

What Is It That Makes A College Christian?

The Identity Of A Church Related College

by DR. ROBERT A. PRESTON

There has never been any shortage of words directed to the problems concerning the nature, identity, purpose, role, goal or mission of the church-related college. The great temptation is to weary of all the talk and to abandon such discussions on the grounds that no final solutions will ever be forthcoming. But to ignore the problems does not eliminate them. The questions remain, and they remain important ones, not only for those of us who are personally involved with such institutions, but also for those who see some value in the churches to which the colleges are related. I would venture to say that the single most effective way of passing on the values of a religious tradition is through formal education. There is an integral connection between the vitality of any religious tradition and the effectiveness by which it is transmitted to each succeeding generation.

We might begin our discussion with a clear delineation of the question at issue, if that were possible. I was at first tempted to say that the question at issue could be precisely stated as follows: What is it that makes a college Christian?

An objection might immediately be raised as to the implication of calling a college Christian as opposed to Catholic. I have in my desk, copies of an interchange of memoranda between my predecessor in the Deanship of Bellarmine College, the late Fr. John Loftus, and myself on this very point.

In one memorandum, dated exactly one week before his death, Fr. John was commenting on a change in wording in the Catalogue recommended by me whereby the word "Christian" would be substituted for the word "Catholic." We might do well to listen to Fr. John's words from out of the past, which I must confess haunt me no little bit: He wrote on January 3, 1969, as follows:

I like the blunt and honest statement that we are a Catholic college. I would have no hesitancy in adding reference to Rome. Perhaps I seem to place too much insistence on this point. But in my observation of the problems of our young people, in following discussions in theology, in working in some ecumenical enterprises, I find it logical, consistent, imperative that my relation to Christianity is in the Roman tradition. Far from apologizing for that view, I insist upon it as a matter of honesty. Neither as a person nor as a member of our academic community do I want this fact underplayed. The Roman Catholic Church has many problems which need attention; it does not, however, require disguise or dissimulation.

Thus even in the statement of the question there is a prior issue that must be met. Fr. John recommends in quite strong language that Bellarmine proudly proclaim its Catholic identity. He argues that the reason for substituting "Christian" for "Catholic" is basically one of disguise or even dissimulation, indicating that we might be ashamed of our Catholicity. Although one could recommend the use of the term "Christian" instead of "Catholic" on other grounds than the ones suggested by Fr. John, the fact remains that there might be a basis for his charge.

I would like to begin the discussion, therefore, with this thorny issue of "Catholic" vs. "Christian." This entire matter is complicated by an emotional reaction of nearly everyone who enters the discussion. Many of the Catholic "new breed" wish to downplay any sectarian differences and concentrate exclusively on the common characteristics shared by all Christians. Thus they react negatively to any use of the term Catholic because they find in it overtones of divisiveness and exclusivity. This group also bristles at the mention of religious orthodoxy, moral absolutes, and the preservation of tradition.

In the opposite camp are those who consider Vatican II a mistake and who look upon any changes as a further departure from "true Catholicism." This group identifies orthodoxy with the *de facto* historical tradition and often makes no distinction between the fundamental tenets of the Church and the cultural accretions that have accumulated through the centuries.

Both positions contain truths that are worth defending. Certainly for far too long it was the tendency in Catholic circles to emphasize the differences, and Catholic apologetics was often done in such fashion that the truth of the Catholic position necessarily entailed the falsity of all other positions. We need to remember that an analogous subject matter transcends an univocal logic. But the remedy to this is not to deny any differences at all. It is to put the similarities and differences clearly in perspective and to remember always that the subject matter of doctrine partakes of the analogical character of reality itself.

I am of the opinion that a college which is Catholic has a mission which in many respects it shares with one that is Baptist, or Methodist or Lutheran. But its mission also has aspects which differentiate it from other church-related colleges. I would like to begin with the common characteristics.

