

ARE THEY JUST ABOUT WORTHLESS?

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THE DISMAL STATE OF MOST CATHOLIC COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES

For those who are committed to revitalizing Catholic higher education, the news about student culture at Catholic colleges and universities, as reported by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA earlier this year, was alarming. The Institute compared the results of a survey administered to incoming college freshman in 1997 with a survey given those same students as graduating seniors in 2001. The results? Catholic seniors at Catholic colleges showed sizeable increases in support for legalized abortion, premarital sex, and same-sex "marriage."

After four years at a Catholic college, Catholic student support for legalized abortion increased from 37.9 percent to 51.7 percent, for premarital sex from 27.5 percent to 48.0 percent, and for "gay marriage" from 52.4 percent to 69.5 percent. The increases are about the same for Catholic students at secular colleges. It would seem that if you want your child to absorb Catholic morality, there's not much point in sending him to a conventional Catholic college.

With the release of the data, liberal Catholic organizations attempted damage control. Others dismissed the findings outright. Monica Hellwig, President of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, said, "The ques-

tion is whether the task of higher education in our pluralistic, changing society is to lock students into rules — or to teach them critical thinking." For Hellwig and most liberal Catholic scholars, one is apparently not supposed to direct one's "critical thinking" against the reigning libertine bromides.

When professors at Catholic campuses attempt to teach from a Catholic perspective, they are often marginalized by their colleagues. Indeed, for those of us who have spent the past few decades toiling to reverse the secularization process that is occurring on our own Catholic campuses, the results are often discouraging.

The re-education of students in sexual morality begins as soon as students arrive on campus. On my own Catholic campus, during the first day of Freshman Orientation, first-year students are given "welcome packs" that contain pink "gay pride" triangles to display in their dormitory rooms. The triangles proclaim the students' room to be an "Open Zone" for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered students. During Orientation Week, orientation team leaders all display the pink triangles on their O-team folders and encourage freshman to display their triangles also. Similar pressure is applied to faculty members.

Indeed, the willingness to wear or display a pink triangle in support of the "gay community" has become a kind of litmus test on many Catholic college campuses. A few years ago there was an incident on my own campus in which a professor's reluctance to display his triangle raised a controversy that many believe contributed to the

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NEW OXFORD REVIEW

abrupt end of his teaching career. The popular part-time faculty member had taught at this University for several years. He had a strong presence in the classroom, with high standards and the highest student evaluations in his department, yet he was denied a contract to teach again. No explanation was given, but many of those familiar with the case believe that the reason was his unwillingness to display a pink triangle proclaiming his office an "Open Zone." When asked to post the symbol in the office space he shared with other faculty members, he responded in writing that he would do so if requested, but that "if the space were mine, I would not post such a sign." His response was widely circulated on campus. The part that probably sealed his fate was his assertion that "a Catholic institution marginalizes itself with such vapid symbolism." One senior professor referred to him as a "homophobe" at a public meeting for even questioning the appropriateness of displaying the pink triangle. Inverted McCarthyism triumphed, and without a whisper from the ACLU.

The animosity toward Catholic teaching on sexual morality is especially strong among many theology and religious studies professors. They have a tremendous impact on student attitudes about homosexuality. Since the courses in theology and religious studies are most often required courses, such professors enjoy a captive audience. At one southern California Catholic campus, a professor of religious studies constructed a "condom tree" in his office so that students could take a condom as they received advice on degree requirements and course selection. While university administrators were successful in encouraging this faculty member to remove the condom tree, he has enjoyed the ability to teach a theology/religious studies course that was cross-listed in sociology under "Gay and Lesbian Voices." The anti-Catholic film *Stop the Church* was shown to the students in his class. Also *Finding Common Ground: Using Adolescent and Children's Literature to Explore Issues Related to Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Straight Identities* is one of the choices to fulfill the "children's literature" requirement for future teachers enrolled in this Catholic university's School of Education.

