre Dame Avenue praying the rosary. Almost all those arrested decided to plead 'not guilty' to the trespassing charges against them. The litigation is still going on even now in June of 2010, with no end in sight.
- Lastly, just as the news coverage finally seemed to be petering out, on April 27 Harvard Law Professor and pro-life hero Mary Ann Glendon announced that she was declining the Laetare Medal, which, according to Notre Dame, is "the oldest and most prestigious honor given to American Catholics."

And through all of the turmoil leading up to commencement day, the university and its public relations operation seemed to make one bumbling and even comical move after another, several of which I recount in my Introduction to Rice's book.

The Analysis

How is it that Notre Dame, the self-proclaimed “greatest Catholic university in the world,” found itself alienating the most vibrant and fruitful elements within the American Catholic community?

The various factors on the university’s side of the split can be accurately summarized by what I call “the four I’s,” viz., *impatience*, *infidelity*, *ingratiation*, and *impenitence*.

As Notre Dame’s drive to become a distinguished university was maturing in the late 1950s and into the next three decades, the time was neither right nor ripe for the massive growth that the university would experience. The vision of what this “great Catholic university” would be was too vague, the times were too tempestuous, and the philosophical reflection on the matter was too spotty and too superficial to serve as a guide on rough seas. Yet it was “full steam ahead,” nonetheless. This is in part what I mean by *impatience*.

Why such impatience? Commentators often point to an article entitled [“American Catholics and the Intellectual Life,”](#) published in 1955 by the distinguished Church historian John Tracy Ellis—this despite the fact that many years later Ellis confided to my colleague Ralph McInerney that he regretted the use to which his article had been put at the time by certain leaders in Catholic higher education. The main thrust of the article was that while Catholics in the mid-1950s seemed to be on their way to prominence in other professions, they were lagging behind as scholars and intellectuals.

Ironically, Ellis’s article begins with what looks in retrospect like a fairly plausible and not particularly worrisome explanation for this phenomenon. First of all, the Catholic immigrant families who came to the United States in the pre-World War II era from places such as Ireland, Italy, Germany, Poland, and Belgium were working people and most assuredly not intellectuals. (Contrast this with the waves of Jewish intellectuals who came to the United States in order to escape the likes of Hitler and Stalin.) Even though education was an important value in the eyes of these new American Catholics, they saw it mainly as a means to social and economic advancement rather than as an end in itself. Second, the substantial anti-Catholic sentiment within American culture was (and still is) particularly pronounced among intellectuals and within American universities. Why should gifted young Catholics have subjected themselves to this sort of prejudice when other, more agreeable routes to professional success were available? Besides, there was every reason to expect that the third and fourth generations of immigrant families would begin to produce scientists and humanists and other intellectuals in greater numbers. This is indeed what has happened. Unfortunately, Catholic higher education had by that point already deteriorated to such a degree in its aims and its contents that when budding intellectuals finally begin to emerge from the mid-1960s onward, they were not, by and large, *Catholic intellectuals*, but only *intellectuals* who *happened to be Catholic* and whose faith was neither *intellectually* mature nor pervasive in their intellectual life. (This is an exact description of many intellectuals who are today in charge of the large and diminishingly Catholic universities.)

In the end, however, it was the last section of Ellis's article that generated the catchphrase that would be tirelessly invoked—in rhythmic chant, as it were—in order to overthrow the intellectual foundations of the distinctiveness of Catholic higher education. Ellis urged Catholics to get out of their intellectual “ghetto” and to make contact with mainstream intellectual life in the United States. At some later date I hope to reflect on this sentiment at more length. I have no wish to deny that it contains an element of truth. However, the truth in question needed to be—and still needs to be—unpacked with a care that was lacking then and is still lacking now. By way of a brief counterindication, I will simply note that in my own discipline of philosophy, mainstream American academic philosophy from the 1950s through the 1970s was dominated by three of the most virulently anti-metaphysical movements in the history of philosophy, viz., logical positivism, ordinary language philosophy, and pragmatism, each of which has left its mark on later developments in the field. In other words, the thirty or forty years following Ellis's article did not constitute the most propitious time for a Catholic philosophy department to abandon Thomism of every stripe and to latch on to whatever was in the air—and this in the name of “escaping the ghetto.” But that is pretty much what happened to my department, so that fifty years later Notre Dame has a philosophy faculty that has become for all intents and purposes indistinguishable from any other decent philosophy department in the United States. (I write this in the wake of the recent retirements of Ralph McInerny, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Alvin Plantinga.) In this particular case, “escaping the ghetto” can be seen in retrospect to have been equivalent to “being assimilated” and “losing distinctiveness.” In short, when the desire to leave the ghetto was combined with the elements of infidelity that were already present in inchoative form in the 1950s and early 1960s, the situation that exists today became well-nigh inevitable.

