

Catholic and Jesuit

What does it mean
at Marquette?

IF YOU WANT TO START A LIVELY CONVERSATION with Rev. Robert Wild, S.J., ask him to define Catholic, Jesuit education at Marquette University. Even before being named president of the university in 1996, Father Wild had been working from his perspective as a professor and later as a provincial to ensure the preservation of the religious identity and core values that have characterized Jesuit colleges and universities for centuries. Now looking forward to his 10th anniversary in the office of the president, he enjoys the satisfaction that comes from having worked tirelessly and successfully with students, faculty, staff and alumni to ensure that Marquette fulfills its promise to provide a transformational education so that students graduate not only better educated but better human beings. Here, he talks about how Marquette continues to strengthen its Catholic, Jesuit identity.



BEFORE COMING BACK to Marquette, I was from 1985 to 1991 the provincial or regional head of the Chicago Province of the Jesuits. There are 10 such Jesuit provincials in the United States, and when we gathered together as we did several times a year, the thing we talked about most was preserving the religious identity of the 28 Jesuit colleges and universities in this country. Jesuits, we knew, would in the future be fewer in number, and so key to this effort would be the lay men and women who would be assuming more and more leadership responsibility. So when I came on as president here, I knew I'd better walk the talk and look carefully at the whole question of how we can best ensure Marquette's religious identity over the long term.

I realized very quickly that to succeed we needed to be very explicit about our goals and mission. We therefore formulated, with the help of the university community and Board of Trustees, a formal mission statement expressing our value commitments and established an Office of Mission and Identity to help oversee its implementation. These values, excellence (a term encompassing not only academic excellence but also all the virtues and values that belong to human excellence broadly understood), faith, leadership and service, we talk about constantly, and we have a consistent, ongoing expectation that every faculty member, every university staff member has a contribution to make in living out and making visible the values enunciated in this mission statement.

To explain that a bit more, we seek to instill in students a passion for pursuing knowledge not simply for self-betterment but also so that they are better prepared to serve the world and its needs. Furthermore, in both the core courses and in the specific academic major or majors that our students choose, as well as in their experience of campus life apart from the classroom, we want them to understand better and reflect upon the demands, not least ethical demands, that will be placed on them both in their professional careers and in ordinary human life.

UNIVERSITIES ESSENTIALLY began as gathering places where teachers and students could come together to share knowledge and to explore questions of fundamental human importance. To carry out its proper work of intellectual inquiry and discovery, a university must be autonomous and self-governing. Furthermore, it must maintain and foster academic freedom. Its very nature, that is, demands that it function as a sort of privileged public square in which faculty members and students can freely advance ideas of all sorts, some of great value and others perhaps foolish or even wrong-headed, subject only to the critical assessment of their peers.

In many ways, our being a Catholic and Jesuit university allows for greater academic freedom than can be found at state or nonsectarian private schools where, for example, topics like religion are ruled out of bounds either by the

demands of the law or more often by a sort of accepted community wisdom that such matters are not "scientific" and so do not belong in a serious way to the education process.

A Catholic institution — and frankly all religiously affiliated institutions — will disagree with that sort of restriction. We say religion is a very central part of human experience and whether you are a believer or not, as an educated person you should at least have some understanding of this phenomenon and how it works. And certainly a university community ought to be able to talk about religion, about God, about all such matters as a normal part of human inquiry.

On the other hand, some think that the emphasis on autonomy and academic freedom that I just underscored is somehow contrary to the expectations the Roman Catholic Church has for Catholic universities. That most certainly is not the case. To the contrary, in his foundational statement about the characteristics of a genuine Catholic university, a document entitled "Ex Corde Ecclesiae," Pope John Paul II affirmed the necessity for these institutions of both autonomy and academic freedom. Because Roman Catholicism lays great stress on the fundamental goodness of creation and views the Incarnation, God's becoming in Christ Jesus a concrete human being, as a core doctrine of the faith, it tends to be optimistic about the ability of human reason to attain the truth. In other words, because God created the universe, the universe can be analyzed and understood by human reason. And when, as



in the case of evolution, there might seem to be an apparent contradiction between faith and reason, the emerging discoveries made by scientists on the basis of this theory will, Catholics believe, ultimately turn out to be, if verifiable by the methods proper to science, in harmony with the teachings of our faith.

Throughout history, Catholic universities have been asked why they would permit something to be studied or discussed that seemingly contradicts accepted church teaching. I can best respond to that with a story:

Once upon a time there was a Catholic university and at that university was a certain theology professor. He was truly brilliant and he was in touch with all the latest trends both in theology and in other relevant academic disciplines. He began to teach several viewpoints that were unfamiliar to many contemporary Catholics, and soon his name came to the attention of the local bishop. The bishop, disturbed by what he read and heard, began to believe that what this theologian was teaching his students was at odds with traditional Catholic doctrine. With that decided, his duty was clear. He would publicly condemn these teachings as false, an action that would lead, he presumed, to the university removing this professor from the faculty since he was not teaching authentic Catholic doctrine. And so the bishop did. But the university faculty, upon receiving the bishop's decree of condemnation, refused to expel the theologian from their membership since they were not convinced by the bishop's

arguments and believed that decisions about faculty membership were theirs alone to make.

That sounds so much like what we hear from time to time these days, doesn't it? But in fact these events took place in 1270; the bishop was the then archbishop of Paris, Étienne Tempier; the university was the University of Paris; and the theologian in question was Thomas of Aquino, better known as St. Thomas Aquinas.

