

## **“Service of Faith”: A Response to Peggy Steinfels and other Thoughts**

First, it is a real honor to be invited to be part of this mission day at Loyola Marymount University. I have been preoccupied with issues related to the Catholic identity and mission of Catholic Universities long before I started my own service as a baby professor in the religious studies department at the University of Dayton in 1977. I remember, for example, how in 1973 I was teaching at one of our Marianist high schools in Cincinnati. Even then, I remember clearly that I had a dual focus: first, reforming the religion program/retreat program for students (it was in a weakened state with too many montages and teachers who thought religious education required only “values clarification,” as it was then called), and second, focusing on faculty development.

A decade later I found myself the chair of a large and somewhat contentious dept of Religious Studies. This responsibility sharpened my awareness of the need to focus on identity and mission. It was, however, especially the next 8 years as Provost in the 1990s that forced me to think about how identity and mission might be embodied effectively not just in one department, but in an entire highly complex university. To add to that challenge, I was required as Provost to deal with many accrediting agencies. They exercise more actual control on the shape, quality and budgets of various parts of the university (especially the professional schools) than does the Vatican. One of the great weaknesses of *Ex corde ecclesia* has been its focus almost exclusively on theology. Departments of theology are typically not the highest regarded

academic units, even at Catholic universities—schools of business, law, engineering and medicine raise more money and are often more respected. In my experience, very few deans of professional schools are more preoccupied with the Catholic mission of their academic unit than they are with the clout of the accrediting agencies.

I said that departments of theology, even in Catholic universities, are often not the most respected departments in the University. Up until the early sixties, most Catholic universities in this country required as many as 24 (and at least 18) credit hours of philosophy and theology for all their majors. By the late sixties, that requirement had shrunk to 12 and even 6.

Theologians and philosophers and administrators were unable to defend their requirements, and other courses took their place. I am not suggesting that we return to the pre-Vatican II numbers. The problem with that arrangement was that it was too often assumed that required courses in philosophy and theology relieved the rest of the faculty of attending to Catholic intellectual traditions. It is much more difficult, and I would think much more valuable, if the various dimensions of the Catholic intellectual tradition were to be presented in all the courses in appropriate and rigorous ways.

Let me now turn first to a few comments on Peggy's excellent analysis of that perplexing phrase, the "service of faith." Afterwards, I will make some of my own observations on the issue of LMU's efforts to clarify the phrase.

## Peggy Steinfels' Presentation

One of the things I like about her paper is that she took her assignment seriously—she addressed head on the confusion that that odd phrase, “service of faith,” seems to have caused many of the faculty and staff of LMU. Put simply, I think the phrase would be easier to understand if it were said that faith and justice are intimately linked. Or, as the post Vatican Church stressed, and as the 1975 32<sup>nd</sup> General Congregation of the Jesuits stated, “The work for social justice is a requirement of biblical faith.” When Peggy asks why the phrase “service of faith” might be threatening to some people, she suggests three reasons:

- It may seem to violate separation of Church and State.
- Universities pride themselves on their autonomy and independence.
- Its sounds like a “creedal requirement.”

I agree with Peggy on all three reasons, but, as I suggested earlier, I think American universities, both public and Catholic, underestimate the degree of control they willingly concede to bodies outside the universities—such as accrediting association, such as the expectations of major donors, such as various requirements for obtaining government funding, especially in professional education. In my experience, most wealthy Catholics are not politically and socially liberal, and do not instinctively push their alma maters in the direction of social justice activities, which to them often appear as slightly disguised initiatives that would be backed by the left wing of the Democratic party. Especially in the last 50 years, the way the secular establishment interprets the separation of Church and state actually privatizes religion. These people assume, I think, that it is government's role

to take care of “justice,” and religion’s role to be “charitable.” Catholicism, however, does not lend itself readily to privatization. This is especially evident if we take Catholic social teachings seriously.

I like Peggy’s suggestion that Catholicism is a capacious reality. That is to say that there are multiple legitimate ways to embody the Catholic traditions. I have heard it said (but I don’t know how true this is) that Boston College emphasizes Catholic intellectual life, Santa Clara social justice issues, and Creighton Ignatian spirituality. I know that the three Marianist universities, one in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, one in dominantly Hispanic southern Texas, and one in Ohio are very different, but still reflect, if you will, a certain family resemblance. Catholicism is especially capacious for those who know well from the inside its multiple forms—that is, who know its history and who grasp something of its international character. Too many American Catholics simply don’t understand their Catholicism in this way.

