

Catholic colleges urged to partner with poor countries

WASHINGTON - One of the Vatican's top education officials Feb. 4 urged U.S. Catholic college and university presidents to examine how they can provide "creative and effective support" to Catholic academic institutions in the developing world that are struggling with inadequate resources.

"The inequality in resources available to Catholic higher education institutions worldwide is a matter of grave concern," said Archbishop J. Michael Miller, secretary of the Vatican's Congregation for Catholic Education.

The archbishop gave the keynote address at the Feb. 3-5 annual meeting of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities in Washington. More than 200 presidents and other top officials of the nation's Catholic institutions of higher learning attended.

Canadian-born Archbishop Miller, a Basilian priest who was president of St. Thomas University in Houston before he was called into Vatican service, cited "globalization, information technology and the commodification of education" as three megatrends that are affecting Catholic higher education around the world.

"In itself globalization is neither good nor bad," he said, but as it transforms economic systems, bringing new prosperity to many, it also pushes many others off to the margins. "Indeed, the gap between the world's wealthiest and poorest nations is widening," he added.

"Also of concern to the Holy See is a cultural globalization which is drawing all societies into a worldwide consumer culture significantly influenced by secularism and just plain old-fashioned materialism," he said. "In many places this cultural homogeneity is leading to the erosion of traditional family and social values which have sustained peoples and societies for centuries. It is particularly the destructive cultural and social effects of globalization that preoccupy the Vatican."

He said Catholic universities can have "an indispensable role in the critical analysis

of globalization,” including critical understanding of its impact on the traditional understanding of higher education’s roles of teaching, research and service.

Among questions Catholic scholars should be asking, he said, are: “What is the image of the human person that globalization proposes and even imposes? What kind of culture does it favor? Does it leave room for the experience of faith and the interior life?”

Archbishop Miller said the Holy See is also concerned about “the opening of a new digital divide between tertiary education institutions in the developed and developing countries.”

“The developments in communication technology are leading to the emergence of an information-based economy on a worldwide scale,” he said. “This, in turn, has an enormous influence on the curricula offered by centers of higher learning ... but it also reinforces existing inequalities among Catholic institutions of higher learning. The universities that are reaping the lion’s share of the benefits of an information-based economy are those in the developed countries.”

Like globalization, advancing technology “is widening the gap between ‘have’ and ‘have-not’ academic institutions,” he said.

Explaining the “commodification” of education, Archbishop Miller said the Vatican is concerned about “the decreasing attention to students – to the integral human development of students. Many tertiary-level institutions are abandoning the goal of forming the whole person as part of their mission.”

“A market-dominated approach to learning emphasizes technical and professional training over the formation of the whole person, replacing the dispassionate search for truth with the cult of competency. ... As a result, learning skills and competencies for the marketplace is replacing the role of a general education curriculum, which has traditionally enshrined a humanistic thrust,” he said. “Catholic education is everywhere suffering from this onslaught.”

Addressing the role of Catholic higher education in confronting those challenges, Archbishop Miller said, “Tertiary education which builds on the Catholic tradition

can resist the imperialistic logic of the market. It offers a space for critical thought and a research agenda based on humanity's authentic needs. ... Catholic universities ought to stress anew - or even for the first time in many parts of the world - the essential place of the humanities in tertiary education."

In the face of the growing specialization and fragmentation of knowledge, he said Catholic institutions should put "a renewed emphasis on collaboration among the disciplines. ... Cooperation and dialogue among specialists in different fields are a mark of genuine catholicity."

The challenges of globalization and the widening gap in information technology show a need for "a new culture of educational solidarity among Catholic institutions," Archbishop Miller said. "The asymmetry between 'haves' and 'have-nots' in Catholic higher education worldwide calls for radically increased cooperation."

"The Holy See is asking Catholic institutions in the developed world to rethink their efforts to date, and to work aggressively to rectify this imbalance with a decisive commitment to academic solidarity," he said.

He suggested U.S. institutions partner in joint research projects with institutions that lack resources.

"The challenge is to put in place at every level effective partnerships based on reciprocity, and not on lopsided relationships that eventually create resentment," he said. "It is a mutual exchange of gifts."