

The Crisis of Catholic Higher Education

by Jim Seghers

Ms. Monika Hellwig's recent participation at the Loyola University of New Orleans lecture on "The Role of the Theologian at a Catholic University" brought to mind Peter Kreeft's insightful *The Snakebite Letters*. In his clever little book Kreeft reveals the devilish strategy for corrupting American society discovered in the instructions that the demon Snakebite sends to his trainee, Braintwister. Regarding Catholic higher education Snakebite writes the following to his nephew.

"My naïve Braintwister,

So your patient has enrolled in a Catholic college: Don't you understand that this increases, not decreases, our opportunities?

Just contemplate this picture for a moment, and you'll start salivating with delight. Millions of innocent, naïve, hard-working parents scrape together big bucks for tuition money for Catholic high schools and colleges--usually a heroic, sometimes nearly miraculous task for middle-class parents nowadays. They put themselves in debt sometimes for life. For what? For their precious kiddies' welfare, academic and spiritual... Best of all, we teach them that a little hypocrisy goes a long way. We're rapidly replacing reason with rationalization. The students learn little shuffling word-games from their teachers, especially in theology. They learn to call apostasy "dissent", heresy "nuancing", baby-killing "choice", sodomy an "alternative lifestyle", and adultery, "adult". Their verbal hypocrisy rationalizes their lived hypocrisy. They learn how simultaneously to live decadence and to talk idealism. I notice further that your patient has enrolled in a Jesuit college; how fortunate! The Jesuits used to be our worst enemies, the Pope's shock troops. How times have changed!"

Donna Steichen observed in her insightful book, *Ungodly Rage*: "Most of a generation of young Catholics have been lost to the Faith because their trusting parents sacrificed to send them to Catholic catechetical programs, schools and colleges." What happened to bring this about?

In the 1960s the presidents of Catholic colleges began to decry the "sectarian," that is, the Catholic nature of their institutions as an obstacle to obtaining federal funds. As a result hundreds of Catholic colleges and universities began to rewrite their charters and invest lay trustees. The formal sell-out of their Catholic identity occurred in 1967 at a meeting of 26 educators from 10 Catholic institutions including Boston College, Catholic University, Fordham, Georgetown, and Notre Dame. What they adopted was the "Land of Lakes" document.

This statement proclaimed: "The Catholic university must have a true autonomy and academic freedom in the face of authority of whatever kind lay or clerical, external to the academic community itself." Thus under a false banner of academic freedom they jettisoned themselves from the safe and true moorings to the Catholic Church. In the process Catholic colleges and universities lost their distinctive Catholic character which made them true alternatives to

secular education and principles. These tragic events are reminiscent of the Hebrew people who sought to have a king "like the nations" (1 Sam 8:5). God announced to the prophet Samuel: "they have rejected me from being king over them" (1 Sam 8:7).

The philosophy of the "Land of Lakes" statement dominates the thinking of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities of which Ms. Hellwig is the current president. It is the guiding principle of most so-called Catholic colleges and universities. The negative results in the lives of students are inevitable. Jeanette De Melo reported in her April 3 article, that in a survey of students at 38 Catholic colleges graduating seniors "are predominately pro-abortion, approve of homosexual 'marriage', and only occasionally pray or attend religious services." This raises an interesting question to parents. If your son or daughter is going to get a secular education at Loyola, for example, why not send them to Tulane, LSU, the University of New Orleans or Southeastern?

During his visit to the United States in 1979 Pope John Paul II called American Catholic colleges and universities to be unapologetically Catholic. In 1980 the U.S. bishops published a pastoral letter on Catholic higher education. The Catholic Theological Society of America issued a report rejecting what it considered "unacceptable extrinsic interventions." The revised Code of Canon Law was promulgated in 1983 with eight canons pertaining to "Catholic Universities and Other Institutes of Higher Studies." Msgr. Frederick R. McManus of Catholic University of America sent a memorandum to all Catholic university and college presidents opposing the new canons. Particularly objectionable to these deconstructionists of the Catholic faith was Canon 812: "Those who teach theological subjects in any institute of higher studies must have a mandate from the competent ecclesiastical authority" and "be faithful to the Magisterium of the Church as the authentic interpreter of sacred Scripture and sacred Tradition."

