

# Faithful Presence: A Conceptual Model for Catholic Higher Education

Richard Rymarz, Ed.D., Ph.D.

## Abstract

This paper proposes a new model for Catholic educational institutions in secular culture. This model is premised on the reality that secular cultures place considerable challenges before religiously-affiliated colleges and universities. Following Hunter's concept of cultural change, this paper proposes that the best way for religious institutions to both flourish and to positively influence culture is by offering a strong, coherent alternative, described here as a model of faithful presence. This approach recognizes that the key to cultural change is usually not a well-supported grassroots or popular movement, but rather the development of strategic social structures which are able to articulate and carry forward a distinctive program in a diverse ideological marketplace. This strategy is especially appropriate in dominant secular cultures that place great pressure on religiously-affiliated colleges and universities to assimilate at a time when many, due to the debilitating impact of secular contagions, have weak religious identity. By stressing "faithful presence" rather than relevance, Catholic colleges and universities have the potential to be transformative cultural agents.

## Introduction

The Catholic Church, through its documents and writings, has set high expectations for the religious identity of Catholic colleges and universities. This identity is often expressed as an internal culture with the capacity to influence wider society. A strong indication of this scope of influence is given in the Second Vatican Council's declaration on Christian Education, *Gravissimum Educationis*:

No less than other schools does the Catholic school pursue cultural goals and the human formation of youth. But its proper function is to create for the school

---

Richard Rymarz is the Peter and Doris Kule Chair in Catholic Religious Education, St Joseph's College, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, and Visiting Research Professor, Australian Catholic University.

community a special atmosphere animated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and charity, to help youth grow according to the new creatures they were made through baptism as they develop their own personalities, and finally to order the whole of human culture to the news of salvation.<sup>1</sup>

In more recent times, *Ex corde Ecclesiae* places expectations on Catholic universities in these terms:

Catholic Universities will seek to discern and evaluate both the aspirations and the contradictions of modern culture, in order to make it more suited to the total development of individuals and peoples.<sup>2</sup>

In light of these expectations this paper will explore the place of Catholic colleges and universities within the wider, secular culture. In particular, it will examine how Catholic colleges and universities can best influence wider culture while, and at the same time, preserving a strong religious identity. It will argue that both these dimensions of Catholic education are connected. A strong internal institutional culture provides a distinctive feature for Catholic education, and at the same time, ensures that it has something unique and potentially transformative to offer the wider culture. By no means is the model outlined here comprehensive. It is best suited to educational institutions, which place a high value on maintaining a strong religious identity.

Within the context of Catholic education, all schools—from elementary through university—share important educative commonalities, such as the need to navigate between the demands of an increasingly secular culture and a strongly transcendent religious tradition. Commonalities such as these help to validate an analysis that proposes a common, reciprocal approach to culture for Catholic educational institutions. Since the opening of Georgetown University in 1789, the number of Catholic colleges and universities in the United States has grown: there are currently 230.<sup>3</sup> Here, as with many other Western countries, Catholic colleges define their own subculture in a societal context where such self-definition is becoming increasingly problematic. This is due, in

---

<sup>1</sup> Pope Paul VI, “Gravissimum Educationis: Declaration on Christian Education,” [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_gravissimum-educationis\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_gravissimum-educationis_en.html), ¶8.

<sup>2</sup> Pope John Paul II, “Ex corde Ecclesiae: On Catholic Universities,” [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_constitutions/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apc\\_15081990\\_ex-corde-ecclesiae\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_15081990_ex-corde-ecclesiae_en.html), ¶45.

<sup>3</sup> United States Catholic Conference, “The Application of Ex corde Ecclesiae for the United States,” [http://old.usccb.org/bishops/application\\_of\\_excordeecclesiae.shtml](http://old.usccb.org/bishops/application_of_excordeecclesiae.shtml), ¶2.

large part, to the growing disparity between the institutional subculture and the wider societal context.<sup>4</sup> Typically, the wider culture shapes the subculture of institutions.

