

Preserving Catholic Identity

Responses to Wilson Miscamble

[KATHERINE O'BRIEN](#) | OCTOBER 8, 2007



In “The Faculty ‘Problem,’” (9/10), Wilson D. Miscamble, C.S.C., addressed the importance of hiring Catholic faculty members in order to maintain the distinctive character of a Catholic university. The article elicited impassioned responses from many of our readers. A sampling of their letters follows.

Heal Thyself

Bravo to **America** for publishing the article by Wilson D. Miscamble, C.S.C., on the state of the Catholic identity of U.S. Catholic colleges and universities. In the past some journals have published attacks on Catholic institutions of higher education that lacked nuance or were mean-spirited. A balanced article like this one in a mainstream Catholic publication has been long in the coming.

I hope that in the future, **America** runs other pieces that continue this discussion, especially focusing on Jesuit colleges and the other apostolic works of the Society of Jesus, like high schools. While the journal does a great job reporting on the good work the Society is doing (e.g., Cristo Rey and Nativity schools), I would like to see more hard-nosed analysis of the challenges facing Jesuit institutions. Possible topics include the corporatization of higher ed, big money and college sports or, again, how well Jesuit colleges have preserved a distinctly Catholic identity.

Anthony D. Andreassi, C.O.

Brooklyn, N.Y.

Intellectual Vitality

The essay by Wilson D. Miscamble, C.S.C., misrepresents the Department of English at Notre Dame. Like the university of which it is proudly a part, the department pursues its intellectual vocation by committing itself to the highest scholarly excellence. Fully 60 percent of faculty in the department are Roman Catholic, and the department affirms the distinctive Catholic mission of the

university. Our demonstrated record of hiring Catholics, women and members of minorities has enabled the department to embrace mission and diversity simultaneously. It is hardly surprising that an excellent department committed to the pursuit of knowledge and truth would seek and encourage a diversity of views among its faculty. Such intellectual vitality represents Notre Dame at its best.

Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe

Chair, Department of English

University of Notre Dame

South Bend, Ind.

By the Numbers

“The Faculty ‘Problem’” that Wilson D. Miscamble argues exists in Catholic higher education is, at best, only one component of the issue of Catholic identity in Catholic colleges and universities. Behind his argument is an assumption that Catholic identity is primarily a function of the religious affiliation of the faculty, but this oversimplifies the issue. If Catholic universities and colleges instituted a policy that two-thirds of the faculty be Catholic, the result would not necessarily increase the Catholic identity of these institutions. The fact is, qualified applicants for faculty positions who happen to be Catholic do not necessarily know more about Catholicism than your average Catholic. There is a fairly high probability that they have never read the documents of the Second Vatican Council, know very little about the Bible or the history of the church’s interpretation of it, do not really understand the concept of infallibility (papal or ecclesiastical) and could not articulate a basic understanding of sacramentality.

So how would one judge these potential faculty members with regard to their effects on the Catholic life of a Catholic university or college? And who would determine the extent of one’s knowledge about Catholicism or judge what kind of Catholic is appropriate for the institution? Is a Catholic economist who is ignorant about the church’s teachings on the economy or the church’s teachings on social justice any better than a non-Catholic economist? I would argue that the ignorant Catholic is worse because of the high potential for misrepresenting Catholic teachings or stressing Catholic teachings that may only scratch the surface of what it means to be Catholic.

Yes, to a certain extent, Catholic universities and colleges must have certain Catholic practices and viewpoints that reflect their name, but what it means to be a Catholic university transcends essentialist categories and is partially determined by the particular social circumstances of the university. How a Catholic institution interacts with other groups (based on the principles of Catholic social teaching) is just as important in forming its Catholic identity as the Catholicity of its faculty. Thinking that hiring more Catholic faculty members will shore up the Catholic identity of the institution is simplistic at best, and reductionist and distorting of Catholicism at worst.

