

# **U.S. bishops, college presidents to discuss campuses' Catholic identity**

WASHINGTON - In dioceses across the country this year, U.S. bishops and Catholic college and university presidents plan to discuss the specifics of how to best promote Catholic mission and identity on college campuses.

The bishops and college leaders will be giving a 10-year review of "The Application of 'Ex Corde Ecclesiae' for the United States" a document that was approved by the U.S. bishops in 1999 and then approved a year later by the Vatican. The document officially went into effect in 2001. It outlines how U.S. Catholic colleges and universities should implement the Vatican document on Catholic higher education "Ex Corde Ecclesiae" ("From the Heart of the Church").

"Ex Corde Ecclesiae" is an apostolic constitution issued in 1990 by Pope John Paul II that outlines the identity and mission of Catholic colleges and provides universal norms to ensure colleges maintain these standards. The document was issued after more than a decade of research involving Vatican departments and Catholic educators around the world. It specifically defines the "mandatum," or church authorization, granted by the local bishop to teach theology.

The plan for upcoming local dialogues to review the application of "Ex Corde" at U.S. Catholic colleges and universities was announced Jan. 20 by Los Angeles Bishop Thomas J. Curry, chairman of the bishops' Committee on Catholic Education.

In a statement, the bishop said he hoped the review will help the bishops "appreciate the positive developments and remaining challenges in the collaborative efforts of bishops and presidents to ensure the implementation of Ex Corde Ecclesiae in the United States."

After these dialogues occur, bishops will share their reflections with one another at regional meetings during their fall 2011 general assembly in Baltimore. These presentations will then be compiled and presented to the president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, New York Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan.

Bishop Curry said the upcoming discussions between bishops and Catholic college and university presidents should provide “an important means to foster a mutually beneficial relationship.”

He added that the “collaboration is essential to the spirit of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, which is why a working group of bishops and university presidents created the review process together.”

Vincentian Father Dennis Holtschneider, president of DePaul University in Chicago and chairman of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, said he was pleased that the bishops “invited university presidents to help shape the instrument that will guide these conversations.” He noted that the church and society at large are “served well when the leadership of both the church and higher education institutions work closely together.”

This notion of university and church leaders working together is something Pope John Paul II hoped would come about as colleges implemented “*Ex Corde*.”

In a 1987 address to U.S. Catholic education leaders, he said the then-upcoming document calls for “close personal and pastoral relationships” between university and church authorities “characterized by mutual trust, close and consistent cooperation and continuing dialogue.”

Pope John Paul’s U.S. meeting with Catholic educators at Xavier University in New Orleans took place as Catholic higher education officials around the world debated the possible effects of the much-anticipated apostolic constitution on Catholic higher education.

The pope just briefly addressed one key point in the document that focused on giving greater administrative control of Catholic universities to church hierarchy. He told the group of more than 1,000 Catholic higher education leaders that bishops must be participants in Catholic colleges and universities and that the work of theologians has to be tested by the church’s teaching authority.

In 2008, when Pope Benedict XVI visited the United States, he met with more than 400 Catholic college presidents and diocesan education representatives at The

Catholic University of America in Washington.

He urged them not to simply transmit knowledge to their students but to bring them to a deeper understanding of faith “which in turn nurtures the soul of a nation.”

Before the address, many were speculating that the pope might have harsh words of reprimand for college leaders for not doing enough to promote their Catholic identity, but instead he spoke warmly to the group, calling them “bearers of wisdom” and telling them of his “profound gratitude” for their “selfless contributions” and dedication.

In one specific reference to Catholic college presidents, near the end of his address, he said he wished to “reaffirm the great value of academic freedom.” He also noted that any appeals to academic freedom “to justify positions that contradict the faith and teaching of the church would obstruct or even betray the university’s identity and mission.”

Pope Benedict highlighted the importance of Catholic identity – a key issue for Catholic colleges, schools and religious education programs – by noting what it is not.

“Catholic identity is not simply a question of the number of Catholic students,” he said. It also is not “dependent upon statistics” nor can it be “equated simply with orthodoxy of course content.”

He stressed that the Catholic identity of a school or religious education program “demands and inspires much more: namely that each and every aspect of your learning communities reverberates within the ecclesial life of faith.”

The pope linked the current “crisis of truth” to a “crisis of faith” and said that educators must do more than simply “engage the intellect of our young” but should instead help today’s youths to fully live their faith.

One way Catholic colleges and universities have worked to develop and strengthen their Catholic identity is through mission identity offices currently in place on more than half of U.S. Catholic colleges.