

## Forging the unknown paths of the 21st century

Raymond A. Schroth | Nov. 13, 2009



Every morning, obeying my 6:30 alarm, I walk four miles through the garbage-littered streets of Jersey City, N.J., and think about what to do with my theology and literature classes. I also ponder the same question that confronts the president of every American Catholic college and university: What, in the 21st century, are the challenges ahead?

St. Peter's College, whose most illustrious alumni are the mega-historian Will Durant and Woodrow Wilson's secretary, Joseph Tumulty, closed after World War I and reopened as an elite liberal arts college in the 1930s. Much has changed. Each year the complexion of my students grows more diverse. The Jersey City neighborhoods are Muslim, Hindu, black and Hispanic, and fewer than a fourth of my students identify themselves as practicing Catholics. The best students, those who win the prizes, are Bulgarians and Nepalese attracted by scholarships and by the towers of our neighbor, Manhattan, N.Y.

Three times a year, with 10 members of the National Seminar on Jesuit Higher Education, I travel to three Jesuit colleges and universities to research articles for our magazine, *Conversations*, received by all 35,000 faculty of these 28 schools. The top schools are thriving, but others are struggling to survive and three are looking for presidents, most likely laymen, to steer them through coming storms.

Some are revamping their core curricula -- often a rancorous, drawn-out, political squabble supposedly about implementing ideals, but also about money and turf.

Our recent visit to the University of Detroit Mercy still lingers: They serve a large African-American population on an urban frontier, in a city -- with long stretches of abandoned, upper-middle-class, once lovely brick houses -- that recent articles in *Newsweek*, *TIME* and *The New York Times* describe as "shrinking" and in peril.

In the 19th century the Catholic higher education mission in America was like the command in Genesis of Yahweh to Adam and Eve: "Increase and multiply, scatter your descendants across the earth." Jesuits founded colleges sometimes more quickly than they could staff them, often more quickly than the French, Italian and German Jesuit teachers could learn enough English to be understood. The challenge of the 20th century was to realize that many of these institutions, compared to other Catholic and secular universities, were mediocre.

The turning point came in 1965 when the International Federation of Catholic Universities, inspired by the

Second Vatican Council text "The Church in the Modern World," met at the University of Notre Dame's villa at Land O'Lakes, Wis., and produced a revolutionary position paper. Drafters included Notre Dame president Holy Cross Fr. Theodore M. Hesburgh and the presidents of Georgetown, Fordham, Boston College, Seton Hall, St. Louis University, plus representatives from Latin America and Rome.

The key sentences: "The Catholic university today must be a university in the full modern sense of the word, with a strong commitment to and concern for academic excellence." It must have "true autonomy and academic freedom in the face of authority of whatever kind, lay or clerical, external to the academic community itself." Translated, that meant that all professors needed doctorates and should do research and publish, the faculty should make the major decisions, American Association of University Professors norms for promotion and tenure would apply, and local bishops could not interfere.

Critics called implementation of this document, plus other adjustments to allow for state and federal financial aid, a "sellout"; tomes like James Burtchaell's *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches* and more recent studies warned that the barn door had been opened and the horses were gone. In 1990, Pope John Paul II, in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* ("From the Heart of the Church?"), ordered that all theologians must have a mandate from the local bishop in order to teach and that the majority of professors must be Catholic. The college presidents responded to these demands with diplomacy, and most bishops have cooperated with them. But, two years ago, in a widely read article, Notre Dame historian Holy Cross Fr. Wilson D. Miscamble argued that Notre Dame had reached the "tipping point" in faculty hiring where Catholic identity might go down the drain (*America*, Sept. 10, 2007).

Perhaps, I thought, these headline-grabbing issues of gay clubs, "The Vagina Monologues," and bans on speakers and honorary degree recipients who would not outlaw abortion had been rendered mute by the apparent success of President Barack Obama's address at Notre Dame's commencement last May. Perhaps enough programs -- faculty retreats, lunches, seminars on religious identity, faculty tours to European sites where the college's religious order had been founded, emphasis on student service projects that achieved a religious goal without being religious -- would allow the identity fight to cool off.

