

## Assessing Notre Dame's Catholic Character

Rumor has it that the Board of Trustees is concerned about Notre Dame losing its Catholic identity. It is hard to imagine how that might happen. One possibility is that U.S. bishops part ways with the Vatican, resulting in ND becoming part of an American church in schism from the Church of Rome. This would be comparable to Corpus Christi in Oxford shifting from Roman Catholic to Anglican under Henry VIII. Another scenario is for the Congregation of Holy Cross to sell the University, to withdraw its rectors from the residence halls, and to shut down Campus Ministry. Given the sheer unlikelihood of events like these, it is a good bet that ND will remain Catholic as long as it exists.

Another concern was mentioned in a recent *Observer* article announcing the resignation of our Associate Vice President for News and Information, citing alumni misgivings about the University's posture during "the recent national culture wars." By this account, some alumni are worried that ND might be losing "its way in terms of its Catholic character." Unlike Catholic identity, which (like motherhood) is an all-or-nothing matter, Catholic character appears to be something that can be gained and lost in degrees. Presumably the worry of trustees and alumni alike is that ND might be undergoing an erosion of values and practices that traditionally have distinguished it from its secular counterparts.

What are these values and practices? Responses will vary with their source within the University. On the lightweight side, PR interests might emphasize practices displaying piety (like lighting candles), while alumni groups might focus on prayers in the Grotto before football games. Responses like these presumably would not be representative of the University at large.

More seriously, many loyal sons and daughters might want the University to take an official public stance on issues central to the "culture wars" mentioned above, such as gay marriage and euthanasia. This will be balanced by the perspective of other partisans focusing on Catholic social teachings (e.g., on just war, or the errors of capitalism), and on programs putting these teachings into effect. While faithful members of the community will disagree on which perspective should have priority, both should be present in discussions of ND's Catholic character.

Inasmuch as ND represents different things for different groups of constituents, however, it would be well served by a common conception of its Catholic character that transcends areas of politicized disagreement. To this end, we might focus on our student body. Suppose we attempt to reach consensus on attributes we believe should distinguish ND graduates from products of comparable secular schools. If we could pin down a representative list of such attributes, we would be well on our way toward having identified the University's Catholic character.

Most incoming ND students have a Catholic background, and a majority probably are practicing Catholics. Let us consider what ideally should happen to a group of such students during four years at ND, in comparison with a like group attending a secular university. The comparison should take into account (1) desirable attributes characteristic of both groups, (2) attributes characterizing graduates of secular schools that ND graduates hopefully might avoid, and (3) attributes prominent among ND graduates not likely to be exhibited by the other group.

Beginning with (1), most of us would agree that students in both groups should receive sustained exposure to their chosen disciplines and gain social skills needed for their future careers. Those headed for graduate work should have solid foundations in their specialties, those planning careers of service should have learned to find helping others rewarding, and those anticipating professional careers should have gained the requisite technical skills. Helping its students with requirements like these is part of ND's duty as an institution of higher learning, and is fully consonant with its Catholic character.

Regarding (2), it seems fair to say that secular universities sometimes foster personal habits and life-styles that have no place in a specifically Catholic institution. Notorious examples are dishonesty (e.g., cheating on exams), over-indulgence (think of binge drinking), and disrespect for other person (e.g., sexual opportunism). Such traits are contrary to the University's mission, and we should do our best to discourage them among our students.

Category (3) brings us to the crux of the matter. What benefits should ND provide to its mostly Catholic student-body that would not be available in a secular setting? Here are a few suggestions to be considered. For one, ND should provide opportunities for its

students to gain thorough familiarity with the history of Catholic thought. This is a matter not of continuing catechesis, but rather of studies treating the history of the Church and the evolution of its teachings.

For another, ND students should be assured that when religiously sensitive issues are discussed in class, Catholic perspectives will be part of the discussion. Included are issues of sexual reproduction, sanctity of life (including capital punishment), and the place of humankind in a seemingly hostile material universe. Participation in such discussion should not be doctrinaire, but rather should be aimed at helping students (Catholic and others alike) understand how being Catholic affects one's everyday life. This discussion should cover matters both of personal morality and of responsibility to other people on the margins of society.