A fundamental issue with regard to the preservation of Catholic identity and culture is the relative strength of the societal culture in comparison to the subculture of the institution. Gleason proposes that many U.S. Catholic colleges and universities lack strength and resilience and, as a result, are more likely to be influenced by the wider culture than to provide any type of leaven to society at large.<sup>5</sup> Dobbelaere has proposed a theoretical model that can be adapted to further explain declining religious institutional salience within the context of a broad theory of secularization.<sup>6</sup> Salience here is understood as the capacity of religious institutions to have a strong and formative impact on both individuals and society in terms that the religious tradition sees as important.<sup>7</sup> He proposes that Christian churches and other religious groups in contemporary society are heavily compromised by contagions.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Bryk, Valerie E. Lee, and Peter B. Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Philip Gleason, *Contending with Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), esp. 318-322; Avery Dulles, *Revelation and the Quest for Unity* (Washington, DC: Corpus Books, 1968), 270; Vincent Bolduc, "Measuring Catholicity on Campus: A Comparative Example at Four Colleges," *Journal of Catholic Higher Education*, 28(2) (2009): 125-147. As early as 1968, Dulles well captured the changing dynamic between society and religion when he commented, "The social pressures in favor of religion are rapidly diminishing. In some circles the situation has almost reversed itself: the convinced believer rather than the agnostic is the non conformist, the independent thinker."

<sup>6</sup> Karol Dobbelaere, "Toward an Integrated Perspective of the Process Related to the Descriptive Concept of Secularization," in *The Secularization Debate*, eds., William Swatos and Daniel Olson (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 2000), 21-37. See also Karol Dobbelaere and Wolfgang Jagodzinski, "Religious Cognitions and Beliefs," in *The Impact of Values*, eds., Johan van Deth and Eric Scarborough (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 197-217.

<sup>7</sup> Karel Dobbelaere, *Secularization: An Analysis at Three Levels* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2002), 169-172. On an individual level, Dobbelaere develops a corollary of this argument by proposing that there is a causal link between declining religious commitment evidenced by indices such as church membership and practices, orthodoxy, importance of rites of passage, private practices, self-evaluation of religiousness and a rise in compartmentalization. Compartmentalization is the tendency to separate religious beliefs and practices from conventional life and, thereby, to reduce religious influences on individuals.

<sup>8</sup> Gleason, *Higher Education*, 305. Gleason also uses this notion when discussing the challenge to maintain distinctiveness in the recent history of Catholic higher education. For instance, he attributes a significant role to the "contagion of liberty."

These reduce the salience of churches and, by implication, institutions (such as colleges) that are sponsored by them. The contagion notion is a useful analogy as it underlies the almost organic quality of religious communities in contemporary culture and the way in which their strength can ebb and flow in response to movements in the general culture. A key manifestation of contagion is a growing discrepancy between public behavior and personal belief. In terms of Catholic educational institutions, for instance, enrollments that remain high may not indicate underlying religious belief or commitment.<sup>9</sup>

Contagions arise from a series of debilitating, usually internal factors, all of which heighten the pace of secularization. These may include a lack of strongly-committed personnel prepared to act as religion animators within the institution, serious ideological differences about the nature and purpose of the institution, or a lack of clarity about the key doctrinal statements of the faith tradition. While on the surface these institutions may look as if they are manifesting a religious identity, a closer examination may reveal powerful, secularizing influences at work.

In their study of Catholic higher education in the United States, Morey and Piderit pointed out this need in the following terms:

Most people in Catholic higher education circles shy away from numerical quotas, even as they acknowledge that Catholic institutional identity requires a critical mass of people who are knowledgeable about the Catholic traditions and as James Provost terms them, “people who are in full communion.”<sup>10</sup>

All of these factors diminish the capacity of the institution to embody the religious claims of the group. Just as a person who carries a series of contagions lacks vitality and vigor, similarly afflicted is the distinctive religious dimension of denominational colleges.

---

<sup>9</sup> Roger Stark and Rodney Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 103. There is some overlap between idea of contagion as a measure of religious vitality and Stark and Finke’s notion of objective religious commitment (Definition 14). Strong religious communities are typified by an overlap between what the tradition identifies as important and individual practice.