But most of five presidents from different parts of the country whom I polled -- Jesuit Fr. Joseph McShane of Fordham in New York; Jesuit Fr. Robert Wild of Marquette in Milwaukee; Jay McGowan of Bellarmine in Louisville, Ky.; Anthony J. Cernera of Sacred Heart in Fairfield, Ct.; and Jesuit Fr. Robert Niehoff of John Carroll in University Heights, Ohio -- were convinced that the identity issue was very much alive and that the struggle to maintain the delicate balance between academic excellence and freedom on the one hand and maintenance of the Catholic heart of the institution on the other was with us for the indefinite future.

I asked: What is the biggest challenge looming ahead? For McShane, "access, affordability and mission" were all related. Working closely with federal and state governments, how can we raise enough money to "care for our students"?

As Cernera put it, the American Catholic universities' historic contribution was to educate the 19th- and 20th-century Catholic immigrants. How can we provide the same opportunity to the new immigrants of the 21st century?

Niehoff stressed the need to give a basic theological education to the faculty and staff, even more so for the current generation of faculty who may be "resistant to faith or even question the value of it."

Marquette's Wild agreed that while Notre Dame had stood its ground on Obama, it is easier for the bigger schools to resist the pressure of that minority of bishops who might interfere.

Meanwhile, over the next 20 years, the role of technology in the teaching process and the increasing demand for

international engagement will increase. And the increase in lay leadership, as priests fade into the background, means we must be prepared at every level to emphasize religious and values education.

The presidents spelled out the big issues, but there are others -- moral issues -- on the classroom level. In the new hurricane of cultural change, the famous analogy of education as Professor Mark Hopkins of Harvard sitting and chatting with a young man on a log in the woods, has been replaced by the student with a laptop on his desk, where he can either take notes or play solitaire, with various plugs in his ears, and his cell phone buzzing in his pants. According to Semiray Kasoolu in St. Peter's paper, *The Pauw Wow* (Sept. 30), in the Facebook world, the message, "I feel sad, can you text me?" is a desperate cry for company. "The technology intended to bring us together is actually splitting us apart." She would rather hear a knock on her door than the "jarring pop-up chat sound."

Research scientist Jesuit Fr. Dan O'Brien tells me that the 20th century was the century of physics and the 21st will be the century of biology, "and genetics will be its flagship field." In this increasingly individualistic and self-centered culture, couples will be inclined to manipulate their own genes and those of their children. Their goal: create a class of people who will start life not only with a better environment, but with better genes. Will Catholic university scholars pursue this line of research?

Mark Slouka spells out the most insidious problem in "Dehumanized: When math and science rule the schools," in the September issue of *Harper's Magazine*. The government will fund math and science because, in their value system, these majors will fuel industry, including the military-industrial complex; education not geared to "produce jobs" is socially useless. But the liberal arts champion democracy. "The humanities, done right, are the crucible within which our evolving notions of what it means to be fully human are put to the test; they teach us incrementally, endlessly, not what to do but how to be." The humanities, which teach us to think, analyze, create, reject and imagine, are our last bulwark against the totalitarian state. If Catholic colleges, bowing to the pressure of the market, cut back on their philosophy, theology, literature, history and languages, they dig Catholic education's grave.

At this time of year, before midterm exams, each of my students has to meet with me for 15 minutes and talk about how he or she is doing in the course. Some I must warn that they have already missed five classes and have not handed in most homework; but face-to-face it's easier to love them all. And I worry that the time they spend "reading" online is not reading at all, but only one more element in the culture of distraction that undermines the goals that most Catholic colleges and universities have enshrined in their mission statements: academic excellence, the liberal arts, personal attention, and dedication to the service of the world.

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