In 1985 the Holy See produced the first draft of what would become *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (From the Heart of the Church). The association of American Catholic Colleges and Universities sent responses to Rome opposing any Church oversight of Catholic universities. After lengthy consultation with 900 institutions, especially with the U.S. Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* was issued in 1990. For the next 10 years theologians and administrators in the US fought against the implementation of this apostolic constitution, which holds Catholic universities and colleges formally answerable for their Catholic character. Even when norms were finally adopted only a few Catholic institutions fell into line. Ms. Hellwig calls for "dialogue," which means discuss but do nothing. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* calls for action. Meanwhile those responsible for its implementation fiddle while the light of the Catholic faith flames out in the hearts of many students.

Yet according to Ms. Hellwig "the American Catholic colleges have done much more to pass on the Catholic theological tradition to lay undergraduate students than Catholic universities elsewhere." Since no data was offered to support this assertion of the superiority of American Catholic higher education, it is impossible to assess its accuracy. However, there is an abundance of data to support the disastrous results of Catholic education in the U.S.

For example, the *Catholic World News* of Feb 13, 1998 reported on a survey to post-baby boom Catholics, conducted by Dean Hoge & William Dinges of Catholic University, Sister Mary Johnson of Emmanuel College in Boston, and Juan Gonzales of California State U. Hayward. Their study showed that: only 58% believed in the Real Presence; 17% believed that only men should be priests; 27% believed that priests should remain celibate; 48% stated that their main beliefs are no different from those of Protestants; and 50% said that the Catholic Church is no more faithful to the will of Christ than other Christian Churches!

The examples of the secularization of Catholic colleges and universities abound. Students at Georgetown had to campaign loud and hard to have crucifixes restored to their classrooms. The university president, Fr. Leo J. O'Donovan, funded and granted use of its name to the student's pro-abortion group GU Choice under a twisted notion of free speech. Closer to home consider Loyola University in New Orleans.

On Friday and Saturday, March 13-14, 1998 it was announced that the Loyola Institute for Ministry would sponsor Thomas Berry so he could conduct a workshop in "Ecologically-Sensitive Spirituality." Who is Thomas Berry, you ask? He's a Passionist priest who calls himself a "geologist." According to Donna Steichen he has been a prime mover in introducing bankrupt New Age ideas to American Catholics. His goal is to "reinvent the human" in a universe freed of "hypermagical ultra-omnipotence." According to Berry the "world is being called to a new 'post-denominational,' even post-Christian, belief system that sees the earth as a living being—mythologically, as Gaia, Mother Earth—with mankind as her consciousness." In the words of Thomas Berry, "The great spiritual mission of the present is a renewal of the entire western religious-spiritual tradition in relation to the integral functioning of the biosystems of the planet and the entire universe." At this workshop, it was announced, participants would reflect together on the natural world as sacred text and spiritual director.

In March 2002 Kim Gandy, President of NOW, was given the platform to speak at Loyola Law School. NOW represents an abortion, contraceptive and radical feminist agenda that is totally inconsistent with the teachings of the Catholic Church. Ms. Gandy's appearance was also sponsored by the Loyola Women's Resource Center.

A graduate of the university reported that his first "theology" professor announced that she was an atheist. She expressed the view that her atheism gave her a more objective perspective to teach theology. A current student informed this writer that in his first exposure to "theology" at Loyola, the professor stated that the course had nothing to do with truth.

The present crisis in Catholic higher education runs far deeper than the policies of administrators. At its core are the distortions of the Catholic faith by many of the theologians who instruct their unwary and poorly catechized students. In the words of Snakebite:

"I see that your patient has enrolled in Professor Avant Garde's theology class. Wonderful news. The best opportunities of all come in theology classes. What a fabulous irony! — the very thing they think makes them distinctively Catholic, the very

first thing parents think of when they consider sending their kids to a 'Catholic' school, is the place where we've been able to undermine students' faith the most.