But more than impatience, the really crucial factor was in fact the *infidelity*, which effectively took the form of a gamble—made in the late 1960s in the wake of Vatican II and in the aftermath of the dissenting reaction to Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae*—that some form of ‘liberal’ or ‘progressive’ Catholicism, ‘liberated’ from the philosophical and theological underpinnings of the past, would emerge as the ‘serious’ Catholicism of the future. Perhaps at the time this did not seem like much of a gamble. After all, a significant percentage of American bishops, along with their closest advisors, seemed perfectly comfortable with progressive agendas. (To my astonishment, I recently learned that in 1976 the then bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend himself led a diocesan delegation to the first Call to Action conference. He was one of about 100 bishops present at that conference, which adopted a number of resolutions that directly contravened traditional Catholic teaching on faith and morals.) At Notre Dame in particular, an attitude of dissent from and disdain for the Vatican played a significant foundational role in shaping hiring policies, tenure decisions, key administrative appointments, curricular reform, and admissions strategies for the next thirty years.

Impatience and infidelity were then combined with an obsequious desire to imitate those schools that had already attained ‘success’ in higher education. Imitation was really the only possibility left open at this point, given that the ‘Thomistic synthesis’ that had previously served as the intellectual foundation for the distinctiveness of Catholic higher education had already been jettisoned by the progressives. The result was that, despite

some relatively vapid rhetoric to the contrary, neither Notre Dame nor any other large Catholic university was in a position to challenge prevailing models of success in secular higher education with a detailed and self-confidently articulated alternative. So since at least the early 1980s Notre Dame has been struggling mightily to keep up with the Joneses amid what might fairly be called a culture of *ingratiatio*. Policies were sometimes adopted for no other reason than that “this is the way they do it at Princeton (or Duke or Stanford or Vanderbilt, etc.)” The thought seems to have been that if only we imitate the others, they will accept us as a peer—and the hidden rider was always “despite our Catholicism” (and, one might add, “despite our big-time football program”).

To be fair, there were obvious cases in which it was entirely appropriate for a growing Notre Dame to imitate more established and prestigious institutions of higher learning; for instance, by paying close attention to what other similar schools were doing, Notre Dame’s endowment management team has become one of the best in the country. But there were just as obvious cases in which such imitation was inappropriate and should have been seen as such. Unfortunately, by this time the intellectual ramifications of the Catholic faith, which might have guided such decisions, had been set aside, the Catholic character of the university having already been relegated to the ‘neighborhood’. Despite what the rhetoric of graduation weekend or of festive presidential installations might have suggested, the university was being led by pragmatists who did not have a comprehensive philosophical vision of Catholic higher education, or a correlative plan of action, to guide them. As time went on, the increasing antipathy of the many newly appointed faculty and administrators toward talk of Notre Dame’s Catholic character served to reinforce the trends that the original infidelity had initiated. This brings us up to the present day and helps to explain how the more recent vibrant and faithful manifestations of Catholicism have slipped off the university’s radar screen. Authentic Catholic witness was the last thing on the university’s mind, so to speak.

But there have not been, and likely will not be, any apologies. This is what I mean by *impenitence*. At the beginning of the millennium, everyone on campus was happy to hear Pope John Paul apologize for the most egregious sins of his predecessors in the hierarchy of the Church. But don’t expect Notre Dame administrators to issue an apology for past sins, or even to acknowledge those sins. I have often imagined a future president of Notre Dame walking in sack cloth and ashes down the “God quad” that stretches from the front of the domed administration building toward the statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and, beyond that, to the statues of Edward Sorin, C.S.C., the founding father of Notre Dame, and of Mary the Mother of God; he would be reciting the most egregious sins of past university administrators, striking his breast and begging for forgiveness. Somehow that could be the beginning of the salvation of the place I love so much. A pretty picture, to be sure. But short of direct divine intervention, nothing resembling it will ever become a reality—especially now that Notre Dame, like so many big universities, has been infused with the mentality of a frustratingly bureaucratic and, to put it frankly, soul-less corporation. The “four I’s” have left little room in the minds of Notre Dame’s leaders for Jesus Christ and his faithful followers in the Church.

