

The Active Embrace of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*
The Case Study of a Small Liberal Arts University

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Introduction

In this paper, we describe the actions taken at Benedictine University to maintain and enhance our Catholic and Benedictine character, and how these actions relate to our embrace of the guidelines in *Ex Corde Ecclesia*.

Background History to Our Catholic Identity

The Catholic identity of Benedictine University was maintained for many years through the presence of the monastic community and their daily routines. Many of the faculty members themselves were monks, daily Mass was celebrated each day, and lay faculty and the monastic community jointly participated in many of the activities in which students were involved. The fact that the monastic housing and the student housing were in the same space also supported the Catholicity of the university. The faculty and students all had a common understanding of what it meant for them to each be Catholic, and what it meant for the university to be Catholic. This understanding was passed to new members of the community, both the academic and the monastic community, seemingly by “osmosis”.

Eventually, osmosis was no longer adequate to pass this understanding. The monastic community moved to a separate Abbey building, the percentage of lay faculty members was growing, and the co-educational student body led to differing housing arrangements.

By the 1990s, an explicit attempt was made to discuss the Catholicity of the university, especially in the areas that address faith and reason. The apostolic constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*¹ was a particular means by which we addressed these issues. Benedictine University embraced the document and began to take a close look at its own mission in connection with its Catholic identity.

With the support of the administration and the Board of Trustees, many conversations and discussions regarding the Catholic identity of Benedictine University began. In 1993, for example, faculty members began to attend and participate in conferences sponsored by Collegium to discuss the meaning and purpose of a Catholic university with other Catholic faculty from other Catholic schools. The Midwest Collegium workshop in Summer 1995, for instance, focused on the Catholic intellectual tradition, the meaning of a Catholic university, and the differences in Jesuit, Benedictine and other traditions. Our Catholic theology instructors requested and were granted *mandata* at the time as well.

The Benedictine University Institute of Science and Values was organized in 1997 to foster a dialogue between recent scientific-technological ideas and research and the humanistic, value-minded interests traditionally associated with the liberal arts. Discussions directly addressing faith and reason were promoted in this venue. Guest speakers were brought in and many faculty members, administrators, and students attended these events.

In the Spring 2001 semester, one of our faculty members, also a member of the monastic community, organized a weekly seminar series, centered on the Catholic Intellectual Tradition,

reading and discussing chapters of Cerner and Morgan's *Examining the Catholic Intellectual Tradition*². In Spring 2002 another group of faculty (including many from the first seminar) discussed the Catholic university and the Catholic Church, using *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* and Gallin's *Negotiating Identity*³ to focus the meetings. Both groups consisted of mostly faculty members; some staff and administrators also attended regularly. The result of these seminars was the development of a core of thirteen key community members who have maintained an active role with the work towards identifying the Catholic character of the university to this day.

In the meantime "maintaining our Catholic and Benedictine Identity" became part of the university's strategic plan. Since 1998, faculty, administrators and staff had worked towards visibly addressing the Catholic and Benedictine character of the campus. We learned that focusing on the Benedictine identity and heritage of the university in the context of value-centered education was much easier for people to grasp and support. Therefore a great deal of time and energy stayed in that area. Little effort was applied to addressing the Catholic ideals.

A new Vision Statement created in 2001, changed that emphasis. The statement, "Benedictine University, a Catholic University in the Benedictine Tradition that Provides a Values-Centered Liberal Arts Education Enriched by Our Excellence in Science" led to unanticipated conversations on "who are we" and "who are we becoming". We began using our traditional strength in science education and research as a marketing focus. A marketing consulting firm was brought in to help us explore the reality of the "vision", to find what was perceived as the university's "brand". Discussions regarding our vision reached all levels of the university – the Board, Abbey, administrators, faculty, students, and staff.

There was some concern about whether this focus on science would mean a lessening of our identity as a Liberal Arts university, and of our Catholic identity. A Vision Taskforce was

created in 2002-2003 to examine all aspects of the vision statement, its reality, and where effort and resources would be needed to move to the desired state. The Taskforce was replaced in 2003-2004 with two “Focus Groups” – one worked on the “a Catholic University in the Benedictine Tradition” portion of the vision statement, and the other on the “a Values-Centered Liberal Arts Education Enriched by Our Excellence in Science” portion. The first Focus Group in particular, worked for two years on how to enhance the reality of Benedictine University being “a Catholic University in the Benedictine Tradition”.

These discussions, and the work of the Vision Task Force and the Focus Groups to “make the vision true”, enhanced our commitment to the Catholic and Benedictine character of the university, and helped us to a better understanding of what this meant, in this time and in this place. It was and is apparent that we need to continue to work towards a greater understanding of our identity as a Catholic institution. A Center for Mission and Identity was created in 2005-2006 to continue to discuss, understand, and promote the vision and mission of the university.