<sup>10</sup> Melanie Morey and John Piderit, *Catholic Higher Education: A Culture in Crises* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 226. The article referred to in the quotation is James Provost, “The Sides of Catholic Identity” in *Enhancing Religious Identity*, eds., John Wilcox and Irene King (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2000), 23.

In the contagion scenario, Catholic colleges and universities have only a limited capacity. If they spread their resources too thinly, they run the risk of providing only a generic educational vision, which although relevant—broadly understood—is not a distinguishable choice in a marketplace replete with options. On the other hand, the ability of a particular subculture to have any impact on the wider society is compromised by its close association with that society. By being closely aligned with the cultural center, the relevant Catholic college or university is not in a position to enter into a critical dialogue with the ascendant cultural norms and, thereby, is very unlikely to affect any sort of change. The vector of change here is not the quantity but the distinctiveness of Catholic educational institutions. Having a large number of religiously-affiliated colleges, most offering a relatively generic educational program, does not ensure that these educational institutions can have any discernible or long-lasting cultural influence. Indeed, in the exchange between the wider culture and the subculture of the college or university, an alignment of the institutional subculture with general cultural norms is likely to occur, albeit gradually.

For Catholic colleges and universities in the United States, shaping their internal cultures so that they may be both resilient and in a position to have some impact on the wider society is a challenge.<sup>11</sup> This formation should take place within a context that recognizes that this activity needs to be directed and purposeful, one in which it is understood that passive acceptance of societal norms will not lead to the development of vigorous or formative subcultures. To help guide this process, a theoretical model that recognizes the inherent challenges can be adapted. The model developed by Hunter is one approach that offers a possible framework within which Catholic colleges and universities in the United States could operate.

### **Hunter's Model of Cultural Change**

Hunter's model argues for a notion of cultural change that moves away from the dominant Hegelian ideal.<sup>12</sup> This sees culture as enduring and relatively stable. It develops a conceptual notion that sees cultures as malleable and influenced by the dominant ideas and, in this sense,

---

<sup>11</sup> Michael Buckley, *The Catholic University as Promise and Project* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

can be contrasted with some well-known models of educational change that focus more on the practical strategies that are needed to affect change within a variety of ideological positions.<sup>13</sup> In Hunter's view, cultures are ultimately shaped from seminal ideas that provide the impetus for change or renewal. For those interested in influencing or redirecting culture, it is crucial to confront and challenge these ideas, or their ramifications, when and where they appear over the vast domain of a dynamic and evolving culture. This is often best described as empowering a grassroots movement to overturn mistaken cultural precepts which are often embodied in social programs. Winning over the hearts and minds of others so that they may be in a position to take up the ideological battle within their own sphere of influence is the first step in this process. Hunter points out that there is nothing wrong with working toward this type of personal renewal. He contends, however, that if this is a strategy for influencing the dominant culture, then it is doomed to fail because it is based on an erroneous assumption about how cultures change.

Hunter proposes a view of culture that recognizes its dialectic nature. For him, culture is, in essence, a complex system of truth claims and moral obligations. From this flows a series of norms, which mediate, on a cultural level, what is seen to be good or evil or, perhaps more sharply, what should or should not be done. Embedded in culture is the idea of symbolic capital. On the one hand, not mass movements but key institutions and individuals who have achieved a higher perceived status than others are what drives culture. Such high status places these institutions and individuals at the center of culture as opposed to being on the periphery. Cultural change, on the other hand, is a process that begins with a different category of elites who are not, in the first instance, at the centermost position of prestige. They are, however, not isolated on the periphery either. It is within this tension of being proximate to the center of culture but not yet in a position to shape normative truth claims and moral obligation that the motivation and the capacity to change culture arise. The ability of these agents of cultural change to parlay their ideas into "powerful social institutions, networks, interests and symbols"<sup>14</sup> is critical and may take considerable time. An important consideration, therefore, is the way agents of cultural change

---

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Heaney, "The Catholic University Project: What Kind of Curriculum Does It Require?" in *Enhancing Religious Identity: Best Practices from Catholic Campuses*, eds., John R. Wilcox and Irene King (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2000); Michael Fullan, *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> Hunter, *To Change the World*, 44.

structure their institutions to be able to have long-term influence and also to faithfully reflect the key ideas and aspirations of the group.

