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Peter K. Kilpatrick introduces himself to the student body at Catholic University of America in

Peter K. Kilpatrick introduces himself to the student body at Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., March 29. The university's board of trustees selected him as CUA's 16th president, effective July 1. (CNS/Catholic University of America/Patrick G. Ryan)



by Michael Sean Winters

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The Catholic University of America announced on March 29 that Peter Kilpatrick will become the school's 16th president this summer when the current president, John Garvey, steps down. Kilpatrick is provost at the Illinois Institute of Technology and was a longtime dean of the School of Engineering at the University of Notre Dame.

In his interview with NCR's Brian Fraga, Kilpatrick said he planned to "read and reflect 'a lot' " in the next few weeks to better grasp the unique opportunities that come with his new post as leader of the nation's national Catholic university, the only pontifical university in the country and the only one owned by the U.S. hierarchy.

He could start his reading list with the document "The identity of the Catholic school for a culture of dialogue," just issued from the Vatican's Congregation for Catholic Education. A bureaucratic text, it is not easy to read, but it makes some good points.

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For example, the text rightly balances the two component and complementary missions of a Catholic university, that is, a president must never forget his school is Catholic and never forget it is a university. "*As a school*, it essentially shares the characteristics of all school institutions, which, through an organized and systematized teaching activity, offer a culture aimed at the integral education of individuals," the text states. In the next paragraph, it adds, "a *Catholic* school is endowed with a specific identity: i.e. 'its reference to a Christian concept of life *centered on Jesus Christ.*' "

Kilpatrick should have a long talk with Bishop David O'Connell of Trenton, New Jersey, who best kept that balance when he served as CUA's president from 1998 until 2010.

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CUA is also my alma mater, so in the spirit of collegiality and synodality, I invite president-designate Kilpatrick to read some of the things I have written about the disastrous tenure of the man he is replacing. As I observed in 2018: "The sad fact is that the Catholic University of America is ill, and the only issue is whether the illness is terminal." That conclusion was prompted by the fact that CUA theology professor Chad Pecknold had suggested Pope Francis was a material heretic around the same time that Garvey and then-provost Andrew Abela, who is now the dean of the Busch School of Business and a marketing professor, had received a vote of no confidence from the faculty.

"Faculty and staff morale is very low, and there is a new culture of fear, divisiveness, and mistrust between departments, administrators, and staff," associate history professor Julia Young wrote at the time in Commonweal.

"No one — not even senior tenured faculty — wants to speak out, for they risk being fired and being accused of insufficient support for the university's mission," she continued. "At times it seems that the administration's interpretation of Catholicism — and of who belongs in the Catholic Church — has narrowed considerably since I was an undergraduate."

The year before, NCR's Tom Roberts looked at the school's ties to conservative and libertarian donors such as Charles Koch and Tim Busch. Reread what Busch said, and it is difficult not to conclude that there is no more dangerous Catholic in the United States than Busch:

> *[Busch] calls the groups "Catholic NGOs" and said, "The evangelization of our country is being done by private foundations, Catholic NGOs, like Napa Institute and Legatus," referring to an organization whose membership requirements assure that only Catholics of substantial means get to join.*

The Master famously said something about a camel passing through the eye of a needle, but that page of the Scriptures has escaped the attention of Busch and his fellow right-wing plutocrats intent on owning CUA, the Papal Foundation and other ecclesial institutions they can purchase.

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This is the core problem at CUA: In the absence of a vision that might move it beyond the tuition dependent, declining enrollment, shrinking faculty, increasingly right-wing trainwreck Garvey has made of the place, the school will continue to decline. Its public image is tarnished by its rank infidelity to the Church's social teachings. A few rich, conservative Catholics would rather have CUA earn a thumbs up from the misnamed Cardinal Newman Society than aim for a university that is catholic as well as Catholic. It is too sad.

To be sure, there are still some wonderful professors at Catholic University, and they will continue to do good work. The structured curriculum, with lots of required courses, still provides a solid education. But just as the hierarchy in this country will never be able to unite itself unless that unity is founded in communion with the pope, CUA will never be able to renew itself so long as its vision of Catholic identity is crimped, defined by same-sex dorms and resistance to Francis in the theology

department, and sectarian.

I wish president-designate Kilpatrick the best. I hope he will move the school in a new and more responsibly Catholic direction. He told Fraga this job was "kind of a dream job for me." The sooner he learns he has inherited a nightmare, wakes up and charts a new course, the better for CUA.

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