

opusdei.org

Universities Inspired by Catholicism: Identity, Culture, Communication

The following are some excerpts from a study by Juan Manuel Mora published in n. 54 of the journal *Romana*. The topic of this essay is a series of questions frequently asked by those who work in universities with a Catholic identity: What does a university's "Catholic identity" mean? What are its main manifestations? How should it influence the activities of those who work there? How

can it be communicated
effectively?

08/04/2010

"The university does not live with its back turned to any uncertainty, to any concern, to any of mankind's need. It is not its mission to offer immediate solutions. But in studying these problems with scientific depth, it must also move hearts, fight passivity, awaken sleeping forces, and form citizens desirous of constructing a more just society. In this way it will contribute with its universal work to lowering the barriers that prevent mutual understanding among men, to alleviating fear of an uncertain future, to fostering, by its love for truth, justice and freedom, authentic peace and concord among peoples and nations", St. Josemaría Escrivá,

Address at the University of Navarra,
October 7, 1972.

1. Introduction

This study will consider some questions often pondered by those who work in universities with a Catholic inspiration: What does a university's "Catholic identity" mean? What are its main manifestations? How should it influence the activities of those who work there? How can this identity be successfully communicated?

These and similar questions can be answered in various ways, depending on one's viewpoint: historical, juridical, theological, etc. Here we are going to adopt the viewpoint of institutional communication, understood as the process whereby the identity of an institution is formulated in an explicit way, expressed in its corporative culture and public

discourse, and projected externally in its public image.

Adopting the perspective of communication will enable us to focus the topic of identity in a practical way: how should a university inspired by Catholicism be viewed by the professionals who run it, the communications media, and its students and alumni.

This is not the moment to consider the historical origin of the university, but we should recall that, born in the thirteenth century in old Europe, universities arose out of the theological studies conducted in the monasteries and great religious orders. Over time, academic centers were created and the university came into being. The first faculties, centered on theology, the humanities, medicine and law, were expanded as new disciplines were incorporated.

The direction of a university is marked by its origin and also by the juridical form it adopts. Here, in a very compressed synthesis, we would like to distinguish three kinds of universities (...):

a) Ecclesiastical universities, erected or approved by the hierarchy of the Church, in which ecclesiastical subjects such as theology and canon law are taught, and in which the formation of priests and candidates for the priesthood is a fundamental part of its mission;

b) Catholic universities, also erected or approved by the hierarchy of the Church, in which non-ecclesiastical subjects are studied as well. These universities are run by Catholic institutions or by lay faithful, who request the approval of the competent ecclesiastical authority. With the required authorization, the condition of being a Catholic

university is established by its name, by its statutes, or through a formal juridical commitment;

c) Finally, universities whose outlook is equally Catholic, but which are constituted without “the formal elements proper to the canonical notion of a Catholic university. 7 That is to say, they do not depend on the ecclesiastical hierarchy, nor do they have the official status or the name of “Catholic.” It is these universities that we will call universities of Catholic inspiration.

The reflections contained in the following pages refer chiefly to this third kind of university.**St.**

Josemaría described these initiatives as works “of human, cultural, and social promotion, carried out by citizens who try to illuminate them with the light of the Gospel and warm them with the love of Christ.” Similarly,**Alvaro del Portillo**

characterized them as universities that strive to “make, as an institution, a Christian contribution to the development of culture.”

2. Identity

(...)

Elements characterizing a university inspired by Catholicism

We will now look at some features that should configure the Catholic identity of a university in a practical and tangible way.¹³ First of all, the harmony between faith and reason, manifested in what we could call “creative fidelity” to the Church’s message. Then we will look at the relationship between a personal and corporate Catholic identity.

a) The harmony between faith and reason

Benedict XVI stresses that “it was not by accident that the Church promoted the universities, for Christian faith speaks to us of Christ as the Word through whom all things were made (cf. Jn 1:3) and of men and women as made in the image and likeness of God. The Gospel message perceives a rationality inherent in creation and considers man as a creature participating in, and capable of attaining to, an understanding of this rationality.”

As John Paul II explains in his Encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, faith broadens reason and gives it wings; it leads reason to grasp more deeply the meaning of man and the world, and frees it from the limits of the merely empirical.