### **Catholic Educational Institutions as Agents of Cultural Change**

In Hunter's view, what is critical to cultural change is the capacity of change agents to find both patronage for their views and ways to transmit these in a fashion that affects the underlying truth claims and implicit moral obligations of the culture.<sup>15</sup> In order for this to be achieved, religious institutions must take a stance on what they perceive to be the best form of interaction between themselves and the wider culture. One approach is to emphasize what Hunter calls the "relevance to" model of cultural interaction.<sup>16</sup> He describes this as follows:

the primary strategy of engagement is adaptation for the purpose of making authentic connections to the people and events of the contemporary world. Thus, there is no real distinctive perspective or practice among old fashioned liberals or within the emerging church beyond maintaining high ethical standards of behavior.<sup>17</sup>

Hunter is critical of relevance models of cultural engagement. He identifies this view with liberal or emerging churches, and it also resonates with one historical view on the role of Catholic educational institutions in culture. In this perspective, a major goal of Catholic educational institutions should be to strive to match the offering of other universities and not to focus relentlessly on maintaining a unique character.<sup>18</sup> Gleason, however, concludes his study of the history of Catholic higher education in the United States with the cautious observation that the major challenge facing Catholic academics today is the need to provide a rationale for their distinctiveness.<sup>19</sup> Catholic institutions have, by and large, succeeded in their aspirations to be on an academic par with comparable secular institutions, a program first set forth by

---

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>18</sup> John Tracey Ellis, "American Catholics and the Intellectual Life," *Thought*, 1955, 30, 351-388. Writing in the 1950s, Ellis drew special attention to the need for Catholic universities and colleges to raise their academic standards to a par with the major secular institutions. In this era, the tenuousness of a distinct identity for Catholic universities was not widely acknowledged.

<sup>19</sup> Gleason, *Contending with Modernity*, 322.

Ellis.<sup>20</sup> Now, higher educational institutions need to strive for strong interaction in terms of level of presence and of using this presence to construct a dialogue between students and the broad vision of Catholicism. The key motivation is to make the educational institution relevant to the lives of those connected with the institution.

One difficulty here is that relevance models neglect the dynamic interplay between subcultures or individual social networks. Catholic colleges that seek relevance are doing so on the contentious assumption that they are offering something to students that cannot be found at other educational institutions. In a “relevance to” model, the necessity (and difficulty) of the educational institution sustaining a viable alternative institutional subculture is not recognized. This is an especially acute problem for many Catholic colleges and universities that operate in a world where dominant truth claims and moral obligations undermine those of the religious community. Dobbelaere and Jagodzinski provide one example of this disparity when they note the rise in contemporary culture of occidental rationality.<sup>21</sup> This results in a disenchantment with the world and a subsequent rise in beliefs that see the world as predictable and controllable.<sup>22</sup> This runs counter to what Stark and Finke described as the fundamental function of religion, which is to put individuals not only in touch with the Divine but also in a position where they can exchange with God.<sup>23</sup> If religiously-affiliated institutions do not take steps to promote their uniquely transcendent world-views, these will not be sustained by the general culture. To maintain an alternate identity that is not completely outside the cultural frame of reference, religious institutions cannot adopt a passive stance or refuse to recognize that the status quo works against the cultivation of a mentality that is sympathetic or at least open to religious claims. Cook comments on this in terms of the need for Catholic educators to

---

<sup>20</sup> Ellis, “American Catholics.”

<sup>21</sup> Dobbelaere and Jagodzinski, “Religious Cognitions and Beliefs,” 197-217.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity,” in *A Catholic Modernity: Charles Taylor’s Marianist Award Lecture*, ed. James Heft (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 125. Taylor would describe this as a denial of transcendence.

