

The Identity of a Catholic University

University of Dallas

February 1, 2010

John L. Allen Jr.

In many ways, my presence on this panel is a bit puzzling. I am neither an academic nor a theologian, and I'm certainly no expert on Catholic higher education. Indeed, I didn't even graduate from a Catholic institution. My degrees are instead from the University of Kansas, which means that my university-level religious formation came in the Church of College Basketball! (Speaking of which, I presume everyone here has already set aside next Monday as a Holy Day of Obligation, since on that night the Jayhawks will be in Austin to take on the Longhorns.)

Brian Schmisek tells me that I'm here to offer "global perspective," and I suppose there is a certain logic to that. Over the last couple of decades, I've traveled the highways and byways of the Catholic world, following popes, speaking in various Catholic venues, and doing my own reporting. None of that, to be sure, qualifies me as an expert on Catholic education, either in the United States or abroad, so take what I have to say tonight for what it's worth: One lay person's assessment of the challenges facing Catholicism in the 21st century, and the role our colleges and universities might play in equipping us to meet them.

Before I get into that, I'd like to begin with a brief word about Bishop Kevin Farrell's commencement address from last May, which is the text that brings us together tonight.

In my recent book *The Future Church*, I suggest that Catholicism faces an utterly new reality in the 21st century, which is that for the first time, our internal divisions are playing out on a truly planetary scale. Two-thirds of the 1.2 billion Catholics in the world today live in the southern hemisphere, and they will increasingly set the tone in the Church during the century to come. If we are to meet the specific challenges of our times – such as the rise of radical Islam, or the biotech revolution – we first have to develop a new willingness to focus on those things that unite us as Catholics, because otherwise the centrifugal energies of this brave new world will quite literally tear us apart.

In that regard, the vision Bishop Farrell outlined is not only compelling on its merits, but also ideally suited to our situation. When he says that "no one of us has the only approach to Catholicism," and that "dogmatism, closed-mindedness, judgmentalism [and] suspicion of one another's motives" are incompatible with genuine Catholicity, he is of course speaking eternal truths. As it happens, these are truths increasingly at a premium in the Catholicism of the 21st century, which faces the root choice of overcoming its tribal divisions or being paralyzed by them. In that sense, Bishop Farrell's call for a hermeneutics of charity is vital – not just for the University of Dallas, but for the entire Church which this university serves.

Let me now say a few words about the global situation facing Catholic higher education, which, in a sound-bite, I would describe as a "Tale of Two Worlds."

The Global Situation

The dominant trend shaping Catholic life in the West, including the United States, is what I've termed "Evangelical Catholicism." What I mean is this: A strong reassertion of Catholic identity, coupled with a new determination to proclaim and assert that identity in the public sphere. As a result, ferment over Catholic identity is the order of the day everywhere, including, of course, in the realm of higher education.

To put the point differently, the *idée fixe* for the Church's leadership class in the West these days tends to be recovering a "thick" sense of Catholic distinctiveness – those markers of Catholic thought, speech and practice which over the centuries have set us apart from the rest of the world and told us who we are. That project is designed to ensure that the Church does not end up assimilated to agnostic secularism – in the memorable phrase of Jacques Maritain, that we do not find ourselves "kneeling before the world."

The mega-challenge in the West is how to revive identity without succumbing to the dogmatism and closure against which Bishop Farrell rightly warns. I've tried to express this challenge in terms of steering a middle course between two extremes: what my friend and colleague George Weigel correctly terms "Catholicism Lite," meaning a watered-down, sold-out form of secularized religiosity, Catholic in name only; and what I call "Taliban Catholicism," meaning a distorted, angry form of the faith that knows only how to excoriate, condemn, and smash the metaphorical TV sets of the modern world. Both are real and present dangers, and the clash between them often defines much of the "action" on Catholic campuses these days.