Continuing projects and activities have thus been developed to promote not only our academic strengths but our Catholic ones as well. Our understanding and promotion of our Catholic identity are being actively addressed in several ways. Our Cultural Heritage core sequence (required of all undergraduate students) uses Catholic texts and authors, and discusses the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. This work is enhanced by our participation in the Association for Core Texts and Courses, and in National Endowment for Humanities summer conferences.

Our promotional materials emphasize our Catholic and Benedictine character. These include an award winning brochure and a Benedictine Values Video, a redesigned Benedictine University website including reworked and more focused *History and Heritage* and *Mission and Identity* statements. Our Visiting Scholars in Catholic Thought program was established in

2004-2005, to bring a scholar to campus each semester. The scholar gives several lectures relating Catholic thought to contemporary issues, visits classes on related topics, and thus supports our efforts to integrate Catholic/Benedictine values and traditions into the curriculum. Speakers have included Daniel R. Finn on Catholic Perspectives on Globalization, William French on Catholic Perspectives on Ecology and the Environment, and David C. Cochran on Catholic Perspectives on Faith and Politics.

Our Strategic Plan, based on the Academic Quality Improvement Program model⁴, includes work on our Distinguishing Features, and in particular, Maintaining our Catholic and Benedictine Identity. The new Center for Mission and Identity has specific goals, purposes, and action plans including seminars and workshops addressing areas in the curriculum, university assessment, the college structure, continued investigation of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* and its relation to the university, and the Institute for Science and Values. A website has been created which includes the availability of reading materials, institutional history, chat board, ACTC-NEH participation information, and seminar presentation notes and preparatory readings.

Ex Corde Ecclesiae at Benedictine University

At the end of the faculty seminar in Spring 2002 (the *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* seminar) there was some discussion of where Benedictine University was relative to the expectations in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, but the seminar structure was not conducive to answering that question. Also, it was May, so the question was deferred *sine die*.

A year later, in the Fall 2003 semester, a group of faculty members who had participated in the *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* seminar, began meeting as a team to consider assessing Benedictine

University vis-à-vis the expectations of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. The team decided to go forward with this effort, with the work initially viewed as a developing a possible faculty seminar or a faculty colloquium presentation.

The five members of this team had no positional power, but significant influential power and technical expertise. One was the immediate past abbot of St. Procopius Abbey, the founding religious community of what was then St. Procopius College, later Illinois Benedictine College, and now Benedictine University – he was therefore the immediate past chancellor of the university, and had been an ex officio member of the Board of Trustees for 18 years. This member of the team has a very strong personal working relationship with the President (he was in fact a member of the search committee which recruited the President), and is currently the Director of Campus Ministry.

Two members of the team were from the Department of Computer Science & Information Systems, within the College of Business, Technology and Professional Programs (one of the three colleges at the time of this work). One of them has significant professional experience in organizational behavior and change management. The other, the longest serving lay faculty member and highly respected by both faculty and administration, was a former dean and division chair, but returned from the “dark side” about ten years ago, and so his credibility has been restored. He was also a faculty member the Department of Computer Science & Information Systems.

The remaining two members of the team brought additional perspectives and experience. A young faculty member in the Department of Philosophy, in the College of Arts & Science, brought his expertise in Church documents, while the last of the five members was the assistant

to the Provost for Institutional Mission, and member of the faculty in the School of Education. He is a long-time and respected expert on our mission, and on the Catholic university.

Thus, the team consisted of faculty members from each of the then extant academic colleges, a member of the academic administration, and a member of staff not in Academic Affairs. The committee was composed both of long-serving members and relatively new members of the university community. They brought particular technical skills to the effort. They had significant positive relationships with other members of the university community. The strength of the team was in the union of their skills, experiences, and relationships, in their diversity of skills and experiences, and in their shared commitment to a fair and effective assessment.

The process the team used was to divide up the sections of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (including the General and Particular Norms) among the five team members. Each team member reviewed their assigned portion in detail, recorded every specific expectation in a separate document, and proposed an assessment of where the university was relative to that expectation, based on their own knowledge and perspective.

The team then reviewed each team member's report, line by line, and modified as appropriate, where expectations in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* had not been noted, where expectations were not really present (sometimes a team member saw what we expected to see, rather than what was present), and where the team view of the assessment was different than the team member's view (additional knowledge, different perspectives, etc.). The team then brainstormed recommended action areas, eventually settling on thirty four recommendations.

Subsequently, the *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* team began reporting to the President. The President was personally interested in the topic, and also wanted to report to others, including

our Board of Trustees, the local ordinary (Bishop Joseph Imesch), and the presidents of other Chicago area Catholic colleges and universities, who met periodically as a group with Bishop Imesch and Cardinal George (Archbishop of the Chicago Archdiocese).

In late Fall 2003, the team became a formal subgroup of the first Focus Group (the AQIP group focusing on the Catholic and Benedictine character of the university). The thirty four recommendations were formally endorsed by the first Focus Group in May 2004. In the 2004-2005 academic year, the team began working with the President and Vice-presidents to assist them in understanding and potentially implementing the recommendations from the group.