Here we can pose an important question: Is it possible to simultaneously respect the integrity of faith and the integrity of human

knowing? Isn't faith a brake on research, impeding reason from advancing courageously in search of the truth?

In his book *Truth and Tolerance*,¹⁵ Cardinal Ratzinger points out that faith is not identified with a specific cultural entity—an ethnic identity, a country, a language—but that it exists in various cultural entities: “as a Christian, one remains a Frenchman or a German, an American or an Indian.” Thus a Christian “lives within two cultural entities: in his historical culture and in the new one of faith, which meet and mingle in him.”

The dominant cultural entity in certain epochs has been ethnicity; at other times the nation. While in today's world, more and more so, it is one's profession: a European doctor has many points in common with an American doctor; and the same can

be said of a professor or a writer. In any case, returning to Cardinal Ratzinger's point, for a Christian, this existing together—as a Frenchman and a Catholic, as a doctor and a Catholic—“will never be a complete synthesis; it brings with it the need for continuing processes of reconciliation and purification.” One could even say that, while always avoiding the temptation of a complete rupture, “the tension itself is productive, renewing faith and healing the culture.”

We shouldn't be surprised here by the use of the word “tension.” The attempt to be fully part of a university and fully Catholic is a difficult one, which can only be resolved within one's own conscience, through the growth of both one's Catholic maturity and professional maturity. Both need to develop in harmony, so that the tension is a fruitful one, renewing

faith and healing human knowledge and culture.

Creating the required conditions for this fruitful dialogue between faith and reason, between theology and the other fields of human knowing, forms part of the mission of any university, and is an unshirkable goal of a university inspired by Catholicism. This requires that theology be taught at the same scientific level as other disciplines¹⁶ and that it be open to the problems they raise; it also requires that the other disciplines be open to epistemological, anthropological and ethical questions that profoundly affect the human person. This dialogue, not exempt from tensions, broadens the horizon of the human knowing and frees it from an overly narrow focus.

b) Faithfulness to the Catholic message

This feature of a university with a Catholic identity is perhaps the most obvious one, at least in theory, although experience shows that is not always easy to achieve in practice. Faithfulness here means, above all, respecting the teachings of the Magisterium, both in the classes that are given and in the research that is carried out.

Besides the need to be consistent to the principles that inspire all academic activity, there is also a responsibility to be loyal to the people who choose a university for its Catholic identity, and whose expectations should not be defrauded.

The Catholic Church views fidelity as being completely compatible with freedom. Benedict XVI, when speaking to university professors, stressed “the great value of academic freedom. In virtue of this freedom

you are called to search for the truth wherever careful analysis of evidence leads you.” Here freedom is viewed in all its nobility, as a spur to progress in knowledge, and not as the mere absence of limits.

Benedict XVI continued: “it is also the case that any appeal to the principle of academic freedom in order to justify positions that contradict the faith and the teaching of the Church would obstruct or even betray the university’s identity and mission; a mission at the heart of the Church’s *munus docendi* and not somehow autonomous or independent of it.”

Faithfulness thus entails responsibility. At the same time, it requires going ever deeper into the Church’s teaching, since it is impossible to be in accord with what one only knows superficially. Catholic identity is rooted in the message of Christ set forth by the

Catholic Church. Some of the elements of this message have special relevance in the university milieu: for example, the recognition of the dignity and centrality of the human person, created in the image of God. These truths are, as it were, “seeds” that need to be cultivated. This is one of the active and positive dimensions of faithfulness, which should be fostered.

For a university professor, a Catholic identity is a spur to confront courageously the questions that are posed by his or her field of knowledge and teaching activity. The fidelity owed to the Magisterium by a university with a Catholic identity is an active, dynamic, creative fidelity.

As the Pope Benedict XVI recalled, “the essential task of authentic education at every level is not simply that of passing on knowledge, essential as this is, but also of

shaping hearts.” For a university with a Catholic identity “there is a constant need to balance intellectual rigor in communicating effectively, attractively and integrally, the richness of the Church’s faith, with forming the young in the love of God, the praxis of the Christian moral and sacramental life and, not least, the cultivation of personal and liturgical prayer.” Therefore together with the educational work of the professors (in its broadest sense, also through their personal example), an indispensable role is also carried out by the university chaplaincy.

