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Response to Christine Pharr: Renewing the Catholic University Presidency

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Christine Pharr's paper provides a cogent account of the historical conditions that have shaped Catholic college and university leadership over the past half century. Charting a shift toward secularism, academic freedom, and institutional autonomy, she argues for the university presidency as a vital point of cultural contact among changing institutions, their religious orders, the Church, and the larger world. The emergence of lay presidents, she contends, requires an ongoing and now more explicitly mindful commitment to infusing such contacts with a Catholic dimension: where once the collar signified, now more diligent work must be done to retain the institution's identity as *Catholic*.

In her paper, Christine attends to the legacies of a decades-long shift described by, among others, the Catholic historian David J. O'Brien in his account of the 1967 Land O'Lakes statement. Noting the historical context of the Second Vatican Council, and the doubling of the US Catholic population between 1945 and 1965, O'Brien describes how the task for Catholic university presidents (led by Theodore Hesburgh of Notre Dame) was at that moment "to affirm their universities' Catholic Identity in ways that would satisfy Rome while achieving their goal of academic excellence."[1] Recalling O'Brien's account enables us to see a striking dimension of Christine's intervention: whereas O'Brien takes for granted the heroic role that a Catholic university president plays in conveying and indeed embodying an institution's Catholic identity (e.g., Hesburgh at Notre Dame, J. Donald Monan at Boston College, John Brooks at Holy Cross, Paul Locatelli at Santa Clara), that historical role—male, intellectual, priestly—is no longer

1 David J. O'Brien. "The Land O'Lakes Statement." *Boston College Magazine* (Winter 1998).

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readily available to us. Part of this change has been brought on by shifts in Catholic religious formation and religious life, but more fundamentally it reveals the changing nature of university presidencies across American higher education. Increasingly, the job of fundraiser-in-chief has displaced the tasks of intellectual leadership that were once the *sine qua non* of university presidencies, and the hyper-professionalization of such fundraising has made it more difficult to find in a single person—religious or not—those increasingly disparate skills.

The shift in the tasks required of a Catholic university president manifests all too clearly the currents shaping American higher education: recessional economics, competition for students, reduced government funding, the rise of professionalized undergraduate education, the waning notion of a "public good," and so on. The fear of being left behind amidst these changes has fomented an obsession with "best practices" among Catholic schools and a modeling of our ways of proceeding on those of secular institutions, practices that are not always in line with our mission. Indeed, from the corporatization of our boards to the pre-professionalization of our students, Catholic institutions must work harder than ever to distinguish themselves from other places.

A few years ago out of curiosity, I checked the composition of the board of trustees at my home institution. The board included 38 individuals, seven of whom were Jesuits. Of the 31 laypersons on the board, 28 either were, or had been while active in their careers, senior executives of corporate enterprises (e.g., president, vice president, CEO, managing partner). The exceptions were a college president, a professor of medicine, and a recent graduate beginning his career as an assurance associate at a "Big Four" accounting firm.[2] This preponderance of corporate executives evinces a desire for the board to provide leadership, of course—and few would deny the wealth of experience such a group brings—but it also displays, let us be frank, a recognition that the board is a primary means of generating revenue for the college, both from board members themselves and as a result of the business acumen they bring. Fair enough: our schools need to raise money. But one central effect of such an emphasis, which now obtains at many (if not all) of our schools, is that college and university presidents have as their primary constituency a leadership body placing high institutional value on corporate training and management approaches, on market-driven logics, and on consumerist models of student service. Lost, or at least no longer prevalent, is the notion that intellectuals should play primary roles in the executive leadership of intellectual institutions—and more particularly that Catholic colleges and universities should be at the forefront of promoting that (now countercultural) notion. I do not mean to criticize individuals on our boards who devote time and personal resources to institutions about which they care deeply, nor to suggest that their contributions are circumscribed entirely by their professional profiles. But I do mean to suggest that this is just one example of why there needs to be more thought given to the way Catholic colleges and universities

2 *College of the Holy Cross 2014-2015 Catalog* (452-55), http://crossworks.holycross.edu/course_catalog/2/ (accessed 17 April 2017).

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gather and develop their boards and their senior executive teams, especially as the pool of qualified religious candidates dwindles in the years ahead.

Rather than being seen as an irretrievable loss, the disappearance of the priestly heroic presidency may be taken as a crucial opportunity to imagine anew what we mean by Catholic leadership. With this in mind I want to speculate briefly how a Catholic university presidency—and a lay presidency at that—might differ from a presidency at a non-Catholic institution precisely because the need for imaginative engagement with Catholic educational traditions can produce resistance to the disheartening trends prevailing in American higher education. More specifically, I would argue that the laicization of the Catholic university presidency presents a chance for our institutions to be more, not less, radically different from our non-Catholic peers in ways that can benefit our students, the Church, and the world. I would open this way of thinking by attending to several related words that recur in Christine Pharr's and David O'Brien's thinking: "retain," "sustain," and "affirm." While I understand the imperatives behind such formulations, each of them posits our institutions as historically belated receptacles of a tradition that is on the wane—in the face of secularism, the instrumentalization of education, and other economic and cultural factors we have discussed throughout this roundtable. I do not mean to suggest that Pharr or O'Brien have got the narrative wrong: clearly the changes they describe have occurred, and are occurring. But if we are willing to take on the task, the emergence of lay presidencies can occasion a renovation of "Catholic identity" as such, and of the institutional practices that accompany such a renovation. In this sense then, I wish to disagree with, or at least put pressure on, Christine's assertion that CCU presidents who are from the laity "still tend, as individuals, to be less well equipped academically to sustain the Catholic identity and mission than their religious colleagues." In fact, the waning of the priestly heroic model of the Catholic presidency can enable us to move beyond the idea that the presence of religious on campus is the primary mode of expressing an institution's Catholic identity. The very conditions that Christine describes invite us to make institutional choices—whom we appoint as presidents, whom we appoint to our boards, whom we hire as faculty—less pre-ordained and thus potentially more imaginative about what an institution's Catholic identity means in the daily lives of its workers, students, alumni, and supporters. Rather than *retaining*, we have the potential to *renew*.