Stephen P. Aheame-Kroll

Delaward, Ohio

Returns on Investment

Wilson D. Miscamble, C.S.C., misses the forest (what has become of higher education today) for the trees (his concerns about faculty hires). At selective institutions, Notre Dame included, higher education has become an investment. A four-year undergraduate degree can easily cost \$160,000. Americans who can afford it consider this a wise investment, because the returns—admission to “top” graduate programs, high paying jobs, connections—exceed the outlay. Returns like these are possible only when a school has nationally recognized faculty members. What they are recognized for hardly matters. The investment model of higher education is encouraged by our obsession with rankings of the “best” colleges and by the expectation that schools will offer their student-clients a campus filled with amenities. No doubt an interest in a Catholic worldview plays a role when parents decide to send their child to a Catholic college, but I fear for most this interest must be secondary to the expectation that this education will be “worth it” in a very tangible sense. I do not know if anything can reverse this trend, but wringing hands over the number of Catholic faculty members at a school like Notre Dame seems a futile response to a much bigger problem.

Daniel Burr

Covington, Ky.

Starting Over

Father Miscamble’s article is a concise and trenchant analysis of what has metastasized from a “problem” to a crisis at many of the best known Catholic institutions. As a graduate of Notre Dame (B.A. ’60) and a long-term observer of Catholic higher education, I have come to the conclusion that for all but a few institutions the retention of authentic Catholic identity is no longer possible. Once a majority of the tenured faculty members are either non-Catholic or, if nominally Catholic, hostile to a Catholic mission as prescribed by *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, the game is pretty well up. The only chance at that point is to have an administration (fully supported by the board of trustees and the controlling religious order) willing and able to impose faculty hiring decisions so as to assure a majority of the faculty will be seriously Catholic. There is no evidence that any institution has the stomach for the kind of protracted and bitter struggle such a course of conduct would precipitate.

A number of new Catholic colleges and universities have sprung up in reaction to all this. Their sponsors and supporters have concluded that, daunting as it is to start a new institution from scratch, it is nevertheless easier than trying to reform one whose secularization is well past the “tipping point.”

Nicholas J. Healy Jr.

President, Ave Maria University

Naples, Fla.

Out of the Ghetto

Father Miscamble's article is a splendid example of "déjà vu all over again." Putting it bluntly, most of his complaints have little to do with his principal concern. They are found in all academic institutions.

In the process of changing to meet new challenges, Catholic higher education moved from an inner-directed view of intellectualism toward an integrated view of knowledge. The result has been messy—inevitably so. But it was and remains necessary to the creation of the "new" Catholic intellectual, one whose vision of the world is not that of the critic on the sidelines but of the participant sharing in the process of developing some aspect of knowledge. Recruiting a "Catholic" faculty could be an adventurous search for those whose contributions to their fields are of importance whether or not they touch on religion or religious issues. Or it could be a replication of those who see their role as defenders of the church against an alien world and whose contributions focus on that alone. Of course there is room for both, but as Father Miscamble's article demonstrates, both are already there.

Should Catholic institutions of higher education try to appoint Catholic faculty? Certainly, the religious affiliation of candidates may well be taken into consideration. But the number one consideration should be the potential contribution to the academic mission of the institution and society at large sought for in the candidates.

Isolation of Catholics creates the image of a church and religion unable to deal with the challenges presented by the societies in which they exist. The task of universities, including Catholic universities, is the preparation of the next generation of intellectual leaders. Catholic schools can do this only if they are giving an education that is fully integrated into the world of learning. The emphasis should be on the students more than on the faculty. That is where the future lies.

James M. Powell

Syracuse, N.Y.

Tipping Point

Thank you for publishing "The Faculty 'Problem,'" by Wilson D. Miscamble, C.S.C. The university's president, John I. Jenkins, C.S.C., has pledged to reverse course; but he faces the obstacles Father Miscamble describes. The school's mission statement declares that the university's Catholic identity "depends on" the "continuing presence" of a Catholic majority on the faculty. Thus, if those in governance permit this majority to disappear, they will have surrendered the university's claim to Catholic identity.

William H. Dempsey

Arlington, Va.

