

VIEWPOINT

But are they offering a Catholic education?

So far, the mandatum has done little to bring our American colleges and universities closer to "heart of the Church"

Three months ago, a significant deadline came and went for the 235 American Catholic colleges and universities, and hardly anybody noticed. What once was billed as a dramatic showdown pitting educators against bishops over the future of Catholic higher education, turned out to be a total nonevent.

"I think the patient is now dead," writes Gerard Bradley in the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars Quarterly. Bradley is a law professor at Notre Dame, and is immediate past president of an organization of orthodox Catholic academics called the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars. By "patient" he meant Catholic higher education in the United States.

June 1 was the deadline set by the bishops two years ago for theology professors at Catholic schools to obtain the *mandatum* — a certification that they teach in communion with the Church.

The *mandatum*, in turn, was an element — by far the most controversial one — in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (From the Heart of the Church), the document on Catholic higher education that Pope John Paul II published in 1990.

Theology professors at some orthodox Catholic schools publicly and proudly

sought and received the mandate. Elsewhere, perhaps, some privately complied. Most, it is safe to assume, did not. June 1 came and went. So much for that.

"The interventions of authority are done," Bradley writes. "Nothing on the horizon suggests that the colleges left to themselves will get religion. The Catholicity quotient of our institutions is set for the next generation. What you see is what you are going to get."

Not everyone will share Bradley's dour assessment. Mandate or no mandate, optimists insist, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* accomplished quite a lot by providing Catholic higher education with useful guidelines and promoting conversations between bishops and college presidents that would not otherwise have taken place.

That could be, but Bradley isn't buying it. The *sine qua non* for Catholic higher education — the Indispensable Conviction, he calls it — is belief in the truth of Catholicism. And the ugly not-so-secret in many Catholic schools today is that a lot of the people in charge reject the idea that a Catholic education is "bet-

ter because the faith is true."

To be sure, even today one finds at many of these institutions the trappings of Catholicism — religious exercises, student retreats, service projects and the like. Bradley calls this The Formula.

"The nearly ubiquitous recipe for a Catholic college today," he explains, "is to surround an education indistinguishable from that at other schools with a Catholic collegiate atmosphere." Its constituent elements are good things in themselves. Unfortunately, they do not add up to a Catholic education.

In Bradley's view, controversies over issues such as classroom crucifixes and pro-abortion commencement speakers that have enlivened the Catholic college scene in recent years are distractions. Debate about such matters "elbows out the main question: whether the intellectual content of the faith has been evacuated from the classroom." In his view, time and again that has happened.

The crucial factor is the faculty, and here the relevant question is, "Is orthodoxy the norm or the exception?" Some

schools don't know the answer because they don't bother to find out. Others know but aren't letting on. In either case, Bradley says, this is hardly information that schools share with parents, alumni and wealthy potential donors.

So what now? Bradley proposes a 10-year program for re-Catholicizing a college, yet he believes that, with relatively few exceptions, most Catholic schools are "lost ... beyond recall." The handful of wealthy, elite institutions will survive, but many others will not. "Many small Catholic colleges are already in hospice [and] others are sure to follow," he writes. As for the rest, many eventually will face facts, stop calling themselves Catholic and compete in the marketplace with their secular counterparts.

Most Catholics accept Catholic higher education as it is because they have been taught to do so. Alumni are relentlessly propagandized to believe that alma mater is the same wonderful place — only more so — of their own student days. And often these schools really do have much to recommend them. But are they offering a Catholic education? If Bradley is right, they are not. □

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By Russell Shaw

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