But what these leaders did not count on, and what has now helped disperse the fog

of ambiguity clouding Notre Dame's relationship to the Church, was the warm sunshine cast by the 26-year pontificate of John Paul II, followed immediately by the papacy of Joseph Ratzinger—along with the profound effect these two holy and brilliant men have had and continue to have on the young people whom they have inflamed with love for Jesus Christ and his Church. As one commentator put it with a wry smile, “It almost reminds you of the Gospels.” Or, to quote Chesterton, the children have “become fanatical for the faith where the fathers had been slack about it.”

In the mid-1980s, a short time after John D'Arcy became bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend, he had the name of the diocesan newspaper changed from *The Harmonizer* to *Today's Catholic*. Knowing the bishop's 'conservative' tendencies (“He's no friend of Notre Dame,” I heard more than once in those days), a progressive friend of mine joked that they should have renamed the paper *Yesterday's Catholic* instead. But, ironically, as I looked around on May 17, 2009 at the crowd of mostly young students and young families who were in attendance at the alternative commencement rally on the south quad, I wondered aloud just who “yesterday's Catholics” were now. Whose vision of the Church was leading to a dead end? And whose vision was instead inspiring young people to dedicate their lives to the Kingdom of God in opposition to the surrounding culture? Whose vision was turning out to be sterile and bourgeois? And whose vision was instead turning out to be fruitful?

The Future of Catholic Higher Education

I now return to the questions about the future intimated at the beginning of this talk. Since I plan to write more about this in the future, I will keep this section short—though, I hope, suggestive. In general, my advice is that, like faithful German Catholics during the Nazi era, we faithful Catholics must now start “thinking outside the box” in mammoth proportions when trying to discern what should be done to promote Catholic higher education under current conditions in the United States. This means that we must begin from the assumption that the major Catholic universities have not in the recent past and will not in the future systematically produce intellectually mature Catholics. This is just a fact of life, and faithful Catholics who resist it (a) are badly misreading the present situation, (b) are doomed to occupying a merely reactive posture within an unwinnable war of attrition—always waiting, as it were, for the next ‘incident’ to occur—and (c), worst of all, are neglecting the intellectual needs of the young Catholics who find themselves at places like Notre Dame, Georgetown, Boston College, et al.

I am convinced that this is a message that bishops, especially, need to hear clearly, even though it will disrupt entrenched ways of dealing with nominally Catholic colleges and universities in their dioceses. They must, I submit, begin to re-think from the bottom up their approach to campus ministry, since they bear the main responsibility for spearheading whatever innovations are necessary for ensuring that Catholics who are college students in their dioceses have at least an opportunity to become intellectually mature Catholics in general and intellectually mature Catholic professionals, whatever their professional work might be.

I will propose in outline form some possible approaches to the problem that faces us in higher education. Each of the specific suggestions highlighted below deserves a lengthy treatment in its own right, and so this is just a beginning. I will take my cue from my friend Christopher Wolfe of Marquette University, who has helpfully laid out four possibilities ([“After Obama,” May 15, 2009](#)), to which I have added a fifth. I will state these possibilities in such a way as to make clear that they are not mutually exclusive:

- ***Support nominally Catholic colleges and universities only by carefully targeting programs and individuals within them.***

In the case of the nominally Catholic colleges and universities, faithful Catholics should give their financial support only to programs and individuals and only for specific scholarly projects or events that arguably enhance the Catholic intellectual formation of those who are meant to benefit from them. Under no circumstances should faithful Catholics make contributions that are earmarked for adding to or maintaining the physical plant of such an institution.