In the global South, the picture looks somewhat different. In general, one does not find the same tensions over Catholic identity, because the "Catholicity" of these institutions is usually taken for granted. It is true, of course, that theology departments in Asia, Africa and Latin America often seem more "liberal" than the general ecclesiastical culture – as here, they tend to be ports in the storm for what one might call the ecclesiastical avant-garde. Yet because the culture wars between left and right tend not to be a dominant feature of Catholic life in the global South, the atmosphere in the universities tends to be less partisan. Moreover, these institutions generally have a more direct relationship with ecclesiastical officialdom – they do not have the history of a gradual (or, in some cases, abrupt) transition to autonomy under civil law that's unfolded, in various ways, both in Europe and the United States.

As a result, tension over Catholic identity is not something most leaders in higher education in the South would identify as a major challenge. Instead, what animates them is the desire to be change agents in their societies. Ask most educators in Africa or Latin America what gets them out of bed in the morning, and here's what they'll say: The urgency of forming a generation of ethically sensitive young people who can lead their nations in combating corruption, violence (including racial, religious and ethnic conflict), war, endemic poverty, and the rest of the cocktail of pathologies that too often define life in the developing world.

To put all this into a sound-bite, the difference between North and South inside Catholicism is that the preoccupations of the North tend to be *ad intra*, focused on the Church's

inner life, under the shadow of secularism; in the South, the priorities tend to be *ad extra*, concerned with how Catholicism can transform the broader culture.

As a footnote to the above, the ethos of the global South is increasingly a feature of the American Catholic landscape as well. By 2030, white Catholics (or, in the argot of the Southwest, “Anglos”) will no longer be a demographic majority in the Church in the United States. Anglos will be 48 percent, Hispanics 41 percent, Asian-Americans 7.5 percent, and African-Americans 3 percent. In consequence, the contrast between *ad intra* and *ad extra* concerns is not just a feature of the global Catholic scene, but also our own backyard.

Implications for a Catholic University

Faced with this contrast, a Catholic university in the United States in the 21st century will be called upon to engage in a classically Catholic work of synthesis – that is, crafting a both/and solution to what might otherwise seem an either/or problem.

In the first place, an American Catholic university must do justice to the hunger for clarity and courage about Catholic identity which is so palpable today, especially among a certain cohort of younger Catholics alienated by the rootless secular milieu in which they were raised. Yes, this evangelical Catholic impulse is potentially dangerous – it can feed the smug righteousness which Bishop Farrell described last May. But here we must fall back on that venerable Thomistic principle, *Abusus non tollit usum*: The possibility of abuse does not invalidate legitimate use. The recovery of Catholic identity is, in itself, an entirely laudable enterprise, and one in which a Catholic university must play a central role.

At the same time, a Catholic university also ought to be a crucible for shaping a more deeply global consciousness in the Church. American Catholics represent exactly six percent of the global Catholic population, yet at times we sometimes seem to feel that the entire Catholic world, including Rome, ought to pivot on our concerns. A university should be a place where a broader sense of perspective takes hold, which in the 21st century has to include identification with the *ad extra* priorities of the bulk of the Catholic world. In other words, we cannot allow the legitimate concern for Catholic identity to become an idol that blocks us from devoting intellectual and logistical capital to the aspirations for social transformation which are the defining cause of Catholicism in much of the world.

How to pull this off is obviously a complicated business, to which there is no one blueprint. The right place to begin, it seems to me, is by taking seriously the wisdom Bishop Farrell offered last May: “We know well that no one of us can ever have all the answers,” he said. “No theologian, or professor or pope, has ever had or ever will have all the answers to what it means to be authentically and fully Catholic.”

If even theologians and popes are disbarred from essaying comprehensive answers to what it means to be Catholic, *a fortiori* a work-a-day journalist such as myself is all the more disqualified. I hope, however, the perspective I’ve tried to offer may be of some use in pondering the identity of a Catholic university in the 21st century. Certainly that effort can have no better point of departure than what Bishop Farrell has already provided.