

CATHOLICITY AND MISSION – TOPIC SESSION

- Topic: Catholic Institutional Identities and Mission in a Time of De-Institutionalization
- Convener: Laurie Johnston, Emmanuel College, Boston
- Moderator: Antonio Sison, Catholic Theological Union
- Presenters: Kevin Ahern, Manhattan College
Daniel Rober, Sacred Heart University
- Respondent: Cristina Lledo Gomez

This session was comprised of two papers, followed by a response and then questions and answers. Kevin Ahern began with a paper that suggested a more robust understanding of the corporate dimension of charism could help Catholic universities live out their mission more authentically and discern a way forward amidst current challenges. A focus on charism has often functioned as an identity adaptation strategy for universities; in the face of growing diversity and dissatisfaction with the institutional church, it has sometimes allowed stakeholders to identify themselves with the charism but not with Catholicism. While this presents risks, it can nevertheless lead to a better understanding of the Catholic faith.

As gratuitous gifts or special graces, charisms are far more than a branding strategy or strategic plan. Since different charisms share the same divine source, they ought to complement each other rather than compete; colleges with varying charisms should consider how they might cooperate or even unite. Overall, genuine charisms are never self-referential and must always be concerned with the health of the wider communities where they appear.

Finally, Ahern proposed that a deepened sense of charism can help universities discern how to preserve freedom within the university, freedom for the university, and even—in some circumstances—freedom from the university, as a charism may invite a move away from present structures or traditional ways of institutionalizing the mission.

Daniel Rober also addressed questions of mission and discernment at Catholic institutions of higher education in the face of secularization and other challenges. Catholic universities find themselves in a bind: opt either for a strong (to the point of overbearing) emphasis on Catholic identity in order to attract those most interested or for a(n) (intentional or unintentional) de-emphasis in order to attract those least interested.

After describing the development of Catholic universities over the last decades from the Land of Lakes declaration to *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, he argued for applying the notion of inculturation to universities as a middle way between sectarianism and secularization. Engaging secularizing American culture involves drawing upon the Catholic intellectual tradition as a living tradition which extends far beyond the confines of the Euro-American world. Pope Francis' "missiology of attraction," grounded in new theologies of mission that have come out of the experience of the church in lands where it lacks the hegemonic past that it has had in Europe, holds promise for universities. To that end, Rober offered three prescriptions: Catholic institutions need to embrace Catholic mission as a positive but constantly negotiated

aspect of institutional identity; Catholic institutions need to orient and root their other choices in terms of mission; and finally, Catholic institutions must recommit themselves to educating Catholics, as the community that gives the institution its historic and contemporary identity. This ought not to be an exercise in hegemony, and certainly not one of conversion, but rather being true to institutional identity.

Cristina Lledo Gomez offered a response to both papers in which she cautioned that neither naming an institution “Catholic,” nor explaining its Catholic values or Catholic charism, nor carrying out “Catholic” activities are sufficient. Certainly, the presence of Catholic “elders” who can be carriers of the mission is important, as indigenous traditions would remind us. But, drawing on Yves Congar, she noted that the Catholic identity of a university is utterly dependent upon God’s intervention by means of the Holy Spirit. It arises not only from the explicit espousal of a Catholic identity and mission but in the activity of turning to the uncreated grace. Praying, in the various ways that it has been part of the church’s history but also in its encounters and learnings from other religious traditions, enables the Catholic institution to do the work of being Catholic, of being the church and witnessing and building the kingdom of God by identifying the ways of injustice, marginalization, and indignities and placing those with little power as the center of concern for the university.

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