I think Peggy is also correct that Catholic institutions need to deal much more directly with “hiring for mission.” Some years ago at the University of Dayton, we decided to deal with this delicate matter directly, but from the bottom up. Instead of having the president and the provost announce that we will now focus on hiring Catholics, we decided to take groups of 20 faculty each semester to a state park about an hour’s drive from campus for an overnight workshop. All I did was help to organize the workshop. Faculty leaders led it. The four one and one half hour sessions were open ended discussion based on sets of readings for each topic area. At the end of the workshop, we brainstormed ways that we could improve how we hire faculty. I can tell you that few of the faculty looked forward to these

workshops—many anticipated a lot of uninspiring talk about Catholicism. Some feared that the conclusion of the conversation would push them to hire pious but dumb Catholics (that’s only a bit of an exaggeration). But our universities must face this difficult matter openly. Can there be a Catholic university with no Catholic faculty, with no Catholic intellectuals? Could Brandeis be a Jewish university with no Jewish intellectuals on the faculty? I know that a Jew could be a historian of Catholicism and that a Muslim can be an expert in the Catholic philosophies of the scholastic period. Muslim and Jewish scholars can and do contribute very well to the mission of a Catholic university by being excellent scholars and teachers, and people who recognize the crucial roles of religion and ethics in society. But neither is able in quite the same way to blend the intellectual and the sacramental life as a believing Catholic intellectual can. We need not only teachers; we also need some witnesses to our faith tradition in our faculties.

Finally, I think Peggy is absolutely right to point to the sacraments, to liturgy and especially to the Eucharist, as central to Catholic identity and mission. Though at one point, in the LMU’s committee’s effort to clarify the mission (there is the suggestion that the university “provide opportunities for worship”), I saw no other mention of these key practices in the university’s clarification of the mission. I will return to this point in a moment.

All in all, I think that Peggy’s analysis and explanation of the issues is thoughtful and helpful. I would now like to add a few more of my own.

## Part II

First of all, I turn to the mission statement of LMU mentioned by Peggy—the mission statement that includes three purposes: 1) the encouragement of learning; 2) the education of the whole person; and 3) the service of faith and the promotion of justice.

I think that the promotion of service projects and service learning has, on the whole, been a boon to higher education, both public and private. It has also sprung up at many high schools. But I rarely hear either study or the scholarly life promoted as an important service to society. Service is almost always detached from academics, and I think this is a big mistake. What also makes thinking about academics as a service is the way in which so much of college education is now focused on majors that are “practical,” that will produce a good income upon graduation. Students find it harder to picture themselves continuing on as scholars, as life-long learners, except to retain their professional accreditation or acquire a higher salary.

But the problem runs deeper than the “vocalization,” if that is a word, of the curriculum. Jesuit Frank Clooney recently edited a book entitled *Post Modern Jesuit*. In essence, the book brings together the voices of a number of prominent Jesuit scholars who feel as though marketing, branding, fund-raising, vocational education, the dominance of professional schools, and administrators who do not really understand the intellectual life—have greatly diminished serious interest in academic work on the part of those few Jesuits left who are in fact doing serious scholarship. While their books and articles might be praised and even featured in campus brochures and alumni newsletters, few people seem really interested in their work or seek to understand its significance. They feel unsupported in their own institutions.

Second, the “education of the whole person” is a phrase that appears in the mission statements of many colleges and universities, especially liberal arts colleges. Many of these institutions have little or no interest in religion. Therefore, I think we need to work much harder to make it clear that to be a whole person, one needs to be both intellectually astute and religiously engaged. The whole person is someone who is conscious of and related to God. For the Christian, there is no person more holistic, if you will, than Jesus of Nazareth, and to be in Him is to be whole.

I’d say further that it is very important that, from a Christian and especially Catholic point of view, persons who wish to be whole must be in communion with others. That need for inter-dependence is why for Catholics the “spiritual but not religious” approach will always be deficient. Believing and belonging are integrally related for us. I recently heard a student describe the banana as spirituality and the peel as religion. I told him that I would prefer to see spirituality as oatmeal and religion as the bowl. If there is not a bowl, the contents are without form, spill out all over the place and ultimately become hard to eat—there is less nourishment. The bowl gives form and structure and makes it easier to acquire the nourishment that sustains life. Analogies go a short distance I admit, but at least he repeated back to me what I had said a month later—that’s more than I can say for lots of things that I try to teach.

In relation to forming the whole person (not just students and faculty), I’d suggest we pay more attention to formative practices, not just “getting the language down.” When I give talks to faculty on the importance of Catholic

intellectual traditions, I often am asked to give them five or ten bullet points that they can then employ. It is as though they are asking for a *USA Today* quick summary of the tradition. It is as though by reading a book on playing a violin a person might think they then know how to play one. Like any genuine tradition, especially one as deep and varied as the Catholic intellectual tradition, one has to practice is to become adept in it. Providing a language without practices is like talking about love without ever loving and being loved.