The fact that most church-related colleges are liberal arts in-

stitutions is not just happenstance. There is a close relationship between the philosophy of liberal arts and the purposes of church-related institutions. No one has yet surpassed John Henry Newman's analysis of this relationship in *The Idea of a University*. In Discourse VIII Newman writes:

Now on opening the subject, we see at once a momentous benefit which the philosopher is likely to confer on the pastors of the Church.

Newman is using the term philosopher in its broad meaning of educator. What is this "momentous benefit" to which Newman refers? The Cardinal argues that the first step in bringing a person to God is "his rescue from that fearful subjection to sense which is his ordinary state." It is through the cultivation of the mind that this is accomplished. Newman continues:

Here then I think is the important aid which intellectual cultivation furnishes to us in rescuing the victims of passion and self-will. It does not supply religious motives; it is not the cause or proper antecedent of anything supernatural; it is not meritorious of heavenly aid or reward; but it does a work, at least materially good (as theologians speak), whatever be its real and formal character. It expels the excitements of sense by the introduction of those of the intellect.

This then is the *prima-facie* advantage of the pursuit of knowledge; it is the drawing the mind off from things which will harm it to subjects which are worthy of a rational being;...

Nor is this all: knowledge, the discipline by which it is gained, and the tastes which it forms, have a natural tendency to refine the mind, and to give it an indisposition simply natural, yet real, nay, more than this, a disgust and abhorrence, towards excesses and enormities of evil....

The first, and to Newman's mind, the indispensable service that higher education offers to religion is the establishment of a predisposition to religious faith by developing in the student a concern for questions of principles and value.

But Newman realized that the very process of developing and refining the intellect carried with it its own attendant dangers. In one of the most astute and still timely analyses of the end result of education without a religious dimension, Newman traces the growth of that intellectual pride that goes before the fall. I am going to quote at length from Newman because I think what he has to say is much to the point of our discussion and extremely relevant today:

You will bear in mind then, Gentlemen, that I spoke just now of the scorn and hatred which a cultivated mind feels for some kinds of vice, and the utter disgust and profound humiliation which may come over it if it should happen in any degree to be betrayed into them. Now this feeling may have its root in faith and love, but it may not; there is nothing really religious in it, considered by itself. Conscience indeed is implanted in the breast by nature, but it inflicts upon us fear as well as shame; when the mind is simply angry with itself and nothing more, surely, the true import of the voice of nature and the depth of its intimation have been forgotten, and a false philosophy has misinterpreted emotions which ought to lead to God. Fear implies the transgression of a law, and law implies a lawgiver and judge; but the tendency of intellectual culture is to swallow up the fear in the self-reproach, and self-reproach is directed and limited to our mere sense of what is fitting and becoming. Fear carries us out of ourselves, whereas shame may act upon us only within the round of our own thoughts. Such, I say, is the danger which awaits a civilized age; such as its besetting sin (not inevitable, God forbid or we must abandon the use of God's own gifts), but still the ordinary sin of the intellect; conscience tends to become what is called a moral sense; the command of duty is a sort of taste; sin is not an offence against God, but against human nature.

The less amiable specimens of this spurious religion are those which we meet not unfrequently in my own country... We find there men possessed of many virtues, but proud, bashful, fastidious, and reserved. Why is this? It is because they think and act as if there were really nothing objective in their religion; it is because conscience to them is not the word of a lawgiver, as it ought to be, but the dictate of their own minds and nothing more; it is because they do not look out of themselves, because they do not look through and beyond their own minds to their Maker, but are engrossed in notions of what is due to themselves, to their own dignity and their own consistency. Their conscience has become a mere self-respect.

Newman was clearly aware, then, of the normal tendency of that intellectual education which is cut off from religious faith to develop into what he calls "a philosopher's, a gentlemen's religion." But even in the face of this danger, Newman thought the risk worth the attempt.

The first purpose, then, of the Christian college, that which all church-related colleges share, is the realization of Newman's "momentous benefit," that intellectual cultivation that frees the mind from the tyranny of sense and opens it to theological and