<sup>23</sup> Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 91. Dulles proposed a similar critique of certain contemporary theological approaches that sought to downplay the supernatural dimension and describe belief in functional terms; Avery Dulles, “Secular Theology and the Rejection of the Supernatural: Reflections on Recent Trends,” *Theological Studies*, 1977, 38, 39-56. See also Kasper’s comments on the loss of a sense of sacred mystery in catechetical work: Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 65.

acknowledge intentionality as a key to effective leadership.<sup>24</sup> Intentionality here recognizes that younger people today are not overly hostile to religion but religious institutions must embody their own religious claims in order for them to have any decisive influence.<sup>25</sup> Smith and Denton make a similar point in their analysis of contemporary youth in American culture. They conclude that a religious mentality, broadly speaking, is not extinct among American teenagers and young adults. What has altered, however, is the rise of a new spirituality that has replaced traditional Christian categories and does not recognize classic Christian concepts such as redemption, salvation, and sacrifice. Without intentional and ongoing planning, this new spirituality is unlikely to be challenged even within institutions that claim religious affiliation. Smith and Denton noted, in particular, the religious laxity of American Catholic teenagers. They offered a variety of explanations for this, but do not indicate that this community faces significant challenges and needs to, as a matter of urgency, address the religious salience of its educational institutions.<sup>26</sup> They concluded:

Compared both to official Church norms of faithfulness and to other types of Christian teens in the United States, contemporary U.S. Catholic teens are faring rather badly. On most measures of religious faith, belief, experience, and practice, Catholic teens as a whole show up as fairly weak.<sup>27</sup>

The emphasis in a “relevance to” model is on making connections with the dominant truth claims and accepted moral obligations already in place. If the dominant vision of educational institutions is too closely aligned, however, then what is being offered is not transformative but rather serves to provide further support to the established societal narrative. There are numerous examples of how this is played out, but to select one, consider the role of course offerings in a Catholic educational institution committed to a “relevance to” model. What courses best meet the demands of the student body? This may have very little overlap with courses that are reflective of seminal Catholic ideas. In this situation, what does the institution do? Does it have a rationale to offer courses which it sees as important within a Catholic educational vision

---

<sup>24</sup> Timothy Cook, *Architects of Catholic Culture: Designing and Building Catholic Culture in Schools* (Washington, DC: National Catholic Education Association, 2002).

<sup>25</sup> Provost, “The Sides of Catholic Identity.”

<sup>26</sup> Christian Smith and Melinda Lindquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2005), 193-217.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

even though they may lack obvious relevance? If it does not, then the Catholic college is becoming another buttress for what Hunter would see as the core cultural belief system.<sup>28</sup>

### Faithful Presence

Hunter proposes that the best model for cultural engagement for Christians is one of “faithful presence.” He situates this understanding within a deeply theological framework, one which privileges the notion of the Incarnation as the decisive moment of human history. The Incarnation is the end point in a model of revelation where God is continuously present in the lives of the people of Israel. At the heart of the theology of “faithful presence” are authenticity and trustworthiness, both in the proclamation of the Christian story and in how this is lived out.<sup>29</sup> The absence of these two qualities is at the heart of the fragmentation of modern culture, best characterized by a weakening of many of the relational links that proved common cause in the recent past. In practical terms authenticity and trustworthiness are reflected in what people and institutions say and what they do. The first task of the Christian church is to, “attend to the people and places that they experience directly.”<sup>30</sup> For Catholic colleges and universities, this would, in the first instance, free them from the perception that they must be able to contour themselves to meet an ever-widening diversity of educational needs. Many religious institutions are not in a vigorous state, and a judicious concentration of resources, talent, and revenue is an appropriate response to a new situation. What, then, are some of the distinguishing features of a college that sits within a “faithful presence” philosophy? In his elaboration on “faithful presence,” Hunter addresses Christian churches directly, arguing

It is the church’s task of teaching, admonishing, and encouraging believers over the course of their lives in order to present them “as complete in Christ,

---

<sup>28</sup> Avery Dulles, *The Resilient Church: The Necessity and Limits of Adaptation* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977). Here Dulles proposes a similar notion when he argues that the Church should be adaptive, that is, responsive to the cultural context in which it is situated but that this, on occasion, calls for the proclamation of a distinctive message that may challenge conventional norms. See also Peter Collins, *A Twentieth-Century Collision: American Intellectual Culture and Pope John Paul II’s Idea of a University* (New York: University Press of America, 2010).

