

Q & A: Msgr. Stuart W. Swetland

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 12, 2010 | Distinctly Catholic

Today, we continue our focus on *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* in advance of its twentieth anniversary on Sunday. Our interviewee today is Msgr. Stuart W. Swetland, the Archbishop Harry Flynn Chair of Christian Ethics and Vice President for Catholic Identity and Mission at Mount St. Mary's University in Emmitsburg, Maryland.

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

Msgr. Stuart W. Swetland: An entire biblical generation (20 years) of Catholic educators has now been formed under the apostolic constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. There are several things we have learned from implementing *Ex Corde*. Some of these, while important in many ways, could be considered as secondary. For example, we have been reminded that there is no one way to be a Catholic university. Different institutions embody their Catholic mission in different ways. Sophia University in Japan must be a significantly different institution than Mount St. Mary's University in Emmitsburg, Maryland. In turn, the Mount (the second oldest Catholic college in the United States) is significantly different than Georgetown (the oldest) or Thomas Aquinas College (one of the relatively newer). This type of diversity can be a good thing as various institutions can serve various needs.

Second, as commentators as diverse as Alasdair MacIntyre, James Heft and Monica Hellwig have noted, being authentically Catholic should make our institutions better universities. The need of our age for the integration of knowledge and an adequate vision of the human person cries out for the depth, breadth and wisdom to be found in the Catholic intellectual tradition with its rich philosophical and theological anthropology. From business ethics to environmental justice to the defense of the most vulnerable to the renewal of the church, our age needs the intellectual ethos of Catholic universities at their best.

Third, the focus on mission and the discussion of the unique aspects of what it means to be a Catholic university engendered by *Ex Corde* has helped many universities establish credible reasons for the extra cost often associated with attending private institutions. "Market niche" and "differentiation" are important in today's highly competitive marketplace of higher education. Accreditation agencies rightfully expect our institutions to be fulfilling their mission as Catholic institutions of higher learning.

But these lessons, as important as they are, pale in comparison with what I like to call "the big three": communion, dialogue, and ethos. The implementation of *Ex Corde* has reminded the Church as a whole, and those involved with Catholic universities in particular (whether boards members, faculty, students, administrators or chancery officials), that the Church is best described as a communion of persons in friendship with the Triune God and in service to each other. Neither the local ordinary nor the university nor any other group or persons are to "lord it over" the others, but each exists in his or her particular vocation in service to the rest. Each and all have an indispensable role in the Body of Christ.

Next, the implementation of *Ex Corde* was the result of extensive consultation and dialogue. Inside each university, between universities, between university leaders and bishops, between bishops and theologians and

countless other settings and venues, the implementation of this apostolic constitution has led to intense dialogue. Even the drafting of *Ex Corde* was the result of dialogue and consultation. Some people of a more juridical or practical mindset find all this discussion frustrating and even counter-productive, but it is part of university culture and essential for finding our way forward as the People of God.

Last, but not least, the implementation of *Ex Corde* has reminded all of us who have the privilege of working in the apostolate of Catholic higher education of the holistic vision that the church has for the ethos of our institutions. Ideally, they are to be Catholic in every appropriate way. According to *Ex Corde* 13, as the philosopher Michael Pakuluk has shown, they are to be Catholic in their material cause (of what they are made: ?A Christian inspiration not only of individuals but of the university community as such?); their formal cause (their essence: ?A continuing reflection in the light of the Catholic faith upon the growing treasury of human knowledge, to which it seeks to contribute by its own research?); their efficient cause (what acts to produce them: ?Fidelity to the Christian message as it comes to us through the Church?) and their final cause (their purpose: ?An institutional commitment to the service of the People of God and the human family in their pilgrimage to the transcendent goal which gives life meaning.?). This is a beautiful vision and a high ideal that every Catholic institution must strive to embody.

I believe that as a community we have learned much from the implementation of *Ex Corde*. But there is much more to be done. We have a lot more work to do. For example, the document calls for an intense dialogue between faith and culture. The universities cannot do this dialogue alone, but they have an indispensable role to play and service to provide. All of these efforts depend on a critical mass of well formed, mission driven individuals working at every level of our universities. Our Catholic identity will not be assured by counting noses or checking baptismal certificates, but by our pro-active formation of the next generation of scholars and administrators who will share in the beautiful but challenging vision expressed in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*.

Tomorrow's Interviewee: John Cavadini, Associate Professor and Chair of Theology at the University of Notre Dame.

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