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Q & A: Msgr. Kevin Irwin

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Distinctly Catholic

This week, Q & A is examining *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, the 1990 encyclical by Pope John Paul II on Catholic higher education. Today we hear from Msgr. Kevin Irwin, Dean of the School of Theology and Religious Studies at the Catholic University of America.

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

Msgr. Irwin: I have been privileged to serve for a quarter of a century at The Catholic University of America located ?inside the Beltway? in Washington, D.C. Therefore it should come as no surprise that the processes of government, the way debates take place in the Congress and the wording of the lobbyists? appeals eventually would influence how I appreciate national debates and matters of international import, including university and church life.

After twenty-five years on the periphery of America?s public life, more often than not I ask myself, ?who is framing this debate?? Among the most important things which *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* has taught us is that Catholic theology is framed in, by and for the church Catholic ?- meaning its universal and international nature and its breadth and history of over two thousand years.

For me three issues stand out that exemplify how this document has helped to ?frame the debate.?

1. Theology in Communion. At about the same time that Catholic theology in America was engaged in the ?turn to the subject,? *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* reminded us that theology is an ecclesial enterprise. It is not about oneself, one?s ideas or one?s approach to God and the things of God. In the end Catholic theology has to be about the ecclesial ?we,? and how the church is drawn, as a church, into the living God. It is about communion (understanding that this term itself carries with it a number of

nuances and shades of meaning).

2. Theology in the Academy and the Church. Again, about the same time when it was conventional to divorce the "academy" from the "church" and its theology, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* invited us to reexamine this distinction, not to say dichotomy. Faculties undertook fruitful (and, yes, sometimes painful) dialogue about how Catholic theology could be academically and scientifically rigorous and also simultaneously be for the good of the church's theology and official teaching where the latter means an ongoing evolution of official church teaching and the legitimately probing questions and opinions of theologians.
3. Many "Catholic moments." *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* reminded us that the very concept of multicultural Catholicism is simply to assert what Catholicism has always been and that the idea that there has been or can be "one" or "the" Catholic moment is impossible. There have been numberless Catholic moments in Catholic theology and university life, with many more to come. To be faithful to the breadth of the Catholic intellectual tradition implies humility, a willingness to learn and relearn the many faces, images and likenesses of Catholic theology as incarnated and lived universally, always in an historical perspective.

These examples help us pass over the usual labels (liberal-conservative) and self-definitions (progressive - traditional) to appreciate what Catholic theology really is and the role which theologians have always had in the church's task of articulating what it believes and teaches, all done not in isolation from or ignorant of but "from the heart of the church."

Tomorrow's Interviewee: Fr. Robert Imbelli, professor of theology at Boston College

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