<sup>29</sup> Hunter, *To Change the World*, 252.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

fit for any calling.” At the foundation of this task, of course, are the fundamental preparations of the catechesis—instruction into central truths of Christian belief, the development of the spiritual disciplines, and the observance of the basic sacraments.<sup>31</sup>

Hunter speaks here of catechesis in relation to the work of churches. In extending the concept of faithful presence to colleges, a legitimate development is to expand the notion of catechesis to one of formation. Catechesis, strictly understood, is a concept that relates to the growth of faith in a person who is already a believer.<sup>32</sup> In terms of a broader educational goal, formation could cover both catechesis for those who are already believers as well as a more general development for those who had not yet made this commitment. For colleges and universities, this means cultivating a firm sense of their identity as places of formation where those involved in the subculture, but especially students, are in the process of developing intellectual, moral, and religious positions. In this context, the college or university must have clear convictions about what they offer in this formation process. For a Catholic educational institution, a key part of this identity is establishing both a connection with the past and an engagement with the culture in which it finds itself. The institutional community (and especially its leadership) is, in effect, asking itself what it can authentically offer in a particular cultural context.<sup>33</sup> This dual function of introspection and outreach has been an intense area of interest for the wider Church in the postconciliar era and has greatly affected the role and perceived identity of Catholic colleges and universities. To offer what Dulles calls a contrast society, Catholic educational institutions must have some consistent stance on how they offer an alternative vision.<sup>34</sup>

### Catholic Colleges and Faithful Presence

To provide a model of faithful presence, Catholic colleges and universities must attend to that which they can offer the wider culture that

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>32</sup> Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (Sydney: St. Paul Publications, 1988).

<sup>33</sup> Melanie Morey and Dennis H. Holtschneider, “Leadership and the Age of the Laity: Emerging Patterns in Catholic Higher Education,” in *Lay Leaders in Catholic Higher Education*, ed. Anthony J. Cernera (Fairfield, Conn.: Sacred Heart University Press, 2005).

<sup>34</sup> Avery Dulles, “Imaging the Church for the 1980’s,” *Thought* 56 (1981): 121-138. Dulles discusses this idea in particular on page 129.

springs from the heart of the religious tradition and which cannot be obtained, in the same quality, elsewhere.<sup>35</sup> What should be offered, following Hunter, is something which is absent from the prevailing culture, but not so distant as to be unrecognizable. In keeping with this premise, I offer three examples of how faithful presence can be modeled in Catholic colleges and universities.

First, Catholic colleges and universities need an emphasis in curriculum planning and in pastoral outreach focused on the primacy of the person and on human formation. Both of these ideas are encapsulated in *Ex corde Ecclesiae*:

A Catholic University purses its objective through its formation of an authentic human community animated by the spirit of Christ. The source of its unity springs from a common dedication to the truth, a common vision of the dignity of the human person...<sup>36</sup>

A Catholic college or university based on an understanding of “faithful presence” could seek to engage the wider culture by placing, in its programs and policies, a very high premium on the importance of authentic human formation. This assumes a need for some educational institutions to offer an alternative to the pervasive and puerile sexualization of wider society. Many have typified this as “hook up culture,” which Glenn and Marquardt define in terms of widespread and transient sexual activity. Here, anything “ranging from kissing to having sex...takes place outside the context of commitment.”<sup>37</sup> Freitas, in her study of American college campuses, notes that the objectification of sexuality is a very common phenomenon across campuses and that Catholic colleges do not appear any different from secular institutions in this regard. She comments that colleges are places where common assumptions need to be challenged:

An institution can have all the prestige in the world, offer the best education and an impressive swath of majors, and even have a great basketball team—but what if this same place [that] harbors a peer ethic that leads students to

---

<sup>35</sup> Timothy Scully, “What is Catholic about a Catholic University?” in *The Challenge and Promise of a Catholic University*, ed. Theodore M. Hesburgh (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

<sup>36</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, 21.