This will take a certain measure of bravery. Imagine, for example, Catholic universities and colleges insisting on a different kind of leadership, structured differently and

with different aims, than the ever-more-corporatized models holding sway at secular institutions. Imagine presidents taking on and expressing a commitment to the "universal" of which Jeff Bloechl writes in his essay—not as an assumption that accompanies their status as religious but as a conscious choice vividly informed by their explicit engagement with the institution's Catholic heritage.[3] Imagine presidents taking on the roles not only of intellectual leadership but of "discerner-in-chief" among senior leadership teams. Imagine that our most elite institutions take as an affront to their missions the kinds of economic inequality they are reproducing in ways Laura Nichols describes in her paper.[4] In this vision, the decisions we make begin to look less like Boston College trying to "out-Harvard Harvard" or less like Holy Cross trying to "out-Amherst Amherst," and more like an enactment of the unique positions those schools hold in the landscape of American higher education: we hire a faculty that is ethnically and culturally diverse *because* of our Catholicism; we commit more resources to financial aid than other schools *because* of our Catholicism; we reimagine our curriculum to balance tradition and emergent interdisciplinarity *because* of our Catholicism; we integrate social practice with the philosophical consideration of justice *because* of our Catholicism; we ask our students to become "more" than their peers at other schools *because* of our Catholicism. Thus the university becomes a means not to retain but to remake, for ourselves and the populations we serve, the nature of Catholic identity. And this renewal takes place because in each of the examples I offer there must be rigorous discussion at the highest levels of the administration about the "why" and the "how" of our choices—discussion that is in dialogue with but not beholden to the trends governing the rest of American higher education.

I'll close just by saying that Fr. Jack Butler's vivid testimony at the opening of this gathering of the Roundtable was something we need to hear more of from our senior administrators, and also a clue to what the most pressing dimension of renewing our presidencies may be: "it's about the faculty." I do not mean that the faculty must be dieted with praise (we often are)—nor do I mean strictly speaking that our schools are not providing enough support for faculty work (mine, for example, is generous on many fronts). But if we are to imagine the kind of institutions Jeff Bloechl calls for

3 Jeffrey Bloechl, "The Catholic University in the World and the World in the Catholic University: Community, Value, and Conversation," *Integritas* 9.1 (Spring 2017), 1-13.

4 I will again use my home institution as an example. While 13.1% of Holy Cross students are from families who rank in the top 1% of household incomes, only 15.1% of our students come from the bottom 60% of income earners in the United States. (https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/01/18/upshot/some-colleges-have-more-students-from-the-top-1-percent-than-the-bottom-60.html?_r=0). Accessed 25 May 2017. Laura Nichols's study shows that 70% of Holy Cross students come from families who rank in the top 20% of household incomes, while only 2% of our students come from families who rank in the bottom 20%. See Laura Nichols, "The Role of Catholic Schools in Reducing Economic Inequality," *Integritas 9.4* (Spring 2017), 1-16. Nichols cites data from Raj Chetty, John N. Friedman, Emmanuel Saez, Nicholas Turner, and Danny Yagan, "Mobility Report Cards: The Role of Colleges in Intergenerational Mobility." Retrieved from: http://www.equality-of-opportunity.org/ (January 2017) as well as from the *Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System* (IPEDS).

in his essay—Catholic and Christian in a fundamental sense that they are bound and impelled by *love*—we need to understand that the "whole" that such practices comprise and manifest is brought into being by, and resides in, the stewardship of the faculty. I am intentionally vague in my use of that "of" because I mean both stewardship *by* the faculty and stewardship attending *to* the faculty. The indispensable commitment to the life of the teacher-scholar, and to promoting active teacher-scholars to the ranks of upper administration, must remain at the heart of every Catholic college and university else we risk becoming a collection of "first-rate second-rate" places whose programs mimic rather than innovate, whose campuses are indistinguishable from those of their secular peers, and whose missions could one day amount to little more than "best practices with a twist." To return to Christine's paper, here is my most radical suggestion: let us seek as Catholic university presidents (and board members) intellectual leaders from among the faculty, more readily and more joyfully than those other kinds of institutions that now so readily choose management over leadership. In this historical moment, heroic leadership must take on a different tenor, and a different dress, than it once had. But such a transformation would be a fine start to renewing what Catholic higher education is, and can become.