Here it is useful to ask: what about non-Catholics who work or study in a university inspired by Catholicism? Or those who do not profess any religious belief? John Paul II stressed that “these men and women offer their training and experience in furthering the various academic disciplines or other university tasks.”

And he added that they have an obligation “to recognize and respect the distinctive Catholic identity of the University.”

In other words, the university is an open and inclusive educational project that people of different religions can share in and make a valuable contribution to the collective effort. Those from a different religious background need to express respect and commitment to the formational work that is carried out there. And the university, in turn, needs to respect the religious freedom of all its members: those professing other beliefs also need to experience that spirit of freedom.

The capacity and willingness to share in the Christian foundations are a prerequisite for working in this kind of university. Specific circumstances can make it inadvisable to incorporate or to continue the

presence of persons who, in theory or practice, are not in harmony with the project. And in a positive sense, it is very important to actively seek professionals who have the proper qualifications to carry forward such an endeavor.

c) Personal and corporate Catholic identity

From the subjective point of view, “personal identity” refers to self-awareness, to knowledge and possession of oneself. “Catholic” adds the note of “conscious and voluntary personal adhesion to Christ and his Church.” Therefore “to be and to know oneself to be a Catholic . . . is not only belonging passively to a religious confession, but voluntary and active participation in the life and mission of the Church.”

The identity of an institution depends above all on the persons who make it up. Universities inspired

by Catholicism are institutions that are given life by the Catholics who carry out their work in a way consistent with their faith. Benedict XVI reminded us that the Catholic identity of an educational center “is a question of conviction—do we really believe that only in the mystery of the Word made flesh does the mystery of man truly become clear (see *Gaudium et Spes*, 22)? Are we ready to commit our entire self—intellect and will, mind and heart—to God? Do we accept the truth Christ reveals? Is the faith tangible in our universities and schools? Is it given fervent expression liturgically, sacramentally, through prayer, acts of charity, a concern for justice, and respect for God’s creation? Only in this way do we really bear witness to the meaning of who we are and what we uphold.”

The first condition for the configuration of the Catholic identity

of a university is the presence of Catholics—professors, other professionals, students—who try to make these ideals a reality. Without a sufficient number of Catholics who give it life, a university of Catholic inspiration is an illusion.

But this is not enough. To be lasting, the university's Catholic identity has to shape its corporate culture: its principles, its values, its professional practices, its very style. The infusion of the identity into the institution's culture gives it unity, direction and meaning. And it makes it a lasting reality, despite the changes in personnel that naturally occur over time. In short, the corporate culture makes the institution unique and distinguishes it from others.

3. Culture

A Catholic identity is expressed in many ways in the culture of an institution. In the case of a

university, these specific features are given expression in the activities carried out there: research, teaching, other corporate activities, relationships.

A. Research

As we have already insisted, research is a crucial task in universities with a Catholic inspiration. What makes the research carried out in these centers distinctive are both the areas or topics of research and the attitudes of the researchers.

(...)

The research found in these centers will also have a distinctive character due to the attitudes of those who carry it out. Among these it is worthwhile emphasizing the capacity for dialogue among people from different academic disciplines. Certainly, the effort to unify human knowledge should characterize all

universities, not just those with a Catholic orientation. But unfortunately today this quality is being lost owing to the fragmentation of the sciences and the trend towards progressive specialization.

If interdisciplinary openness is a feature that should mark any mature university professor, it holds particular importance for a Catholic. 28 An interdisciplinary approach is a prerequisite for the possibility of dialogue between faith and reason, between theology, philosophy and the other fields of human knowledge. It is an invitation to consider the great topics of anthropology, and provides a vision of the whole which is a premise of a good education. Interdisciplinary openness is shown in certain qualities such as humility, an appreciation for the research of others, respect for different methodologies, ability to work as a team, and a spirit of collaboration.

B. Teaching

Universities are called to make the students the center of their activity. The professors aspire to leave in the students a lasting educational legacy. John Henry Newman described this ideal succinctly: “They form a mentality which lasts a lifetime and whose characteristics are freedom, fairness, serenity, moderation, and wisdom.”

