

Vatican official challenges colleges to be ‘unambiguously Catholic’

PLYMOUTH TOWNSHIP, Mich. – You can’t have a college or university that “happens to be” Catholic; the institution’s Catholic identity ought to unmistakably permeate every discipline, and its graduates ought to be willing to stand up for the church.

This was part of the message delivered by Cardinal Francis Arinze, who spoke at a fundraising dinner April 16 for the SS. Peter & Paul Educational Foundation. The Nigerian cardinal is the head of the Vatican’s Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments and former president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

During his speech at the Inn at St. John’s banquet center in Plymouth Township, he outlined what the Catholic faith community ought to expect of their institutions of higher learning.

“Not only should it be a community of scholars and students, representing different branches of human knowledge,” Cardinal Arinze told the gathering of about 200 people. “But at the same time it should be an academic institution in which Catholicism is vitally present and operative.”

The cardinal said a Catholic college or university should explain its Christian mission in a mission statement, and adhere to it by hiring Catholic educators who are experienced in living and teaching the faith as well as their respective disciplines.

“If a high number of its intellectual leaders are, indeed, not Catholic – how can they be expected to live and share what they do not have?” the cardinal asked. “It is particularly important that the Catholic intellectual leaders not just happen to be Catholic, but that they be scholars who have matured in their studies by years of studies in a university that is already known to be unambiguously Catholic.”

Cardinal Arinze spoke in the Detroit area the day before Pope Benedict XVI met with U.S. Catholic educators in Washington. In that address, the pope said he wished to

“reaffirm the great value of academic freedom” but said 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.”

In his talk, Cardinal Arinze spoke philosophically about the confluence of faith and reason, and how natural revelation leads to a greater understanding of faith. All truth comes from the Holy Spirit, he said, citing St. Thomas Aquinas – so naturally all truth will lead back to God.

To acknowledge the connections between academic truths and divine reality, he added, a Catholic institution requires a higher level of education than its secular counterparts.

“A Catholic university demands more – not less – intelligence than another university which has no special link with the Catholic faith,” he said.

Cardinal Arinze spoke of students and alumni of such universities as having to be “dynamic” people who embrace their faith and are able to defend it.

“They do not say, ‘I am Catholic, but ...,’” he said, to applause. “They should rather say, ‘I am Catholic, and therefore’ The one that says ‘I am a Catholic, but’ is really saying ‘I am Mr. Dissenter. I am Mr. Disagree. I am Mr. Problem Child of the Church’ ... and sometimes, Rev. Problem Child,” he added, to laughs from the gathering.

The SS. Peter & Paul Educational Foundation is trying to raise money to begin a Catholic college in Lake Orion. While they’ve found a location – the Scripps Mansion, which formerly housed the Guest House Retreat Center for priests and religious – they still need to raise about \$3 million for the college.