Third, I've also tried to think about that hard-to-understand phrase, "the service of faith"; what might it mean? Does it mean how we might serve the faith? But that is still confusing. How about "faithful service"? But that might sound like obedient service, or service that never raises any questions—a posture that most academics would not wish to assume. What about "service by the faithful"? Does that mean that only the "faithful can offer service? That seems too narrow. Given what I have read, the phrase might best be understood as "faith and justice," or a kind of Christian faith that requires one to be committed to creating a more just society. That makes the most sense to me. Perhaps you should drop the confusing phrase, "service of faith," and go with what it means and can be stated clearly?

In campus discussions at the University of Dayton, we have had a similar problem with the word "sacramentality." It appears prominently in our mission statement. It seems to be that sometimes we need to stick with a word or a phrase that is not well understood until it becomes well understood (it would be difficult now in Catholicism to drop the word "infallibility"—and to substitute for it a phrase like "utterly reliable teaching." We did

replace at Vatican II frequent reference to the “deposit of faith,” which made the faith sound like a precious collection of things that could be found in a well protected box, a safe of some sort. I am not sure what to suggest about the phrase “service of faith.” But I do know one thing. To make a word or a phrase meaningful requires not just better and better explanations, but also, and even more importantly, embodiments (practices) that show what the word means.

Let me conclude with a few brief observations on the two pages of clarifications that the LMU committee offered on the meaning of two phrases, “service of faith” and “education of the whole person.” Especially after listening to Peggy’s paper, I found myself wondering just what the relationship is between “the proclamation of the Gospel” and the “service of faith.” The committee reassures its readers that faith (I presume they mean the Catholic faith, but they never make that explicit) in no way implies proselytizing. In his important address cited by Peggy, Fr. Kolvenbach stated that the Jesuits have from their origins been solemnly charged with “the defense and the propagation of the faith.” That is strong language. It means preaching and promoting Catholicism; can a Catholic university not do that? I think it must. The question, of course, is how best to do that. I think in the North American Catholic community in general, and in most of the Catholic academic community, there is such a fear of proselytizing that imagining an effective way to witness to the faith, even while thinking critically about it, is far too rare. We even shy away from saying that it is important for us to teach it, and not just to Catholics, but to all our students, as part of their liberal education.

One of the things I admire about LMU is the serious way it explores religious diversity. This exploration is harder to create in Midwestern Catholic universities. But when I read the two pages written by the committee, I detect, I hope I am not unfair in saying this, a preoccupation not to offend or exclude anyone, to make everyone feel welcome. It is almost as though any emphasis on the particular will be in opposition to the universal.

I have worked on lots of mission statements, and revisions of mission statements, and have done so at more than one Catholic university. Most of the people working on these statements have a very hard time mentioning up front and clearly Jesus Christ, the Catholic Church and the celebration of the Eucharist. Is it not possible to proclaim and teach about Jesus Christ for Christians and do so in a way that explores as well the riches of other religions? Is it not possible to affirm the central importance of the Church for Catholics without suggesting that everyone who is not in the Church is lost, or vincibly settling for less than the best that God has to offer? Is it not possible to celebrate the Eucharist (and I do believe that Catholic universities should understand that there are more forms of liturgy, more inclusive of, for example, all Christians, than the Eucharist)—is it not possible to celebrate the Eucharist in such a way that it becomes a means to create greater unity?

Please do not misunderstand me. There is much that I admire in the committee's explanations. However, I do think there is a need to link more clearly than they presently do the relationship between the Catholic faith and the promotion of justice, the proclamation of the gospel and legitimate forms

of witness, preaching and teaching of the faith that support inter-religious dialogue. I understand full well the committee's reference to the need to "embrace the tension of being institutionally committed to Roman Catholicism," but I wish it would also state that belonging to an international Church that is able to articulate its teachings on human rights, the dignity of every human being, the promotion of justice, the end of racism, a continuing critique of aggressive forms of capitalism and all forms of militarism—that affirming these great gifts of "institutional" Roman Catholicism not only can be a source of tension, but can also be a great source of strength for those who now are a part of a country which is one of the most powerful in the world. The universality of the Church and its social teachings is one of the blessings, I believe, of being a Catholic.

In a 1995 address at a national gathering of 450 leaders of Catholic colleges and universities hosted by St. Thomas university in Minneapolis, Peggy stated, and I quote her now, "I believe we have a decade—10 years—in which this question of identity must be honestly faced, addressed and definitively taken on as a commitment and core project of institutions that hope to remain Catholic." I am encouraged that LMU is honestly facing and addressing this issue. I do believe, however, that the question of identity is never definitively answered, not only in this life for individual persons, but also in the Church itself over the centuries. Nevertheless, there is already much to be more thoughtfully appropriated by us, especially in Catholic universities, that will ensure that we really do remain distinctive, and thereby richly contribute to the pluralism of higher education in the United States.

But again, I am encouraged by our discussion, by this day, and by the progress we can make together

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