Where Credit Is Due

The article by Wilson D. Miscamble, C.S.C., expresses a valid concern, that more Catholic professors in a Catholic institution are desirable—all things being equal in scholarship, of course. On the other hand, his identification with *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* may indicate he is more into propaganda and polemics than scholarship.

Despite the direction Father Miscamble recommends that Notre Dame take, he might acknowledge that N.D. is doing pretty well—to no small degree because Ted Hesburgh, C.S.C., demanded that truth and engagement be preferred to dictatorial documents like *Ex Corde*. In fact, whenever an intrusive Curial official began harassing Notre Dame and Catholic universities, Ted Hesburgh knew whom to call to keep such intruders away from a solid university. Prophets of doom notwithstanding, he did a heck of a job.

Bill Mazella

Yonkers, N.Y.

Hiring for Mission

Father Miscamble's glass-nearly-empty portrayal of Catholic mission and identity on our campuses is as misleading as it is simplistic. He uses one data point—53 percent Catholic faculty—and several anecdotes from the University of Notre Dame to make the point that unless we all hire more Catholic professors at Catholic universities, we will “merely replicate...secular institutions and...surrender what remains of their distinctiveness.”

Father Miscamble ignores the exciting work that has been done throughout Catholic higher education for nearly 25 years to preserve and advance our distinctive missions.

The preservation of our missions and identities as Catholic institutions of higher education is a complex, multi-layered, exciting endeavor that has involved thousands of faculty members and staff in the United States for nearly a generation. To reduce this important work to counting Catholics is demeaning to us all. Even the author admits that his one data point may be inaccurate when he reports regarding Notre Dame faculty: “The figure as of 2006 was 53 percent, which is somewhat inflated by those who answered ‘Catholic’ on the faculty questionnaire but for whom the practice of the faith appears to be nominal at best.” Ah, and here's the rub, too. Who is the best judge of whether a Catholic is “nominal” or “committed?” I say let's continue our important work of hiring for mission and ensuring the distinctiveness of each of our institutions as places where faith and reason intersect. I am proud to be associated with this important project, and I look forward to my continued participation in it.

Noreen M. Carrocci

President, Newman University

Wichita, Kans.

Intellectual Curiosity

Father Miscamble's article is fascinating, but I wonder whether, whatever the results of the Rev. Andrew Greeley's research, the supply problem is quite so easily dealt with.

Of course we should be wary if Catholic institutions (or indeed any others) get caught up too much in the U.S. News & World Report rat race. But—here's a radical suggestion!—while we get upset about the secularizing culture that may appear to be gaining the upper hand in such institutions, should we be equally upset about the non- (anti-?) intellectual culture that seems to pervade those charged with the direction of the American Catholic Church? Perhaps that culture even more urgently demands to be changed.

Nicholas Clifford

New Haven, Vt.

Maybe Next Year

In "The Faculty 'Problem,'" Father Miscamble appears to be suggesting some kind of frustration that Catholics are not given extra consideration in the employment process at Notre Dame, even though over half of the faculty identify themselves as Catholic. Last time I checked, the University of Notre Dame was an equal opportunity/affirmative action employer. While I appreciate the author's concern for potential bias in the hiring process, Notre Dame is a top-tier institution and has had much success in the modern academic world. Whether it is ground-breaking faculty research or having a winning football team, a good part of Notre Dame's success lies in not obsessing over the number of Catholic linebackers on the field or professors in the classroom. True success for a Catholic university is measured in scholarly contributions, excellence in teaching and, one hopes, a winning football season.

Curt G. Friehs III

Wichita, Kan.

Crux of the Problem

Catholic universities have a major decision facing them with respect to the faculty "problem." Do they: (1) recruit a committed Catholic faculty and retain such or (2) seek to recruit faculty members who will bring "prestige" and "popularity" to the university, even though such person(s) do not bring a traditional, true and viable Catholic educational pedigree?

This is the crux of the "problem" facing the Catholic universities today; and this dilemma must be resolved sooner, much sooner, rather than later. Otherwise the demise of a traditional Catholic education at a Catholic university will be a *fait accompli*.

David L. Carpenter

Salt Lake City, Utah