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Affirming Education

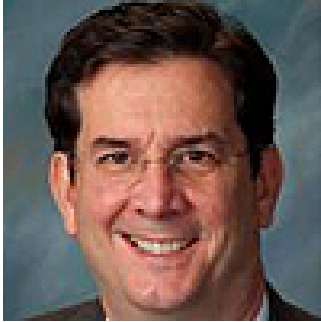
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Affirming Education

04.18.2008 | Catholic, President, Education

Along with memories of tight security and cheering students, University of Dayton President Daniel J. Curran came away from the historic meeting of Pope Benedict XVI with U.S. Catholic educators with a strong sense of pride – and purpose.

"When you analyze the entire speech, there were several themes. He talked about the role of Catholic education in the history of this country multiple times; he referred to the role of universities in educating the poor and immigrants," said Curran. "He also focused on the university's critical role in the pursuit of knowledge and truth.

"The pope expressed the great value of Catholic education in America. This speech was not about shortcomings. It was about all the things that universities and schools have done to help the disadvantaged and our students in general, asking us to continue that work and to stay true to our Catholic faith," he said.

Curran said about 400 Catholic educators – college and university presidents and school superintendents – gathered at the Catholic University of America in a room decked out in papal yellow and white, graced with a large white chair. The wait was long, he said, but the excitement was intense when Pope Benedict entered the room.

Curran was seated near an aisle and so, was less than 10 feet away from the pontiff when he entered.

"He was very pastoral, very calm. Everyone paid such close attention to his speech," he said.

Curran found the pope's emphasis on faith, the intellect and service to be "very positive and affirming."

"He used the term 'intellectual charity' to refer to the responsibility of educators to lead the young to truth. He said it was nothing less than an act of love," Curran said. "He thanked Catholic educators for our dedication and generosity."

The pope affirmed the value of academic freedom in searching for the truth, but cautioned that this freedom should not be used to contradict Catholic faith and teachings, Curran said.

"He didn't talk about specific parameters; he didn't cite negative examples," he said. "He was saying that as a professor himself, he knew how important academic freedom is, but he wanted us to know that we have to protect the teaching of the church."

Reflecting on the pope's message, Curran said he felt strongly positive that "the University of Dayton is maintaining and strengthening our Catholic identity in line with the pope's expectations. I walked away feeling very good about UD."

"It was a great affirmation of what we're doing at UD," Curran said. He said the University consistently carries out the works of faith, intellectual exploration and service outlined by the pope.

Curran said the Marianist Educational Associates – lay members of the university community – are fine examples of individuals dedicating themselves to fostering the Catholic, Marianist heritage of the University of Dayton and are helping the University stay true to those traditions.

UD's campus ministry is actively involved in deepening the faith of students through Masses, retreats and faith exploration programs, he said.

"Several participants at the papal event approached me expressing their appreciation of the work of the Institute for Pastoral Initiatives, led by Sister Angela Ann Zukowski," Curran said. "One priest thanked me and said the institute's education for the laity is an important service to the Church."

Curran said he was reminded that the Marianist charism embraces the creation and discovery of new ways for changing times, and that online programs such as those offered by the Institute for Pastoral Initiatives are forward thinking in meeting the challenge of strengthening the faith as outlined by the pope.

In talking about Catholic educators, Curran said it was noteworthy the pope mentioned two women, St. Elizabeth Seton and St. Katharine Drexel, known for their work in educating and ministering to African-Americans, Native Americans and the poor.

"It was very affirming of what UD does with service. We have students all over the country doing service with the poor and the disadvantaged. The pope's message to educators was to keep doing what we are doing," he said.

After hearing the pope's message and reflecting on what the University of Dayton does as a Catholic, Marianist educational institution, Curran said "This interaction affirms that the University is pursuing its mission in an appropriate way. We must continue to work hard to enhance what we're doing.

"His message was that Catholic education must continue to focus on faith, the intellectual pursuit of truth, and the fostering of social justice. These goals have been central to the University of Dayton's mission for generations and will continue to be so in the future."

For more information, contact Cilla Shindell, director of media relations, at 937-229-3257 or shindell@udayton.edu (url: <mailto:shindell@udayton.edu>) .