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Bishop O'Connell: Happy Birthday Ex Corde Ecclesiae

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Distinctly Catholic

The following is a Guest Commentary from Bishop David O'Connell, C.M., who was recently ordained as the Coadjutor Bishop of Trenton, New Jersey, but who previously served for 12 years as the President of the Catholic University of America.

Bishop O'Connell:

Those of us who have been involved in Catholic higher education for the past several decades mark a milestone this week as we note the twentieth anniversary of Pope John Paul II's apostolic constitution on Catholic universities and colleges, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. As a former faculty member, academic dean, vice president and president of different Catholic universities, I celebrate this anniversary with gratitude for *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (ECC) brought a real clarity of vision to campus life and work that previously had not been available or accessible to those of entrusted with the job of teaching or running these institutions. Prior to 1990, our Catholic universities and colleges in the United States struggled with the meaning and claims of Catholic identity in and for their activities and operations, occasioned in my opinion by the 1967 document signed by twenty-six Catholic educators and administrators, popularly known as the "Land O'Lakes Statement." While that earlier document had some worthwhile elements, it ended up becoming a "declaration of independence" for Catholic universities and colleges from legitimate ecclesiastical oversight and authority. I truly believe our institutions suffered a "crisis of identity" as a result.

The 1983 Code of Canon Law with its first-ever treatment of Catholic universities and colleges and ECC helped tremendously in the process of renewal of and on our Catholic campuses. Even most critics --- of which there were many at the time of their promulgation --- will now admit that both the Code and ECC occasioned a "conversation" at Catholic universities and colleges throughout the country that had not

heretofore taken place. Unfortunately, most of the criticism then focused on the notion of a "mandate" to teach theological disciplines as a violation of academic freedom, a concern that seems to have all but disappeared. Other positive elements of Catholic higher education, especially as contained in ECC, were missed due to manufactured fears of intrusive "external" control, none of which seems to have occurred. I predicted it at the time and I am happy to reflect now that all the hysteria about ECC and the subsequent Vatican approved United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' "norms of application" created within and outside of the Catholic academy never actually materialized in any substantive way.

One very important and, in my opinion, positive provision in ECC can be found the constitution's assertion that the diocesan bishop is not "external" to the Catholic university and college. This is an antidote to the innovation recommended by the Land O'Lakes gathering. The diocesan bishop can never be considered "external" to anything "Catholic." I say that, not simply because I have --- as some of my friends and university colleagues have joked --- "crossed over to the dark side" by becoming a bishop; I say that because it is true. The bishop is an integral part of "all things Catholic" within his diocese. That does not mean he controls everything, far from it. But he is and must remain part of all Catholic activities and institutions, offering the support, guidance and leadership that are part of the Office he holds in and for the Church, in which Catholic universities and colleges can and should play a vital role. I say "can and should" because the "vital role" of which I speak is diminished when our Catholic institutions fail to live up to their Catholic identity and mission. The expression "truth in advertising" comes to mind as Catholic universities and colleges continue to compete in an aggressively competitive marketplace.

For the last twelve years I served as president of the "bishops' university," The Catholic University of America (CUA) in Washington, D.C. If any Catholic president has had to work with the hierarchy regarding Catholic higher education, no one has had to do it as much as I, leading an institution with twenty-five cardinals and bishops on a board of trustees of fifty members. I can say without hesitation, no bishop I know wants to run the Catholic universities or colleges within his diocese. I think that's why my term as president of CUA lasted so long! But, I can also say without hesitation, no bishop I know wants those same Catholic universities or colleges to fail or flounder. The bishops believe, as most Catholics do, that our Catholic institutions need to be authentically what they say they are. When the identity question is settled clearly, the mission makes sense and follows appropriately. Our Catholic universities and colleges continue to contribute to the search for truth and the advancement of knowledge in a distinct and unique way within the broader academic arena because both reason and faith are allowed to lead there. That's what ECC affirmed so well and that will remain its lasting contribution.

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