Their scholars and teachers, of course, know very well the contradiction between 'the spirit of Vatican II' and the letter of its documents. They know that those documents reaffirmed the very things they despise: old things like the Latin Mass, the rosary, devotion to Mary, papal infallibility, traditional morality and the need to conform one's conscience to the teaching authority of the Church. But the students rarely read the documents, so they can be easily fooled. Professor Garde is perfect for your purposes. He's a 'reinterpreter' and a 'nuancer'."

This underlining problem of errant theologians is seen in Ms. Hellwig's reference to the "*magisterium* of expertise [theologians like herself, of course]... alongside the *magisterium* of office [the Pope and the bishops united with him]. These haughty theologians believe that they hold the trump card in all matters doctrinal and moral. The reality is that the proper role of the theologian is to serve the Magisterium. Authentic Catholic theologians are called to be a sign of contradiction to the world, not a sign of contradiction to the Church.

Consider the Catholic Theological Society of America. In *Human Sexuality*, the study they commissioned in 1977, this organization approved artificial insemination, mate swapping, adultery, premarital intercourse, acts of homosexuality, bestiality, and sexual relationships between therapists and patients.

Authentic Catholic theology is God centered because it is rooted in God's revelation as infallibly interpreted by the Church. What is taught as "theology" in many Catholic institutions is in reality ego-centered. Even Ms. Hellwig admits as much: "Most programs have been planned to begin with the students' own experience and questions, and from there to explore what religious traditions have to offer in understanding and interpretation." This approach to religious studies should have its name changed from theology to egology! Not only is the individual's experiences the focus of study, but also this self-centered theology is expanded by "religious traditions," implying that all religious traditions have a comparable value. Thus, Hellwig continues, "Often the students are offered a look at another tradition [that is, other than Catholic] with which they are not already familiar."

There are, of course, many orthodox Catholic theologians. However, they are marginalized, denied positions, refused tenure, and dismissed. Such is the penalty for Orthodoxy. Consider the example of Fr. Manuel Miguens, O.F.M., S.T.D., S.S.D, formally of Catholic University. Fr. Miguens holds doctorates in theology and scripture. He completed his graduate work in Rome, Jerusalem, and Louvain. He is fluent in English, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Latin, Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Syriac. He is published in: Spanish, Italian, Latin, and English. After 5 years at Catholic University he applied for tenure. The promotion committee in School of Theology unanimously endorsed his request. The vote of entire theological faculty was also favorable, with one negative vote and one abstention. However, the Academic Senate that granted tenure to a dissenter from [*Humanae Vitae*](#) rejected Fr. Miguens.

Why is Fr. Miguens no longer at Catholic University? He espoused a conservative, that is, orthodox theology. Obviously, he was politically incorrect. He severely criticized in a scholarly review Fr. Raymond Brown's, S.S. booklet *Priest and Bishop* in a "wrong" magazine, *Triumph*. Finally, in his book, *The Virgin Birth*, Fr. Miguens demolished the arguments of Fr. Raymond Brown and Fr. Joseph Fitzmeyer that the virgin birth did not rest on solid biblical ground. So much for academic freedom and the scholarly exchange of ideas!

Ms. Hellwig solution to the current crisis is more dialogue. In contrast John Paul II offers the only effective remedy, proclaiming the unadulterated truth. That explains the differences between Loyola and authentic Catholic colleges and universities like Thomas Aquinas College, Santa Paula, CA; Franciscan University, Steubenville, OH; Christendom College, Front Royal, VA; Thomas More College, Merrimack, NH; University of Dallas, Dallas, TX; Magdalen College, Warner, NH; and Assumption College, Worcester, MA.

Catholic parents have a choice. They can send their children to colleges and universities fully in accord with *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* or they can follow the lead of the demon Braintwister.

“Always remember, a sneer is more potent than any argument. That arch-troublemaker, Archbishop Fulton Sheen, saw through our strategy. Shortly before he died, he advised Catholic parents who wanted to be sure their children did not lose their faith to send them to Catholic colleges and be sure they took lots of theology courses.”

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