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Q & A: Father Robert Imbelli

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

Today, we continue our focus on *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* in advance of its twentieth anniversary on Sunday. Our interviewee today is Fr. Robert Imbelli, a priest of the Archdiocese of New York who teaches theology at Boston College.

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

Father Imbelli: (The following observations do not pretend to generalize beyond one person's limited experience, though that experience represents 25 years of involvement with Catholic higher education in various colleges and universities.)

I think *Ex Corde* has significantly altered the conversation regarding Catholic higher education. Most importantly in that it has reintroduced into the discussion the crucial issue of what is the distinctive identity of the school in question. How does it differ from its competitors in the higher education field (and, inevitably, "market").

Thus the adjective "Catholic," rather than being downplayed in favor of a school being "in the _____ tradition" (supply adjective associated with religious order or founder), once more appears prominently in many mission statements and recruiting pamphlets.

The challenge is how to embody this Catholic identity in terms of institutional forms and priorities. Some have undertaken to formulate a vision in terms of the "Catholic Intellectual Tradition." Others have begun or enhanced Catholic Studies Programs. But the embodiment of a Catholic vision in terms of curriculum remains a matter of ongoing commitment and contention.

The same may be said of the crucial, but sensitive issue of hiring for mission. Clearly, this should not

mean hiring Catholics only, an option neither desirable nor feasible. But, equally clearly, if hiring is unrelated to the vision and mission of an institution, then that vision will remain only wishful thinking or mere rhetoric. *Ex Corde* seems at least to have put the question firmly on the agenda.

Ex Corde seems also to have encouraged some institutions to display more noteworthy and noticeable religious art on campus, including in classrooms, thereby creating an environment that is more identifiably Catholic.

An issue that the above initiatives tend to surface is that of 'hospitality.' Does being hospitable to other traditions, perspectives, individuals speak against presenting and underlining distinctive Catholic perspectives and symbols? If prior to *Ex Corde* some may have opted for a blander, more neutral manner of self-presentation, one witnesses a more robust and confident affirmation in its aftermath. Not to lessen hospitality, but to make clearer and more inviting the setting in which hospitality is offered.

Tomorrow's interviewee: Msgr. Stuart Swetland, who holds the Archbishop Harry Flynn Chair of Christian Ethics and is Vice President for Catholic Identity and Mission at Mount St. Mary's University in Emmitsburg, Maryland

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