Having said this, I do not mean to suggest that bishops should simply ‘give up’ on nominal Catholic colleges or universities, or that they should pull the trigger and pronounce them no longer Catholic. Perhaps this will happen at some future time in the case of many of them, though the historical record suggests that it is far more likely that, one by one, these colleges and universities will seek to weaken, and eventually sever, their ties to the Church on their own. But before that transpires, they may still do many good things as institutions while they waver back and forth with respect to their Catholic identity. After all, these schools have made a living at affirming that they want to be Catholic *but* also intellectually excellent, where that little word ‘but’ reveals the very un-Catholic assumption that, from their perspective, there is a fundamental conflict between being faithful and being intellectually excellent. And so they will continue on their present path of institutional schizophrenia for the time being, as long as they think that this works to their advantage. Let them do so.

However, on the other side, bishops need to make it clear that they have little vested in such institutions, and that ordinary Catholics should no longer expect those institutions *qua* institutions to behave in a way that is totally faithful to Christ and His Church. Perhaps in this way scandal can be avoided, or at least mitigated, every time (and you can bet that there will be many such times) a nominally Catholic institution of higher learning acts in a way that flies in the face of Catholic values.

- ***Focus much more on providing Catholic education at both secular universities and nominally Catholic universities through intellectually high-powered forms of ministry that are independent of the universities themselves.***

One of the most encouraging stories of the past few decades in Catholic higher education is the emergence of a number of exemplary Catholic initiatives meant to

promote Catholic intellectual life at the periphery of secular universities, where there is no expectation that the university's curriculum will do this. These campus ministry programs self-consciously seek to satisfy the intellectual, as well as moral and spiritual, needs of the Catholic students who take advantage of them. A few outstanding examples are the programs at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana; Texas A&M University; the University of Kansas; the University of Chicago; and Princeton University; and I am assured that there are many others as well. Such programs need to be started where necessary and to be beefed up wherever they already exist. Faithful and zealous Catholic faculty members at the relevant schools should be recruited to contribute to this effort, but the bishops should also commit themselves to hiring 'freelance' Catholic intellectuals as an integral part of the staffs of their campus programs. This may turn out to be a bit expensive, but it is an expense in the service of absolutely essential spiritual works of mercy that the Church as an institution must take the lead in providing under current circumstances. After all, there is a spiritual need here that almost no one else is going to address, and this is precisely the sort of situation in which the Church as an institution has historically taken the lead.

We must likewise realize that the nominally Catholic universities require exactly the same sort of ministries. In fact, the nominally Catholic colleges and universities present more of a challenge to the bishops than do their secular counterparts. The reason is that campus ministries on historically Catholic campuses have tended not to concern themselves with Catholic intellectual life at all, since it was always assumed that the curriculum would take care of this need—this, despite the fact that at places like Notre Dame the curriculum has most decidedly not been taking care of this need for over forty years now. In fact, at the present time Catholic students at nominally Catholic colleges and universities are arguably worse off than their counterparts at secular schools with dynamic and intellectually high-powered campus ministries.

To my mind, this is the wave of the immediate future and the single most important initiative that bishops, Catholic intellectuals, and benefactors should be undertaking.

I should also add that it is sometimes possible to find even on secular campuses programs that in fact promote Catholic intellectual values even though they are not confessionally Catholic. An example is the Psychiatry and Spirituality Forum founded by a Notre Dame graduate at the University of California at Irvine.

- ***Support the small flock of current Catholic colleges and universities strongly committed to Catholic education, traditionally conceived.***

This goes without saying, since [these faithful \(or striving-to-be-faithful\) schools](#) are providing an important example as well as an important service. In some cases they have been founded relatively recently and from scratch; in other cases, they are colleges that had drifted away but have either been turned around or are in the

process of being turned around. The latter are almost always relatively small schools with relatively small faculties; their small size makes them amenable to radical changes of direction over a relatively short period of time.

Notice, by the way, that a few on-line academic programs are likewise found in the Newman guide to faithful Catholic colleges and universities. This is a part of a trend that is in its initial stages in American higher education in general. It is difficult to predict exactly how this trend will play out in the future, but those interested in Catholic higher education would do well to keep an eye out for opportunities to exploit it. Some commentators believe that we are seeing a genuine revolution in American higher education, as more and more colleges and universities price themselves out of the market. Be that as it may, the man to whom this paper is dedicated had enough foresight to see these possibilities, and it would be good for us to follow his lead. In general, the internet, despite its many faults, has been and should continue to be an asset in the work of evangelization and Catholic intellectual formation.