(..)

We have already noted that the university is a place well-suited to asking questions. And each person feels impelled to raise the most radical and important questions: Who am I? What is the basis of my dignity as a person? Why does evil exist? What will make me happy? Upon the answer to these questions depends the orientation of one's whole existence. Hence the importance of providing students

with a solid philosophical and theological formation, which will be a foundation for the specialized knowledge that each will acquire in their specific field of study.

A sound personal relationship between professors and students can help foster the maturing of young people. Thus academic counseling is very important. The tutorial system, in its various forms, complements the work carried out through classes and seminars, and adapts the general content to the needs of each student. In the sphere of personal relationships, the example of the instructors has great relevance. Students have a great capacity for observation, and they expect consistency between what is taught and what is lived, and are always more receptive to personal witness than to theoretical discourse.

Finally, it is worthwhile mentioning here an aspect of what St. Josemaría called the “integral formation of young personalities”³⁵: the fostering of concern for others. The participation by students in social assistance programs merits special recognition within the university curriculum, since it sows lasting habits among them. For many reasons, this effort to foster service towards the neediest members of society is an essential part of all Catholic university formation.

(...)

D. Relationships

Universities are not closed in on themselves; they interact in many ways with their surroundings and are fully inserted in the society around them. They have contacts with public authorities, with other educational and cultural institutions, with businesses, with the media.

Amid this rich web of relationships, they act in harmony with their mission and corporate values. The principles they uphold are the same, whether acting within or outside the university itself. Experience shows that activities marked by hospitality and friendship are often the first step towards grasping their Christian identity.

Here we could also mention a characteristic highlighted by **St. Josemaría** in regard to the beginning of the University of Navarra: the spirit of cooperation with other universities. The Founder of Opus Dei said that the University of Navarra is, and sees itself as, one more among all the other Spanish universities, and wants to contribute its grain of sand to the improvement of the university system in the service of society.³⁸ This attitude excludes any temptation to self-

complacency, fosters collaboration, and facilitates relationships.

Having reached this point, let us turn for a moment to the questions asked at the start: What does a Catholic identity bring to a university? As Benedict XVI said in his address at La Sapienza University: “What should the Pope do or have to say in a university? Surely he should not try to impose on others, in an authoritarian way, the faith that can only be given in freedom. He has the mission of keeping awake a sensitivity towards truth.”

Fostering sensitivity towards truth. Isn't this truly the deepest vocation of any university man or woman, the essential mission of any university? Its Catholic inspiration encourages university members to diligently seek and transmit the truth, with a universal vision, to love personal

freedom, putting the person at the center of their work.

4. Communication

The Catholic identity of a university is made up of the ensemble of features that determine its way of being, its institutional culture. These features are usually known implicitly. Communication consists precisely in making the implicit explicit by means of words and deeds. Because its Catholic identity has a public character, those who work in these universities have to know and respect its identity, to the extent that they participate in its educational task. Those who wish to study there have the right to be informed before they enroll. With respect to society in general, transparency is today an essential requisite for the functioning of institutions. In all these dimensions, both internal and external, the work

of communication has to be planned in an organic, consistent and well thought out way. It cannot be left to improvisation. We will now look at some practical questions related to the communication of a Catholic identity, both within and outside the university.

A. Mission statement

The first expression of the identity of a university inspired by Catholicism is found in the juridical texts, in the statutes by which it is governed, as well as in the contracts, agreements or covenants that establish, if such is the case, its connection with the Church. In addition, the identity is expressed in its statement of principles or mission statement, which sums up the mission and values of the institution. This informative document should be brief, clear and easily understandable.

Mission statements usually include three types of content: generic aspects common to all universities, specific features common to all universities of Catholic inspiration, and particular characteristics proper to each institution.

In accord with its informative purpose, the mission statement should be known to everyone in the university community. For those who work in the university, it constitutes a kind of pact or commitment between the parties regarding work and discipline; but above all this statement contributes to the definition of the collective endeavor. For the students and their families, it is an essential informative element, even before applying for admission: its knowledge allows an informed decision to be made. The failure to communicate these principles could lead to misunderstandings if the student, upon arrival at the

university, encounters something different from what was expected.