<sup>37</sup> Normal Glenn and Elizabeth Marquardt, *Hooking Up, Hanging Out, and Hoping for Mr. Right: College Women on Dating and Mating Today* (New York: Institute for American Values 2001), 13. See also Laura Steep, *Unhooked: How Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love, and Lose at Both* (New York: Riverhead, 2007).

believe that finding a boyfriend or a girlfriend at college is like “playing the lottery”...you hook up with 99 people before you hit the jackpot and find someone who will stick around.<sup>38</sup>

To address this concern using a “faithful presence” approach, Catholic colleges and universities could offer an alternative to the “hook up” culture and by so doing offer a powerful illustration of the practical dimension of faithful presence.

In adopting an approach that springs from a Catholic understanding of sexuality and the human person, the possibility of cultural change, as outlined by Hunter, can be seen. The Catholic college is responding to a conventional need within the wider society, namely, the desire of younger people to build meaningful relationships with others.<sup>39</sup> This is not an objective too far removed from normative cultural positions. What is being offered, however, is distinguishable from the mainstream. It is a vision of formation that sees the human person as having inherent and unalienable dignity. A manifestation of this approach is seeing sexuality as an integral part of the human person, one which must be acknowledged and treated with respect, especially in the transitional years into mature adulthood.<sup>40</sup> By embodying and proclaiming this understanding, the Catholic college is staking a claim that there will be some individuals, both Catholic and non-Catholic, who will be attracted to this vision. These individuals are not satisfied with the notion of formation that is embedded in “hook-up” culture and elsewhere. The interaction between the college and the wider culture needs to be emphasized conceptually in the “faithful presence” model. Catholic educational institutions need to be responsive by offering a genuine alternative that is germane to the religious tradition. Critically, this may not be seen to be generally relevant to many in the wider culture. It does, nonetheless, have some appeal and is offered with a spirit of authenticity.

A second example of how “faithful presence” could be manifested in Catholic colleges and universities in the United States arises from much

---

<sup>38</sup> Donna Freitas, *Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America's College Campuses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 230-231.

<sup>39</sup> Mark Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit: Sex and Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>40</sup> Amy Adamczyk and Jacob Felson, “Friends’ Religiosity and First Sex,” *Social Science Research* 35 (2006): 924-947.

recent research on the lives of emerging adults,<sup>41</sup> the population cohort between senior high school age and early adulthood (roughly ages 18-29). In the United States, most emerging adults see religion as an effective and positive means by which basic moral principles are acquired. Beyond this, religion has an increasingly minor role to play. Smith and Snell describe many emerging adults as having the view that they have “graduated” from religion in the sense that they have gained from it all that they need and have now moved on.<sup>42</sup>

Along with the loosening of religious bonds comes a worldview that is relativistic and shaped by a shallow and confused moral reasoning.<sup>43</sup> For Smith and his colleagues, the picture of young adults in transition is a sobering one, a sentiment captured well in the subtitle of their book, “the dark side of emerging adulthood.” For those who seek a way out of the “dark side,” what can the Catholic college or university offer that is at once pertinent to the life experience of the student and also germane to the religious tradition? As Pope Benedict XVI has elaborated on a number of occasions, the Church and, by implication, Catholic colleges and universities, must challenge the moral relativism of the age by offering a unified vision that encourages individuals to ask profound questions of themselves and their actions.<sup>44</sup> The general challenge for Catholic colleges and universities is to offer something to those who, in Hunter’s terms, are in a marketplace of options and are interested in what is being offered. However, a Catholic college or university that engages with students on the basis of “faithful presence” has the possibility of impacting wider culture through the distinctive quality of the formation it offers.

The third example of how “faithful presence” can be realized in Catholic colleges and universities in the United States is a more cogent articulation of how the institution appropriates the past and preserves collective memories. This is especially important in the current cultural

---

<sup>41</sup> Timothy Clydesdale, *The First Year Out: Understanding American Teens after High School* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>42</sup> Christian Smith with Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 286-287.

