

# Institutional Identity, Pressures for Change, and Executive Leadership at U.S. Catholic Colleges and Universities: A Response

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Professors Henkin, Dee, and Holman are to be commended for their interest in researching the implementation in the United States of Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities: *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (hereafter, ECE). This research was conducted by a written survey of Catholic College and University presidents. The surveys were sent via the ACCU network, a logical way to proceed. The three professors interpreted these survey responses and the project was reported in a paper entitled: *Institutional Identity, Pressures for Change, and Executive Leadership at US Catholic Colleges and Universities*.

At the outset of their paper, the researchers inform the reader that the response rate to their survey was 40%. This rate may seem average or even high in certain circumstances. Considering the nature of the inquiry, however, and the professional character of the group to whom it was sent, the response seems low. Taking this into account, the conclusions and summation at the end of their report, which are presented with a certain definitive tone, would have been better framed in a more tentative fashion. It is with this judgment in mind that the present response is written. Three comments are offered as a way of continuing the conversation and in order to gain deeper insight into what is potentially the most challenging papal document about Catholic higher education.

*First*, Henkin, Dee and Holman fail to differentiate the various kinds of Catholic colleges and universities that exist throughout the world. For example, pontifical institutions such as The Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C.; diocesan institutions such as St. Thomas University, St. Paul, Minnesota; and independent institutions such as the University of Notre Dame, South Bend, Indiana. Though all of these universities are Catholic in so far as they adhere to canon 803 of the Roman Catholic Church's 1983 Code of Canon Law ("That school is considered to be Catholic which ecclesiastical authority or a public ecclesiastical juridic person supervises or which ecclesiastical authority recognizes as such by means of a written document."), they represent a descending juridical relationship between the Roman Catholic hierarchy and the respective educational institution. The absence of this distinction in Henkin, Dee and Holman's work is significant because not all Catholic colleges and universities will necessarily need to adhere to the implementation of ECE, or adhere to it in the same way

or necessarily to the same degree.

In their recent document, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae: The Application to the United States*, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCC) underscores this point stating: "The Application [of ECE] refers to Catholic universities and other institutes of higher learning; excluded from the Application's treatment are ecclesiastical universities and faculties which are governed by the Apostolic Constitution, *Sapientia Christiana*". In other words, pontifical and diocesan universities (ecclesiastical universities), by definition, are Catholic institutions erected and governed by the Holy See and particular diocesan bishops respectively. Consequently, they are far more obligated to establish and maintain a juridical and working relationship with the Roman Catholic hierarchy than are independent Catholic colleges and universities.

*Second*, the authors conclude that "Catholic college presidents are not in agreement as to whether ECE is compatible with guarantees of academic freedom and institutional autonomy." What does this mean exactly? The study itself reveals that 53.9% of Catholic college and university presidents surveyed either strongly agree or agree that academic freedom for faculty members and ECE are compatible. The survey also states that 50.7 % of Catholic college and university presidents surveyed either strongly agree or agree that institutional autonomy and ECE are compatible. This should not come as a surprise since Pope John Paul II himself writes in ECE: "A Catholic University possesses the autonomy necessary to develop its distinctive identity and pursue its proper mission. Freedom in research and teaching is *recognized* and *respected* (emphasis added) according to the principles and methods of each individual discipline, so long as the rights of the individual and the community are preserved within the confines of the truth and the common good" (General Norms, article 2, no. 5). Therefore, though we cannot say that there is complete agreement on the part of Catholic college and university presidents regarding the compatibility between ECE and academic freedom/institutional autonomy, it is fair to say that the majority of those surveyed do believe that ECE and institutional autonomy/academic freedom can co-exist. Is this not more helpful to say than saying "there is not agreement?"

*Third*, any conversation about academic freedom and institutional autonomy must include the reality that academic

freedom and institutional autonomy do not exist autocratically. There is no such beast, catholic or secular, as a completely autonomous institution or a place where academic freedom goes unfettered. There are limits to both. For example, in the United States, institutions of higher learning exist within particular states. Consequently, they must conform to the laws, policies, and regulations of these respective states' educational governing bodies. In addition, regional and national accrediting bodies influence the life and work of said institutions seeking various forms of regional and national accreditation. Thus, it seems plausible to suggest that if an institution wants to identify itself as Catholic then the Roman Catholic Church's hierarchy has the right and responsibility, through "close personal and pastoral relationships . . . characterized by mutual trust, close and consistent cooperation and continuing dialogue" to guarantee that the life and work of said institution authentically reflects Catholic ideals, principles and attitudes (ECE, par. 28).

Furthermore, as ECE is implemented in the United States, Henkin, Dee, and Holman suggest that the present prosperity enjoyed by Catholic colleges and universities may be short lived. I, on the other hand, suggest that Catholic college and university communities should not summarily dismiss, reject or unnecessarily criticize Pope John Paul II's interest in Catholic higher education. Rather, I contend that his call to reaffirm and in some cases reclaim the catholicity of Catholic colleges and universities is arguably what will enable these institutions to continue to prosper. It strikes me that in a world in which there are numerous types of private, independent liberal arts institutions each competing for students, Catholic college presidents, trustees, faculty, and staff would do well to remember it is the catholicity of Catholic college and universities that makes them unique and enables them to offer significant and often distinctive contributions to the larger academy and culture.

### References

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