

Q & A: Barbara McCrabb from the USCCB

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 9, 2010 | Distinctly Catholic

All this week, we will be asking Catholic educators about the implementation of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. Today, we hear from Barbara McCrabb, assistant director for higher education of the Secretariat of Catholic Education of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The question: What have we learned from the implementation of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*?

Barbara McCrabb: When Pope John Paul II launched a conversation on the nature and purpose of the Catholic university in 1990, he said each stakeholder played an integral part in the conversation. He looked to faculty, students, administrators, trustees, sponsoring religious congregations, the bishop, and his collaborators in the local Church to examine four essential characteristics of Catholic universities:

1. Christian inspiration;
2. On-going reflection, in the light of faith, upon human knowledge and the contribution to that knowledge through research;
3. Fidelity to the Christian message, and;
4. Institutional commitment to the service of others.

He affirmed Catholic higher education's irreplaceable task and indispensable mission.

Now, twenty years later we can reflect on fundamental lessons that have emerged from this on-going conversation: personal relationships, intentionality and formation. People came together for thoughtful, animated and sometimes contentious conversation. The pope encouraged personal and pastoral relationships grounded in mutual trust, cooperation and dialogue. Bishops rose to the call to promote Catholic universities and to assist in the preservation and strengthening of Catholic identity, including the protection of Catholic identity in relation to civil authorities. University leaders re-examined institutional origins and renewed how they live out their Catholic heritage. These were graced moments for many campuses, though admittedly not without challenges. Trusting dialogue and cooperation, especially between an individual bishop and an institutional leader, bears fruit that benefits the university, the Church and society as a whole.

The development of Mission and Identity Offices demonstrates the value of intentionality. In 1990 fewer than 10 universities in the United States had a Mission and Identity Office; by 2001, when The Application for *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* in the United States was recognized, more than 40 universities had offices; and as of 2010, 139 of the 220 Catholic universities have Mission Identity Units, according to a study conducted by the Boston College Center for Catholic Education. The significance of these offices lies not in their existence, but in the authority, support, and activities they hold. Most offices are led by senior administrators with significant campus influence. They are funded with institutional dollars rather than temporary grant funds. These units sponsor programs and services that promote the charism of sponsoring congregations and celebrate Catholic heritage.

This conversation about the mission and identity of a Catholic university has impacted the entire campus. Many professionals, while well trained in their discipline, often lack sophistication and formation regarding the Catholic context of the institution. Nationally led initiatives for professional development seek to build individual and institutional capacity to integrate mission so that it permeates all of campus life. These programs incorporate the principles of Ex Corde Ecclesiae in to the curriculum. For example, Collegium offers networking opportunities and formation for faculty across disciplines on religious identity. A summer institute for campus administrators brings together seasoned Catholic administrators to share their insights with those newer to Catholic higher education. A collaborative effort among several Catholic higher education associations uses Ex Corde Ecclesiae principles to articulate best practices in student affairs. These conversations help cultivate a common language that frees stakeholders to more fully embrace the mission of their Catholic university.

Tomorrow's Interviewee: Msgr. Kevin Irwin, Dean of the School of Theology and Religious Studies at the Catholic University of America.

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