Like same-sex "marriages" and premarital sex, abortion remains contested terrain on Catho-

lic campuses — despite official Church teaching to the contrary. Some students have attempted to create a culture of life on Catholic campuses by forming "Students for Life" organizations, but must compete with other student organizations for scarce funding — and they often lose out in the funding race. Pro-life campus speakers are often marginalized or ignored in favor of those who support a woman's "right to choose." A few years ago on my own Catholic campus, an internationally known public figure in the pro-life movement, Fr. Paul Marx, the founder of Human Life International, addressed a nearly empty auditorium. There had been little publicity about the event; most students and faculty were unaware of Fr. Marx's impending visit. With the exception of a few pro-life faculty and staff members, and a handful of courageous students, there were no administrators in attendance. By contrast, when the radical Angela Davis visited our campus last spring, she received accolades from administrators and professors alike. In contrast to the lack of attention paid to Fr. Marx, professors gave extra credit to students who attended Davis's lecture on radical politics and lesbian identity.

Following Angela Davis, to complete the trilogy of fashionable Leftism on our campus last spring, radical feminist Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, author of *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, and Howard Zinn, author of *Marx in Soho*, arrived on campus. After the "pro-choice" Schüssler-Fiorenza claimed that pathological patriarchy is destroying the Catholic Church, and Zinn condemned America, dinners were held in their honor and senior-level university administrators privileged the visiting celebrities with their presence.

Still, there is hope. On my own campus, some students have taken the lead in attempting to reinforce the school's Catholic identity. Students for Life is a club that is thriving, as is the Ave Maria Rosary Club (there is also an Intervarsity Christian Fellowship and a Campus Crusade for Christ). Campus cultures at schools such as Thomas Aquinas, Champion, Ave Maria, Christendom, and Steubenville are committed to a strong Catholic identity. Other Catholic colleges and universities, such as Gonzaga, are attempting to revitalize their Catholic identities. ➔

The Cardinal Newman Society is trying to help by serving as both a resource to Catholic campuses and as a "watchdog" organization. Recently the Society published a list of more than 40 Catholic campuses that presented the vulgar *Vagina Monologues* last academic year, a play that favorably presents the seduction of an underage girl by a lesbian. Providing people with the names, addresses, and phone numbers of the offending Catholic college presidents, the Society asked concerned Catholics to contact these presidents and express their dismay.

Unlike the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, the Cardinal Newman Society was alarmed by the data disclosed in the UCLA survey. According to the Society's President, Patrick J. Reilly, "We would expect Catholic colleges to have a much stronger effect in bringing students closer to Catholic teachings, or at least not having them fall away." Not surprisingly, the Cardinal Newman Society has met with opposition from those concerned about "academic freedom" on Catholic campuses. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) recently held a national conference at the University of San Diego (USD) on academic freedom on Catholic campuses and warned of the threats posed by Catholic constrictions on academic freedom. Representatives of Georgetown University's "gay and lesbian" student organization were featured in a panel at USD to caution about the threat that some Catholic colleges and universities pose to the "gay and lesbian community."

Undeterred by the AAUP, George Weigel responded to those who warn of threats to academic freedom on Catholic campuses: "I would simply ask: What about consumer fraud? If some Catholic colleges and universities have become venues in which Catholic students stop thinking and living like Catholics, something is desperately awry."

Others are beginning to ask the same questions. During "Visiting Day" on my own campus this past academic year, prospective students and their parents were greeted by a group calling itself Courageous Christians United. The group carried signs reading "USD Teaches Heresy and Homosexuality," "USD is Not a Catholic University," "Homosexuality is Not a Catholic Value," and "It's Great to be Gay at USD." Demonstrators advised

prospective students and their parents that there are two "gay pride" organizations on campus, that the University regularly hosts pro-homosexual speakers on campus, and that there are "coming out" groups on campus. The Catholic monthly newspaper *San Diego News Notes* interviewed a family who said that after speaking with the demonstrators they were having second thoughts about USD.

Sadly, for the Catholic parents of high school seniors who are inquiring into Catholic colleges, the decision about college seems to be getting more difficult. ■