- ***Support the establishment of independent institutes that combine Catholic intellectual formation with training in specific professions.***

Another interesting phenomenon is beginning to occur on the contemporary educational scene. Lee Smolin is the founder of the Perimeter Institute of Theoretical Physics in Waterloo, Ontario. This is a free-standing institute, independent of any university. As he explains in [*The Trouble with Physics \(2007\)*](#), Smolin was prompted to establish the institute because of his dissatisfaction with contemporary particle physics, which is, he claims, dominated in all phases (funding, journals, graduate education) by a theory that may very well turn out to have been a dead end. With the help of sympathetic benefactors, he was able to establish an independent research institute in order to liberate bright young physicists from the intellectually oppressive modes of thought dictated by university physics departments under the thrall of the currently dominant theory.

The Church is herself no stranger to such initiatives. As the universities were declining in the 14th century amid the Black Plague, the division in the Papacy, and other sources of intellectual and social disintegration, the study of Thomism flourished and spread. Why? Because the Dominicans continued to expand their apostolates throughout Europe, especially Eastern Europe, and to establish new centers of studies that were wholly independent of the universities.

I mention this because, in addition to the still flourishing Dominican Houses of Study in the United States, the last few decades have seen the establishment of free-standing centers of professional training that attempt to integrate that training with a solid Catholic intellectual formation. Perhaps the three most prominent at present are the Institute for the Psychological Sciences in Washington, DC, the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and the Family, also in Washington, and John Paul the Great University in San Diego. But there are others as well, and more

are in the planning stages.

This strikes me as potentially a very powerful source of Catholic intellectual formation for the immediate and long-term future. Such institutes are relatively inexpensive as educational ventures go these days, but it is their independence of potentially oppressive university structures that makes them so attractive. What's more, they can be tailored to meet specific social needs in disciplines like the social sciences, mass communication and entertainment, business, and technology, along with the traditional staples of philosophy and theology.

- ***Support the establishment of universities that aspire to compete with major secular universities.***

This is the least likely and most difficult of all the possibilities, a multi-million-dollar task and a very long one at that. Perhaps Ave Maria University can someday attain the stature of a major university, but even if so, it would be good to have others as well. Perhaps one or more of the institutes just spoken of could one day grow into a major university.

This is the sad legacy of the failure of the historically Catholic universities. Notre Dame today has an endowment that stands at between five and six billion dollars. Perhaps infidelity helped raise this much money (infidelity and filthy lucre have always been allied, after all), but much of it likewise came from faithful Catholics who believed precisely that the university was forging a distinctively Catholic path in higher education. The same holds true of other historically Catholic universities.

However, a more positive way way to look at the situation is this: Universities today, including the nominally Catholic ones, do a relatively good job of providing professional training in the sciences, the humanities (a few caveats are necessary here, of course), engineering, architecture, law, and business. What is important from a Catholic perspective is that this training should take place [within a generalist context that the universities almost invariably fail to provide in any systematic way](#). So our first priority as Catholics should be to provide what is missing—if not in a totally Catholic setting, at least in Catholic oases (dare I say “ghettos”?) near centers of professional training, i.e., colleges and universities.

Conclusion

In retrospect, the Obama incident at Notre Dame may have been a blessing in disguise—even, if our Faith is to be trusted, for the people, both on and off campus, that university administrators are still trying to get even with. The reason is that the incident has served, like none before it, to focus national attention on the general situation with purportedly Catholic higher education these days. It is all for the best that more people—and, particularly, more bishops—may finally be ready to heed the warnings that men like Ralph McInerny have been sending out for many years, warnings that are

ominously like the ones Pope Benedict sounded in the passage with which this talk began. My contention is that we must seize this moment to ask ourselves as faithful Catholics just what we are willing to do to ensure that the next few generations of Catholic students will not suffer from the sort of inadequate intellectual formation that historically Catholic colleges and universities have been giving their recent predecessors. The time is ripe for bold and innovative action. Our Faith demands no less.