In summary, the mission statement is a fundamental document from the point of view of both internal and external communication, the “first word” of its public discourse, of its institutional “narrative.”

B. Dialogue

A Catholic identity by its very nature tends towards dialogue. As Karol Wojtyla said: “Being a Catholic means being convinced of the truth of revelation and of the possibility of dialogue.”⁴⁰ The great value given to reason in a Christian anthropology, the conviction that human intelligence can attain the truth, the firmness with which Christians defend their own freedom and that of others, all foster an attitude open to dialogue.

This openness to dialogue raises some practical dilemmas for universities with a Catholic identity. To what extent should the doors of a Catholic university be open to people who dissent from Catholic doctrine and morals, whether theoretically or in their behavior? If a university applies overly broad criteria here, how can one avoid negative repercussions, especially on the students? But if one is too restrictive, how can a university avoid isolating itself, and as a result fail to influence positively the common search for knowledge? We are not referring here to the hiring of those who find themselves in these circumstances (a question we have dealt with earlier), but to invitations extended to take part in activities, conferences and debates.

These dilemmas make clear the existence of an inevitable tension and the need for a constant exercise

of prudence. Therefore, perhaps it is worthwhile formulating some general guidelines:

a) In first place, institutions with a Catholic identity are exposed to two simultaneous risks: on the one hand, the danger of watering down this identity through a mistaken concept of dialogue, as though dialogue required renouncing one's own convictions; and on the other, the danger of irrelevance, through an excessive tendency to isolation or an incapacity to grasp the reasoning of others. Prudence is shown in finding a way to skirt both dangers.

b) Moreover, in public debates between educated persons, one does not persuade by merely setting forth one's own convictions or arguments. One needs to submit to the "trial" of dialogue, developing argumentative skills and accepting the open and progressive character of the forming

of opinions.⁴¹ Thus just as it is logical to hope that non-believing scientists will stay within the limits of their specialty, and not apply to philosophical or theological questions the methodology proper to the experimental sciences, so too a believer who wants to debate a scientific question needs to respect the methodology of the corresponding field of knowledge. For example, if a debate is planned about the constitutionality of a law regarding abortion, one needs to first know the fundamentals of constitutional law; and the same is true if the discussion is centered on the medical or political aspects of the question.⁴²

c) Finally, we should not forget that dialogue implies before all else a relationship between persons. The radiation of the Christian spirit is not an ideological or intellectual work, nor much less a political debate. The

external projection of Christian identity often takes place through personal relationships. As we have seen in regard to interdisciplinary dialogue, the human sciences tend towards separation, while persons tend towards unity.

These guidelines can be useful for making prudent and successful decisions when dilemmas such as those we have mentioned are posed.

C. Audience addressed

The Catholic identity of a university is communicated through concentric circles. In first place, it has to be known by those who work in the institution. In a certain sense, an institution is the group of people who make it up; it is they who imprint a style, and express the identity in a lived culture. They are the spokespersons and ambassadors of the organization. Therefore internal communication is always the first

phase in the process of corporate communication.

Together with the professors and professionals who work in the university, other groups form part of the “internal public,”⁴³ including the students, alumni and benefactors. Those who feel the responsibility of helping to sustain the academic center financially have the right to be informed periodically. Also included here would be the families of the students, who merit a special type of communication.

Among those addressed are also the collaborators of the university. This includes, for example, the suppliers, especially those who provide services that entail a direct relationship with other members of the academic community. Here we can also include the businesses with which the university has agreements and the institutions that provide

some form of assistance. These too need to be informed about the characteristics of the university, since they form, in the broad sense, part of the educational process. By way of example one might mention the employees of companies subcontracted for cleaning, security, or other kinds of service: these are professionals who may have frequent contact with and more than a little influence on the students.

The external public includes the other universities, and other educational and cultural institutions in the area, the public authorities and regulatory agencies, the media, the shapers of public opinion, and finally society in general. A special mention should be made of potential students, and particularly their families, who have a decisive role in the choice of an educational center and receive its publications with interest.

