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Vatican official cites challenges in Catholic higher education

By Jerry Filteau

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WASHINGTON (CNS) -- In a recent address in the United States, a top Vatican education official said Catholic colleges and universities today face a number of major challenges and are called "to a continuous renewal, both as 'universities' and as 'Catholic.'"

Speaking in Indiana at the University of Notre Dame's Hesburgh Center auditorium Oct. 31, Archbishop J. Michael Miller said that in recent years "the Holy See's primary concern at every level is encouraging the fostering and, if necessary, the reclaiming of the Catholic identity of institutions of higher learning."

Archbishop Miller, a Canadian, is secretary of the Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education. Catholic News Service was given the final written text of his address Nov. 15.

Among challenges facing Catholic higher education in the West, he said, are:

-- Fostering within the university community ongoing reflection on human knowledge in the light of faith, in the face of "the widespread opinion which exiles faith from the academy."

-- "A countercultural insistence on the importance of truth" in the face of widespread relativism that says each individual is his or her own measure of truth. "Education in the truth is a proper goal of Catholic higher education," he said.

-- "Reclaiming (Catholic higher education's) tradition of an integral Christian humanism" in a culture in which many "justify higher education almost exclusively as an instrument for career preparation and think of the university as a convenient structure to house commercially sponsored research."

-- The "moral challenge" of making a significant contribution from its resources to Catholic higher education in the Third World, recognizing that "the ever widening gap in the social, economic, cultural and technological spheres" affects the unjust global distribution of resources in higher education as well as in other areas of life.

On the relationship of Catholic universities to the church, Archbishop Miller said that Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, before he became Pope Benedict XVI, had once argued in an interview "that it might be better for the church not to expend her resources trying to preserve institutions, whether universities, hospitals or social service agencies, if their Catholic identity had been seriously compromised."

"Elsewhere in his writings Cardinal Ratzinger expressed his opinion that a time of purification lay ahead for the church, and this undoubtedly would have repercussions on her educational institutions," the archbishop added.

What the former cardinal will do as pope in the field of Catholic education "is still open to speculation," he said, but a scenario that the pope might prefer to have fewer—but clearly Catholic—institutions rather than many whose Catholic identity is muddled "might well prove to be accurate."

"I bring this to your attention today for one main reason," he said. "In recent years, the debate in the United States, and to a lesser degree in Europe, over the Catholic identity of universities has presumed that the pope and the bishops want to preserve all the church's institutions of higher education; that she has, if you will, a vested interest in their continuance. But what if that presumption is mistaken? The views previously expressed by Cardinal Ratzinger at least suggest that it might possibly be."

"Some commentators," he continued, "would conclude from this that, if a nominally Catholic university is no longer motivated by a strong sense of its institutional Catholic identity, it is better to let it go, to end its claim to be Catholic."

Reports on that part of Archbishop Miller's address provoked a flurry of discussion in U.S. Catholic higher education circles. Initial published reports on it interpreted the archbishop's words to mean that such a cleansing "will" or "will likely" be part of the new pope's agenda.

In fact the archbishop said, "Commentators have no way of knowing whether Pope Benedict will pursue this path of encouraging a kind of 'evangelical pruning.'"

Jesuit Father Charles L. Currie, president of the Washington-based Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities, told Catholic News Service, "The speech was more balanced than the early reports suggested."

He said that as he read through the talk he kept thinking that the 28 U.S. Jesuit institutions that form the association are "doing pretty well in most of these areas. We're certainly aware of the challenges that he's laying out and we're responding to them."

At several points in his talk, the archbishop suggested that whether a university should continue calling itself Catholic if it is not actively pursuing and strengthening its identity is first of all a matter of the institution's own integrity.

The stakeholders in a Catholic university "must decide on their institution's future direction," he said. He added that this "involves positive institutional changes which will result in clear witness, where this has not been the case, in teaching and scholarship to Catholicism's rich intellectual, artistic, moral, literary, historical, spiritual, sociopolitical and even scientific traditions."

"For Benedict, I would venture, the measure of an institution's identity can be judged by the integrity of its Gospel witness to the church and the world," he said. "If this is so, then it could mean that, where secularization in a university proves to be irrevocably entrenched, it might be a matter of truthfulness and justice for such an institution to no longer be considered officially Catholic."

But he also indicated that even if an institution seems to have lost much or all of its Catholic identity, the answer is not necessarily to declare it no longer Catholic and the Holy See may not be inclined to push for such a judgment.

"Whether or not the Holy See should in any way force the question is a moot and delicate point," he said. "Despite some publicity to the contrary, in general it has shown itself to be very reluctant to do so. The stakes are high, and in an institution such as the Roman Curia, which thinks in centuries, a premium is placed on prudence."

While some observers would argue for pruning, others would argue "that, while a particular university's ecclesial identity may well be compromised, it has only temporarily been taken hostage," he said. "The better course of action, these latter maintain, is to be patient, to work for slow incremental changes while putting up with far less than the ideal, and to pray that successive generations will reassert the institution's Catholic identity for their children's children."

Archbishop Miller's talk was the annual Vatican lecture sponsored by Notre Dame's Nanovic Institute for European Studies.

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