Some of the recommendations were already in place (e.g., “a visible outreach to the wider community from the president”) and the *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* team’s work was simply to learn this and declare success. Some of the recommendations (e.g., “Assess ministry to Latino students”) proposed specific work, and the team’s task was to identify the appropriate person or organization responsible for work in this area, and discuss/persuade them of the value of the team’s recommendation.

Some of the recommendations (e.g., “establish a Chair in Catholic Theology”) might require significant resource commitments. These recommendations were passed to the appropriate officer or body for consideration in the resource prioritization process. We realized in this work that approaching potential donors is also a significant university-level decision, and thus would in general require agreement from the appropriate officer.

As previously noted, the *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* team had no positional power – no authority to direct anyone to do anything – so all recommendations were necessarily passed to the person, office, or organization with “line” responsibility. The team continually wrestled with the proper process to do this effectively – passing the recommendation and rationale to the responsible

party, respecting their decision-making authority, while also attempting to ensure reasoned response (and, yes, trying to persuade them to our view).

Reflections on Where We Are Going as a Catholic University

There are several difficult questions which have been raised through this work. What does our Catholic character mean for our relation to the environment, for behavior in the classroom, for our treatment of adjunct faculty, etc.? What are the pedagogical and service expectations for a Catholic university?

How should our curriculum reflect the Catholic character of the university? How should it incorporate *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*? How do all these answers change as the Church itself transitions over time?

There were several challenging aspects of the work reported here, all somewhat independent of the Catholic character topic, and all somewhat reflective of academic structure. How do we institutionalize the work that has been done, when a committee disbands? How do we ensure accountability?

Committee decision making is inherently difficult, and made more difficult by the fluid participation in many of these committees. The principle of subsidiarity is not widely accepted – issues tend to breed more issues, and issues resolved tend to regularly reemerge. Conflict was common, but often not acknowledged. The difference discussed in the “*Ex Corde Ecclesiae at Benedictine University*” section, between positional and influential power, was most significant.

What Advice Do We Have?

We recommend that a small committee assessment of the college or university vis-à-vis the expectations of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* be the first step taken by any school beginning this work. The heterogeneity of the committee is critical, to allow for correction of individual member perceptions (and often for more tactful phrasing of assessments and recommendations). Brainstorming to identify recommendations is also much more effective with a heterogeneous committee than with other models.

We have found a forum beyond the small committee to take the implementation to the rest of the school to be worthwhile. This group will probably include members of the assessment team, but should probably also include representatives from various constituencies within the college or university. It should probably also include some administrators, and should, we suggest, be somewhat larger than the assessment team. Our advice is that this group be chartered to bring the discussion to the rest of the school, starting with the recommendations from the assessment team.

The effectiveness of this work, both the assessment and bringing the recommendations to the rest of the college or university, depends heavily on a set of shared goals between the assessment committee, the implementation team, the faculty as a whole, and the administration. We recommend against assigning any executive authority to either of these groups, since that would explicitly modify existing governance and decision structures. We acknowledge that this implies that the committees succeed only by influencing the decision making process, but that is exactly what we believe is proper and effective (and also difficult and time-consuming).

The assessment process is relatively finite, but the implementation process is long-term. There is a great temptation to generate a list of accomplishable actions and declare success. But the goal is to create a Catholic university community, and that process will literally take forever.

Some success comes from creating interest and forums for discussion of these issues. One of the challenges is to decide what constitutes success in such discussions. Is it reasonable to expect all faculty members to participate? Surely some will contend (possibly by absenting themselves from the discussions) that such issues are not germane to a modern university, with expectations of academic freedom and academic excellence.

Finally, although the work we describe is difficult, and takes a long time to accomplish, we nonetheless believe the benefits, to the individuals and the school, are great. It is worthwhile to travel this path.

Conclusion

We have learned several lessons through this work, and intend to apply them going forward. First, integrity and trust are imperative (albeit difficult). A roadmap of what is going to be done is a valuable tool in focusing effort, as are performance measures and expected outcomes agreed upon in advance. We must institutionalize what we do – we must create a system (rather than ad hoc groups). Inclusivity is the only way to ensure broad embrace of the goals and the path to the goals. We must continue to strive for shared definitions and shared goals. If we view the world through a Catholic prism, and understand the behaviors expected, our work will be easier and more productive.

¹ *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, Apostolic Constitution of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II on Catholic Universities (1990).

² *Examining the Catholic Intellectual Tradition*, Anthony J. Cernera and Oliver J. Morgan, eds., Sacred Heart University Press, Fairfield (2000).

³ Alice Gallin, O.S.U., *Negotiating Identity, Catholic Higher Education since 1960*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame (2000).

⁴ AQIP is an alternative accreditation model, based on quality improvement programs, reducing the focus on the every ten years self-assessment and inspection in favor of one to three year goals with action plans.