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National Conference of Catholic Bishops

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Nov. 9, 1999

TO: RELIGION EDITORS AND WRITERS
RE: EX CORDE ECCLESIAE

The National Conference of Catholic Bishops will meet in Washington, D.C., Nov. 15-18. Among the items they will consider will be Ex Corde Ecclesiae, or "from the heart of the church," a papal document on Catholic higher education. At debate is how the pope's vision of Catholic higher education should be implemented to strengthen and maintain the Catholic nature of the 230-plus Catholic colleges and universities in the U.S.

The enclosed article appears in the Opinion section of the Nov. 12 issue of the Chronicle of Higher Education. The Rev. James Heft, S.M., chancellor and University professor of faith and culture at the University of Dayton, recounts the process and outlines the issues that have surfaced.

If you'd like to reach Father Heft for comment, he can be contacted by phone at (937) 229-2105 and via e-mail at heft@checkov.hm.udayton.edu. If you have any questions or need further information, contact Pam Huber at (937) 229-3241 or via e-mail at huber@udayton.edu.
Have Catholic Colleges Reached an Impasse?

By James L. Heft, S.M.

NEXT WEEK, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops will gather in Washington for its annual meeting. Prominent on the bishops' agenda will be Ex corde Ecclesiae. Pope John Paul II's apostolic statement on Roman Catholic higher education, precisely how Ex corde should apply in practice at the 230-plus Catholic colleges and universities in the United States will be the subject of discussion, and perhaps a vote, by the bishops.

The issues raised by Ex corde are just the latest in a long history of debates over how Catholic institutions should relate to the Catholic Church, and are far more complicated than the press sometimes makes out. Some historical background puts what is happening in perspective.

In 1969, Pope John XXIII called together the heads of worldwide "pontifical" institutions of higher education, those chartered by the Holy See. The institutions at the meeting joined to form an association that would later be called the International Federation of Catholic Universities. Not long after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), the association, under the leadership of Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh and with the support of Pope Paul VI, was broadened to include institutions that had been founded by religious congregations.

Through the organization, Catholic colleges and universities worked together to rethink their nature and their mission in the context of the Vatican Council and the changes confronting society in the 1960s. At a regional meeting in 1967 at Land O'Lakes, Wis., American Catholic educators declared that "the Catholic university must have a true autonomy and academic freedom in the face of authority of whatever kind, lay or clerical, external to the academic community." At the same time, they declared that a Catholic institution must be a community "in which Catholicism is perceptibly present and effectively operative."

That 1967 statement marked one of the most important moments in the history of Catholic higher education in the United States. It captured Vatican II's stress on shared governance with the laity and greater support for Catholic universities, and spurred such changes in the United States. By 1970, many leaders of major American Catholic institutions of higher education had turned over fiduciary authority to predominantly lay boards of trustees. That shared responsibility, coupled with a sharp decrease in the number of priests, brothers, and sisters available to be professors and administrators, presented new challenges for Catholic colleges and universities in defining their Catholic identity and mission.

A congress of Catholic universities was held at the Vatican in 1969, and another in 1972, when a document titled "The Catholic University in the Modern World" was drafted. It asserted that all Catholic universities, despite their obvious differences, share four characteristics: a Christian inspiration of the academic community; continual reflection on expanding knowledge from the perspective of faith; fidelity to the Christian message as it comes through the church; and a commitment to the service of the church, to all humanity, and to the transcendent meaning of life.

The 1972 document also distinguished between institutions chartered by the Holy See and other Catholic colleges and universities, and it reaffirmed the institutional autonomy of the latter. Among other things, was the authority of local bishops. The statement noted that Catholic theologians at non-pontifical institutions who did not teach authentic doctrine could and should be judged by the local bishop—but not necessarily removed from the university.

Vatican reaction to the 1972 statement drew the lines of the debate that we are confronting this month.

Cardinal Giuseppe, head of the Vatican's Congregation for Catholic Education, wrote the following year that "although the [1972] document envisages the existence of university institutions without statutory bonds linking them to ecclesiastical authorities, it is to be noted that this in no way means that such institutions are removed from their relationships with ecclesiastical hierarchy which must characterize all Catholic institutions." He never specified, however, what form those relationships should take.

That, since the early 1970s, the central issue has been how, on the one hand, to understand the necessary institutional autonomy and academic freedom claimed by non-pontificaly chartered Catholic colleges and universities and, on the other, how to correct the inappropriate form of the relationship that such institutions should have with the American bishops and the wider church.

The Vatican took an important step toward clarifying that issue in the revised code of canon law published in 1983. The new code affirmed the right of the church to establish and to govern universities; said faculty members should be not only academically competent but also "outstanding in their integrity of doctrine and rightness of life;" said Catholic theologians should have a mandate to teach from the competent ecclesiastical authority; and maintained that Catholic presidents of Catholic colleges and universities should make a profession of faith. Educators, however, have been unsure whether the statement on Catholic higher education applied only to pontifically chartered institutions, or to all Catholic colleges and universities.

At about the same time, another interna-
Catholic educators have long called for true autonomy and academic freedom.

Educators would have made a genuine effort to understand the distinctive mission of higher education. The document remains on three key issues: whether to require that Catholic theologians obtain a mandate indicating their commitment to the church with their bishops (the fact that the latest text keeps the Latin word and no longer speaks of a "mandate" is apparently an attempt to avoid suggesting a command or order, but it still worries many presidents and most theologians); whether Catholics assuming the presidency of a Catholic institution should have the ability to work on the church; and whether the corporate bylaws of non-pontifical institutions should be approved by the local bishop.

Catholic universities already acknowledge that they do have obligations in those areas, and they strive, with varying degrees of success, to fulfill them. They work to ensure that authentically Catholic theology is taught as such. Many presidents and boards of trustees are also more aware than ever before of the importance of the entire institution's mission, and the fact that it is not only academic but also Catholic. They believe that the requirement of the American Conference of Catholic College presidents to diminish academicians' already shaky confidence in the compatibility of Catholicism and serious intellectual work. From theological and academic oversight of all three obligations will not suffice to foster a vibrant Catholic intellectual life, and may doom. For an active Catholic intellectual life, much more is required, not least of all the presence of Catholic intellectuals and others committed to a distinctive intellectual experience rooted in Catholicism.

One of the biggest challenges to achieving the goals of Ex corde is that, although many Catholics now have Ph.D.'s, few are Catholic intellectuals. Catholic intellectuals undertake scholarly work with certain presuppositions. For example, they believe that the more deeply one gets into what it means to be human, the more ines- capable are ethical and religious questions; the more one turns toward a form of knowledge, the more necessary it is to make connections with other areas of knowledge; the more intellectually vibrant a religious context will learn to think and shape the wider culture. The Catholic intellectual is a believer, one who is nourished by the sacraments and who draws inspiration and guidance from the tradition and teachings of the church. Whether or not the vote on Ex corde is postponed this week, I hope that the press, observers, and participants will remember the complexity and long history of the issues.

Pope John Paul II's apostolic statement on higher education says that Catholic colleges and universities—ex corde ecclesiae—from the heart of the church. In biblical thought, the image of the heart contains the most important elements of the mind. The current document portrays a vision of the heart which is "faithful Catholics." At critical points, what I think of as "metaphorical," such as "to the extent possible," and "as much as possible," soften juridical expectations.

Other examples can be cited. Together, they indicate that American bishops