

Roundtable conversation summary

Chester Gillis's description of "centered pluralism," as well as the complementary iterations of charism and hospitality at Georgetown and St. Catherine, raised the question of what constitutes the "center." Is it a critical mass of Catholic faculty, or rather the character of those who promote mission? On the one hand, institutions with many members of the founding religious order, or those whose Catholic identity is rooted in bishops' active oversight, have greater certainty about the future of their mission, compared with institutions where the numbers of religious are declining. On the other hand, some observed that institutions facing such decline have been motivated to be more deliberate and strategic about fostering mission. Participants noted the collaboration of Jesuit schools, for example. Many have recognized the importance of leadership and the necessity of thinking about hiring for mission, and implemented strategies for faculty and student formation.

The real neuralgia, one participant observed, comes when there are new assertions of the "center," whether through symbolism (like crucifixes on the walls of classrooms), curricula, or recruitment. There is need for balance between striving for excellence, on the one hand, and developing and maintaining a strong center. Ought there to be some strategic program for recruiting active Catholics? Or is it better to develop strategies of collaboration among a diverse faculty, so that people with any number of religious or philosophical convictions can participate in a shared college mission? One participant raised the question of whether the Roundtable might develop some kind of position on this question of the center.

Underneath the practical question of what colleges and universities ought to do lay a more foundational question that a participant raised in the course of the conversation. What is at the heart of Catholicism (pointing to John Paul II's *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*) that gives rise to the Catholic college or university? Participants identified a number of descriptors which bear upon the task of these institutions (in no particular order):

- The person of Christ
- Church
- The book of Scripture and the book of life
- Sacramentality
- Morality
- Love of the whole person

- Hospitality and community
- Social justice
- Attentiveness to the global reality and the environment
- Rigorous intellectual inquiry
- Mediation of experience in history and literature and social and natural sciences, etc.
- An emphasis on philosophy and theology
- Finality in God's plan for us

Participants observed that while these identifiers are positive, there are yet mixed perceptions about the nature of Catholic mission in colleges and universities. Several observed, for example, that there are generally positive associations with the founding religious orders, but that the adjective "Catholic" is still often perceived negatively, perhaps because of media biases. Moreover, there exists in the contemporary cultural landscape a plethora of opinions about what the noun "university" means. One observer shared that he strives to disabuse parents of the idea that the university is a kind of employment agency. Catholic colleges and universities must be strategic in presenting what is distinctive about the experiences that faculty and students will have under their auspices.

One participant suggested that a key is that these institutions want people to grapple with God in some way. Another suggested that there is a shared concern for vocation, in the broad sense of helping people discern a way of living. As the conversation continued, a number of other implications of being Catholic and being a college or university emerged: the celebration of the Mass on campus; a willingness to engage transcendent questions, even in the absence of complete answers; a recognition that faith involves, on some level, a surrender rather than a complete mastery of information. Describing the implications of the desire to unite faith and learning, one participant said that the campus is "a place of joy and vivacity where there's a thrill in learning and community and justice."

Educators who participate in the Catholic mission want to share that joy and vivacity with students, and so it is not uncommon for students to (re-)discover faith while on campus. Some undertake the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA), but one participant observed that it is necessary to remind students that they are joining not just the campus ministry, but also the universal Church, where young adults sometimes find it difficult to find age-appropriate ministry. Several participants agreed that ministry to young people in the Church is often weak, and that the faith formation of students while on campus can therefore be difficult. One observer recalled a conversation with a bishop who lamented the poor job that Catholic colleges were doing to form young people—to which the observer responded that the difficulty lay earlier, in the poor formation of young people before they become college students. The larger challenge in sharing faith with students today is that the Church as a whole must grow in its willingness to understand the world that young people live in, and respond appropriately. One participant suggested that this challenge is in part about proper marketing, to the extent that it is about understanding a demographic and seeking to meet their desires. In other contexts, that dynamic has been called evangelization.