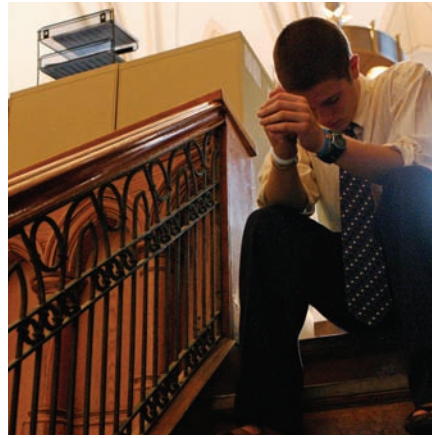
Ironically, the supposedly heterodox theologian that Thomas was thought to be, not only by his archbishop but also by other contemporary Catholics, became recognized over time as perhaps the greatest of all Catholic theologians. All of which is a helpful reminder that the debates we have about the Catholicity of our universities are not at all a new thing in the life of the church. And it is also a reminder that the principal work of a university, the discovery of truth, is not a simple business but proceeds by fits and starts, with some gaining insight well before others do.

WHILE I DO THINK it important in terms of Marquette's religious identity not to be generic, "Judeo-Christian" or something like that, but to be what we have always been, Catholic and Jesuit, we do well to remember that about a third of our present students are not Roman Catholic. In that regard I am sometimes asked whether having so many students of other faiths enrolled

at Marquette detracts from our identity as a Catholic university and I say no, decidedly no. The presence of these men and women enriches us as a university, helps us to consider questions that we might otherwise not consider, gives the university community a wider perspective. In turn, we try to assist these individuals to engage more deeply with their own particular faith tradition.

You will hear people say that schools like Marquette are less Catholic today. To the contrary, I would argue that most of our American Catholic universities — Marquette certainly among them — are far more forthright, far more explicit, far more self-critical about their Catholic identity than they were 30 or 40 years ago. In this regard, we are not shy these days about stating who we are and what we think it important for us to be. Furthermore, we not only have a mission statement; we work hard to make sure that we live out the values it proclaims. Where once we left it to the Jesuits to take care of the religious and faith dimensions of the university, we now work to have all of our faculty and staff involved in actualizing Marquette's Jesuit and Catholic commitment.

To be sure, a faculty member's first responsibility is to teach with skill and excellence his or her specific academic discipline. Indeed, faculty members contribute in a vital way to the mission of this university when they teach and do research with excellence, for this is the primary work God expects them to do. But in their concern to be effective communicators, in the way they take



into account their students' experiences, in their overall attention to the needs of their individual students, they necessarily communicate to their students their own personal values. And we encourage our professors to recognize, honor and work constantly to improve this aspect of their work.

I think we've been very successful in fostering real pride in our identity and mission. It certainly wasn't a coincidence that during recent visits by accrediting bodies from the North Central Association of Colleges and the National Collegiate Athletic Association, both groups commented that it was unique to find, as they did at Marquette, students, faculty and staff members all clearly articulating our mission and the role they share in helping the university live it.

I personally take a lot of satisfaction in our progress in this regard, but this could not have happened without a university-wide commitment. If I as president were to just wave my hands and hope good things will then happen, or even if I were to send down an edict from on high. ...well, in a university things just don't work that way. People who don't want to do something can find an infinity of ways to appear cooperative when in fact they are anything but. And so my goal has been to work steadfastly day by day to win minds and hearts for the cause because, frankly, I don't believe that people can be coerced into being good stewards of our university's mission.

Not that there is no room for further improvement in how we conduct this critical aspect of our business, the

forwarding of our Catholic and Jesuit identity. At times we make mistakes, and of course the very character of a university, its willingness to allow odd, even truly strange ideas to be discussed and advanced, can make it look at times as though we don't adequately protect our religious values. But I will tell you that when the presidents of Catholic universities get together these days, it is clear that they take very seriously their responsibility for ensuring that their schools remain committed to their Catholic character.

IT CONTINUES TO BE such a pleasure to be a part of this university, a university at which on a daily basis our students are exposed to varying points of view and find themselves wrestling with deep questions of faith, of ethics, of who they individually are as human beings and to what specific vocation they are personally invited. The university thus becomes an environment in which such questions are very much in play, and helping our students to discover answers to such questions is no small part of what we do.

Of course there are challenges facing Catholic universities, the biggest being how we can keep this sense of purpose, this strong sense of identity and dedication to our mission vital and strong in the future. More and more of our universities will have lay men and women replacing clergy as presidents. Can we in this changing circumstance maintain

our Catholic identity? My short answer, and one I give strongly and firmly is yes, with work we can indeed do so. Certainly here at Marquette, we are doing whatever can be done humanly to ensure that over time the kinds of values that we treasure now can be values that are in place 50 or 100 years from now and looking for further ways that we can still better accomplish this. You know, the old Jesuit search for the *magis*, the still better way to accomplish what God wishes for us and for this institution. Still, there are no guarantees; each generation has to take responsibility for this.

That said, we here at Marquette feel privileged to be able to travel this road with our students, to assist them as they grow both in knowledge and in faith so that they become men and women who will not only experience personal success in their chosen profession but will, as wise, caring and faith-filled leaders, make a truly positive difference in our world. Our communities, our nation and our world need a continuing legacy of principled leaders, and we are committed to developing students who will respond to that call. And in the tradition of Ignatius of Loyola, we ourselves are striving day by day to improve and strengthen all that we do for God's greater glory. To my mind, you can't be engaged in a more Catholic or Jesuit enterprise than that.