All of these audiences addressed in the process of communication can also be called “shareholders” or “interest groups”: people who are in some way affected by the decisions or activities of an institution, or whose decisions and actions can have an affect on the organization. To communicate adequately with them, the institution needs to identify them clearly, to know their specific needs and demands, so as to be able to respond to them effectively. This is also true when striving to communicate the university’s Catholic identity.

D. Principles

Communication is effective to the extent that it has a clear and consistent message and aim. In contrast, it is ineffective if it is done in a disjointed way, no matter how much creativity may be involved. This is especially important when it

comes to communicating the university's Catholic identity, a task that has a certain complexity and more than a few nuances.

Here we will enumerate six principles of sound communication, derived both from the nature of the process of institutional communication and from the dynamics involved in transmitting the Christian message:

a) Transparency: the first form of transparency is to communicate one's identity, taking into account the audience addressed. This requires giving a clear account of one's mission statement and explaining its implications. There also is another form of transparency, a more subtle one, which consists in making known the criteria that are being followed in informing on one's motives and goals and on the Christian formation one is trying to impart, so that it is clear

there are no hidden agendas. In short, one needs to explain clearly what one is doing and also why one is doing it. Transparency creates a climate of freedom and trust.

b) Consistency: the most effective communication is that which is verified by deeds, more than by words: the decisions, the style, the customs, the environment of the institution.⁴⁴ The consistent and exemplary lives of the professionals involved have much greater communicative effectiveness than declarations of principles. One must not forget that the “mission statement” tries to express in words a reality, a culture, a way of being and working. Consistency gives credibility to communication.

c) Suitability: in the task of communicating it is necessary to adapt oneself to one’s audience. The professors, students, parents, etc.,

each have their own needs that one must meet in a suitable way, with a content, language and channel appropriate for each case.

d) Continuity: the relationships a university maintains with many people have a lasting character and are prolonged over a large stretch of time. Therefore the communication plans need to be progressive in nature. The content can be transmitted little by little, during the time that the relationship lasts, so that it is understood and assimilated in depth. The information given at a particular moment, for example, when a student or professional is incorporated to the university, would be of little value if there was a lack of continuity. Isolated information has only fleeting effects.

e) Participation: the communication of a Catholic identity does not have a merely informative purpose; it

represents an invitation to share in the educational project. One needs to try to avoid divisions being set up between the professionals working there, invisible walls that separate those who are more active in respect to the mission statement from those who view themselves as mere spectators. All form part of the endeavor, each in his or her own way. The active participation of everyone helps in the fulfillment of the corporative mission.

f) Freedom: a Catholic identity entails beliefs, convictions and attitudes, and therefore has to be communicated and received in a context of freedom. The more relevant the personal implications are of what one wishes to transmit, the more respectful has to be the way of communicating it.

E) Actions

It is impossible to offer an exhaustive and generic list of communication activities suitable for transmitting a Catholic identity. Each university has its own characteristics and every group of professionals presents specific needs.

Perhaps it would be more useful to propose a simple outline that could facilitate the task of transmission and give it a certain organic character. It is a matter of identifying, on the one hand, the audience being addressed (professionals, students, graduates, communications media, etc.); and, on the other hand, various “modes” for the communication process, which entail different channels and attitudes:

a) Informative mode: the most basic way to communicate one’s Catholic identity is to transmit clear and objective information to all the interested parties. To the

professionals, students and other members of the “internal public,” since it is a key element to their connection with the university. And to the external public, by means of brochures, informative sessions, or web pages, for all who might be interested.

b) Reflective mode: the characteristics of the university institution and the nature of its Catholic identity make it necessary, besides giving information, to create spaces for reflection—seminars, debates, conferences, lectures—where it is possible to go more deeply into the content of what is communicated, share questions, seek answers. The dialogue between faith and reason is not something theoretical, but is made concrete in an open conversation, from which new light will always arise.

c) Formative mode: an essential activity of universities with a Catholic identity is pastoral work. Pope John Paul II stressed the need “to promote the pastoral care of all members of the university community, and to be especially attentive to the spiritual development of those who are Catholics. Priority is to be given to those means which will facilitate the integration of human and professional education with religious values in the light of Catholic doctrine, in order to unite intellectual learning with the religious dimension of life.”⁴⁵ Each university establishes the proper means to carry out this task, in accord with its possibilities and needs, and the indications of the competent authority: liturgical and sacramental life, spiritual retreats, etc. In this area the university chaplaincies carry out an essential role.