Most importantly, ND should provide its students with ample opportunities to grow in their faith. The point here is not primarily to make their faith more impregnable (think "defense" in football), but to make it more integral to their intellectual and spiritual lives. A mature spiritual life engages one's entire being, encompassing hopes and affections no less than thoughts and deeds. Above all else, ND's distinction from its secular peers should lie in its contribution to the spiritual maturity of its students.

ND's capacity to serve its students in this manner depends both on the quality of its residence life and on the character of its teaching faculty. Quality of residence life is moderated by time-tested regulations like parietals and drinking policies. Since these regulations are never perfect, they should be subject to continued evaluation. There is reason for confidence that such evaluation currently is being effectively managed.

Assessing the contribution of the teaching faculty is considerably more difficult. Like their counterparts in secular universities, ND faculty should exhibit a high level of professional competence. They should be capable of teaching their respective disciplines with authority, their research should provide paradigms for students to emulate, and their personal conduct by and large should be commendable (a matter of less concern in some institutions than in others).

Given this common ground, what should distinguish ND faculty most markedly from faculty in secular institutions? The answer, I suggest, is their readiness to help their students explore the riches of the Catholic faith. This requires a grasp of the Church's

moral and social teaching, along with an ability to present the ramifications of this teaching in a forthright fashion. In the case of fields most vitally affected (e.g., most humanities, and certain social sciences), moreover, ND faculty should be ready to undertake research exploring these ramifications.

To sum it up, the primary desideratum is that ND provide a setting in which its undergraduates can grow in faith, and that it have a faculty fully capable of supporting this growth. ND's Catholic character consists largely in its being an institution of that sort. The question of the hour is how the University's Catholic character can be effectively assessed.

There is a tendency among academic administrators today to rely heavily on quantitative measures. At ND, teaching is gauged in percentiles, scholarly accomplishment in numbers of publications, and student success by grade point averages. In the spirit of the times, we often assume that ND's Catholic character can be measured similarly by percentage of Catholics on its faculty. But as experts in measurement would be quick to advise us, this assumption is fundamentally mistaken. Catholic character is a qualitative feature, and quality cannot be assessed by quantitative measures.

In line with this, it should be noted that the observations on Catholic character above do not support the conclusion that ND's faculty itself needs to be predominantly Catholic. Scholars from other religious traditions (or conceivably of no religious persuasion at all) might be eminently qualified to help Catholic students progress in their faith. At the same time, there are many Catholic scholars who conduct their professional lives in a manner disengaged from their religious beliefs. These factors suggest that it could actually be counterproductive to insist that ND have a set percentage of Catholics on its faculty.

But if Catholic character cannot be measured by a tally of Catholic faculty, then how? Let us remind ourselves that another important concern of the University is the academic quality of its various departments. Academic quality is assessed periodically by panels of external reviewers. Perhaps Catholic character could be assessed in a similar fashion.

Here is one way that might prove feasible. Individual departments would work with their deans in identifying specific contributions they might be expected to make to

the Catholic formation of their students. In some departments (e.g., theology), the contributions presumably would be more specific than in others (e.g., mathematics). After a few years of operating with these expectations in view, departments would undertake self-assessments of their contributions and submit the results to their various deans. Deans would comment as they see fit, and prepare summary assessments for their respective colleges. These then would be submitted to the Provost's Office, which would prepare an assessment for the academic wing overall.

In the meanwhile, the President's Office, with the help of the Executive Vice President, would be collecting similar assessments from other branches of the University (e.g., Campus Ministry, Residence Life) that make a direct contribution to its Catholic character. When results from both academic and non-academic branches are at hand, the President's Office would compile a comprehensive assessment for the University at large. The President's assessment finally would be submitted to a Board of External Evaluators, appointed (one member each) by the deans acting jointly, the Provost, the President, and the Board of Trustees.

As a final step, the External Evaluators would prepare a comprehensive statement of strengths and weaknesses, to be distributed to all parties taking part in the assessment. This final statement should follow a format enabling responsible officers to track major changes over set periods of time. If evaluations of this sort were undertaken periodically (e.g., once a decade), they would yield information regarding ND's Catholic character that would be far more useful than a pro-forma tally of Catholic faculty.

Needless to say, a procedure of this sort would be time-consuming, and would not be popular with all parties involved. Accordingly, the procedure itself would need evaluating before being put into effect. The primary merit of the present proposal is that it seems to be a step in the right direction.