<sup>43</sup> Christian Smith, et al, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>44</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, “Relativism: The Central Problem for Faith Today,” *Origins* 26 (October 31, 1996): 310-317.

context that can be typified as a time of considerable tumult.<sup>45</sup> For Catholic universities and colleges, a sense of stability and continuity could provide another significant counterpoint to the prevailing culture.<sup>46</sup> As Dulles pointed out, for theologians such as Benedict XVI, the only way forward is for the Church, and, by implication, Catholic educational institutions, to stress a continuity thesis.<sup>47</sup> This recognizes that for any major world religion, the past must not be seen as a burden but rather as a foundation that gives direction to the future. As Wuthnow articulates: “The Church must ... be backward looking; it has a special mission to preserve the past, to carry on a tradition.”<sup>48</sup> Catholic colleges and universities could well develop, as part of their distinctive identity, a sense that they value reflection and a certain degree of introspection as part of the educational experience that they are offering. This is a recognition of current Catholic educational institutions as heavily dependent on the work and insights of previous generations, not a maudlin fascination with the past. Such awareness does not preclude a capacity to engage with the best and most cutting edge research but is cognizant that these new insights can sit favorably with acquired intellectual capital. Hunter is critical of an approach that he describes as a “defensive against” mentality. In this approach, the emphasis is on an almost irreconcilable and enduring conflict necessitating the creation of tight, controlled enclaves.<sup>49</sup> This is not in keeping with what is being proposed here.<sup>50</sup> Here, a “faithful presence” model incorporates a more active and interventionist approach to historical memory and seeks not just to acknowledge the past, but also to use the past to influence and

---

<sup>45</sup> William V. D’Antonio, et al, *American Catholics: Gender, Generation and Commitment* (New York: Alta Mira Press, 2001).

<sup>46</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, “Address of his Holiness Benedict XVI to the Roman Curia Offering Them his Christmas Greetings,” [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf\\_ben\\_xvi\\_spe\\_20051222\\_roman-curia\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051222_roman-curia_en.html). Here Pope Benedict XVI expands on this idea by contrasting discontinuity with reform and continuity.

<sup>47</sup> Avery Dulles, “Pope Benedict XVI: Interpreter of Vatican II,” in *Church and Society: The Laurence J. McGinley Lectures, 1988-2007* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 468-484, esp. 471.

<sup>48</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *Christianity in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 48.

<sup>49</sup> Hunter, *To Change the World*, 214-215. Hunter primarily identifies this approach with fundamentalists and mainstream Evangelicals but sees it as a strategy being re-adopted in recent decades by conservative Catholics.

<sup>50</sup> Jason Byassee, “Being Benedict; The Pope’s First Year,” *Christian Century* (April 18, 2006): 2-8.

shape the wider culture while also helping to define the institutional subculture.

## Conclusion

The “faithful presence” model of Catholic education in secular cultures brings with it significant demands. These are particularly acute at a time when many institutions lack internal strength due to contagion by a variety of secular influences. In the future, more colleges and universities with historical Catholic association may need to closely examine their identity, especially if they are unable to point to how they are fulfilling a mandate to be a faithful presence within the wider culture.<sup>51</sup> The “faithful presence” model changes Catholic colleges’ and universities’ focus away from a concentration on cultural integration, as typified by “relevance to” models, and toward a new orientation. This would emphasize an engagement with culture, but one that arises out of a sense of what the college has to offer that is both transformative and germane to the tradition.

A key question for further discussion is what “faithful presence” looks like on a practical level. One illustrative example that was discussed in this paper was an emphasis on human formation. How this is developed in the structure, recruitment, and curriculum of Catholic colleges and universities needs further elaboration. In addition, other manifestations of “faithful presence” need to be considered. These should be both within general cultural norms but not too closely aligned, as befits Hunter’s model of cultural change. One area that appears to be particularly fruitful for future development is embodying the vision of a preferential option for the poor.

---

<sup>51</sup> D. Paul Sullies, “The Difference Catholic Makes: Catholic Faculty and Catholic Identity,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43 (1) (2004): 100. See also Michael Miller, *Terrence Kelley Vatican Lecture at Notre Dame University*, <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2005/11/03/catholic>.