d) Popularizing mode: with activities suited to their nature, such as cultural outreach and intervention in public debates, universities with a Catholic inspiration exercise a broad sphere of influence, especially in the key topics mentioned when speaking about research: life, family, education, justice, ecology, peace. If necessary, one will also need “the courage to speak uncomfortable truths which do not please public opinion, but which are necessary to safeguard the authentic good of society.”⁴⁶ With deeds more than with words, universities can be a shining focal point of light.⁴⁷

The results of communicating one’s Catholic identity effectively are not difficult to perceive. Within an institution, it fosters commitment on the part of professionals; it improves the consistency of the educational program, brings added motivation, and helps to create a climate of

participation and trust. From the external point of view, the Catholic identity projects an image that attracts professionals and students who seek this type of environment. These advantages also bring with them obligations: everyone expects a university recognized as Catholic to be consistent with its own principles. The expectations here can be very high and call for a sustained effort. This is the other face of a good reputation, which never allows one to rest on one's laurels.

5. Catholic identity and governance of the university

The strengthening of a university's Catholic identity is a mission shared by all the members of the institution. The Christian inspiration is called to permeate the corporate culture, and this is possible only through a strong spirit of collaboration. At the same time, the organisms of government

have a special responsibility in this regard. Initially, those beginning the educational endeavor set forth the key structural elements: statutes, regulations and mission statement. When this foundational phase is concluded, those in charge have to strive to ensure the continuity of these founding ideals.

Essentially, the governance of an institution entails the progressive development of its mission, with which strategic decisions have to be aligned. A Catholic identity defines the mission of these universities and therefore also inspires their strategies and projects. Therefore, the academic authorities need to integrate into their work of governing the aspects that relate to this Catholic identity, with particular attention to all that refers to the hiring and training of the professional staff.

An important part of government involves setting up mechanisms for evaluation that will show whether the institution is advancing in the right direction. Measures need to be provided for the compiling of data that give precise knowledge of the actual effectiveness of the decisions taken by the administration and that facilitate the required reflection on this data. It is always easier to evaluate tangible elements than intangible ones; it is easier to evaluate its financial status than the university's fidelity to its mission statement. But difficulties are always an invitation to creativity. It is important to identify the indicators that reveal its real situation in this regard.

Effective evaluation brings with it both knowledge and self-critique. And it is incompatible with self-complacency, and even more so with the self-deception that might stem

from a poorly understood desire to avoid problems or transmit a positive image. Such evaluation implies an openness to change, the imagination to explore new paths for improvement, always with the corporate mission in view. In short, it imparts realism to decisions and a capacity for innovation.

Conclusion

We have tried here to sketch some key points regarding the communication of a university's Catholic identity. As we said at the beginning, a Catholic identity is formulated in an explicit way, and expressed in the corporate culture and public discourse. After this analysis, the reader might be left with the impression that communicating a Catholic identity is an arduous and complex task. However, the opposite is the case: the deepest Catholic identity is one that

is lived with the greatest naturalness; the best communication is the simplest and clearest.

We will end with some words of Benedict XVI. Although the Pope was here answering a different question (namely, how faculties of philosophy and theology can fulfill their mission), we can understand it as a response to one of the questions we posed at the beginning: how can we succeed in making its Catholic inspiration permeate the culture of a university and communicate it successfully? “This is a question which must be constantly worked at, and is never asked and answered once and for all. So, at this point, I cannot offer a satisfactory answer either, but only an invitation to continue exploring the question—exploring in company with the great minds throughout history that have grappled and researched, engaging with their answers and their passion

for the truth that invariably points beyond each individual answer.”⁴⁸

The question about the Catholic identity of a university and the attempt to answer it correspond to each of the professionals who have chosen the university as a life project. They will always find themselves striving to make progress, spurred by a love for the truth and the example of wise men and women. In showing forth the beauty of a Catholic identity, they are providing a valuable service to the entire university community. And they in turn receive the gift of “a life filled with meaning.”

Juan Manuel Mora

catholicism-identity-culture-
communication/ (04/06/2025)