



Mission Possible: A Project to Help Hire Catholic Faculty

Jon Christman, Staff Writer (04-20-06)

For more than two decades at Notre Dame there has been a continual drop in the percentage of Catholic faculty; but there has been no concerted, systematic effort to stave such a decline. However, two new initiatives which are both in their infancy – 1) the formation of a database of first-rate Catholic scholars and advanced doctoral students, and 2) seminars for undergraduates seriously interested in doctoral studies – are hoping to lay foundations that will contribute to the ultimate protection and affirmation of the University's distinctive Catholic mission.

"To build a great Catholic university you do need to have a certain percentage of Catholics," said Mark Roche, Dean of the College of Arts & Letters. "The way to do that for the long term is to find persons who are interested in carrying out the Catholic mission."

When only 43% of new faculty hires in the College of Arts & Letters were Catholic last year, Dean Roche saw a potential looming crisis for the University's ability to fulfill its specifically Catholic mission. Because that College is responsible for more than half of new faculty hires at the University every year, Dean Roche labeled mission hiring as the "most pressing challenge at present" in his 2005 Deans Report. He approached Father Robert Sullivan, Associate Professor of History and Director of the Erasmus Institute, in June 2005 to commence a pilot project that identifies Catholics within the various departments at leading national institutions and compiles the information into a comprehensive database that will aid Notre Dame Arts and

Letters Departments in their searches for new faculty.

Fr. Sullivan has been aided in the compilation of this database by a group of researchers, including two 2005 Notre Dame graduates last summer, three undergraduates on work-study during the current school year, and one full-time assistant, who peruse public sources, primarily on the Internet, as well as some printed sources, to identify Catholics. Most of the projects gathering efforts are directed towards assistant and associate professors, since they are much more likely than established, full professors to consider a move to Notre Dame.

Dan Cheely, a graduate of Princeton University, who was hired full-time to work on this project, has spent weeks and months compiling the database, which beyond providing basic information, includes a Catholic ranking from definite to possible, or even special categories for non-Catholics who either do work in Catholic scholarship or would foster the Catholic mission. Cheely admits the frustration and tedious nature of the work.

"I'll go through a full departmental faculty page, sometimes forty professors, and sadly, maybe turn up two possible Catholics, or possible mission hires," Cheely said.

Furthermore, the project has yielded an apparent difficulty in simply finding Catholics within some disciplines. There are some fields which simply are more secularized, thus presenting a challenge

to Notre Dame which seeks the Catholic mission in all areas of scholarship. For example, the list of names for history is currently well over 100, whereas psychology has significantly fewer names, and the Catholicism of many on the list is less definite.

"We are looking for all kinds of people who will be mission supportive. Its a great boon if they are Roman Catholics, and serious Roman Catholics, but its not exclusively that," Fr. Sullivan said. "We do in fact come up with names regularly of people that would be quite suitable as mission hires, but we are bound by the fact that the University itself lacks at the moment any kind of sophisticated definition of what constitutes a mission hire."

At present, some persons in the University restrict the definition of mission hire to those who can check a box marked Catholic.

Dean Roche shared concerns with this current metric used by some in determining whether a person will contribute to the Catholic mission: "Right now, we track Catholics according to a self-reporting questionnaire and indicate whether theyre Catholic or not. There are some persons who will fill out the form as Catholic and we have no evidence from the interview that they combine their scholarship and their religious identity in deeply involved ways, so that we are surprised that they checked the box."

In an October address to faculty, Fr. Jenkins, as a new President, said the University must seek a faculty "which has a preponderance of Catholics." Exactly how many faculty comprise a preponderance differs according to whom one talks with, but most persons concerned about the Universitys mission agree that a majority of box-checking Catholics is the minimum level that the University must not fall below. Current statistics, however, show a trend to do just that. In the 1970s, the percentage of Catholic faculty hovered at 85%, according to Fr. Jenkins in his speech; by the mid-1980s, the number had fallen to 64%; by the mid 1990s, the number was 57%, and in 2005 the number was just below 52% for full-time instructional faculty, according to the 2005

University of Notre Dame Fact Book produced by the Office of Institutional Research. The purely objective number is not the only problem Notre Dame faces in drawing Catholic scholars, as well as non-Catholic, mission supportive academics.

Fr. Sullivan expressed the inherent difficulty in the binary between Catholics and non-Catholics as it relates to the broader mission. "Now that [preponderance] is a slippery term," Fr. Sullivan said. "Its not an exact metric. The complication of this is you end up with a very unrealistic binary between people who can check a box reading Catholic and people that cannot check that box. The consequences of that binary is that you might have people who consider themselves Catholic in some sense but have no deep investment in the universitys mission, considered as mission hires. On the other hand, you can have very distinguished people who, though not Catholic, are deeply invested in and useful to the Universitys mission, but who are not considered mission hires." Incoming historian, Mark Noll, from Wheaton College, is a prime example of a hire of the latter sort. Professor Noll is an eminent voice in American religious history and has entertained offers from eminent secular universities (all of which were turned down), but as an evangelical Protestant, does not technically count as a mission hire.

But similar to Professor Noll, many of Notre Dames most distinguished hires in the last decade, according to Dean Roche, came to Notre Dame specifically because of the Catholic mission.

"Why did they come to ND? Why did they leave Harvard or Stanford? I didnt ask whether they were Catholic," Dean Roche said. "I said, why did they come? The most dominant factor was the Catholic identity. I think it can be a great recruiting tool."

Some posit concerns that such a commitment to mission hiring will adversely affect our current ranking of 18th in national universities according to U.S. News & World Report. Dean Roche finds these concerns misguided.

"Our Catholic identity is not only a tremendous intrinsic value. Its also our enduring competitive advantage. We can hire above our level because of our Catholic identity," Dean Roche said. "We need to find those people. Well never sacrifice quality to hire Catholics. What we might do is have to search again."

Already, there have been faculty drawn from the database list that have applied and been finalists for job openings. According to Dean Roche, some from the database will even be joining the faculty in the fall, revealing the early success of the project. But finding mission oriented hires, and specifically Catholic ones, is not the only initiative that has begun to counteract the hiring dilemma.

"We cant just solve it by finding them in one year. We have to in some ways grow them," Dean Roche said. "There is a long tradition, which has been slowly changing, of Catholics not aggressively seeking graduate study."

At Notre Dame, approximately only 6% of undergraduates pursue careers in academia. Although this number has risen in the past decade, it is merely half of the average at other top-20 institutions. To carry the Catholic mission in the future, Dean Roche, Father Sullivan, and others realized that Notre Dame needed to be pro-active in building potential mission hires.

Therefore, in an attempt to foster graduate study as a Catholic vocation, Fr. Sullivan, through the Erasmus Institute and with the help of other Notre Dame faculty, formulated two, two-week summer seminars for undergraduates seriously considering careers in academia. This will be the first official installment of any program of this kind at the University, but it is yet another long-term solution to the mission hiring problem at Notre Dame, for it exposes interested students to the academy who will be potential Notre Dame graduate students, or years down the road, perhaps even members of the faculty. The twenty-four rising juniors and seniors who are participating hail from not only Our Ladys University. They will arrive in June from other leading Catholic institutions and prominent

national institutions as well.

"I think any university with a particular religious affiliation ought to have something like this," said Brad Gregory, an Associate Professor of History, who will be running a seminar entitled "Humanities and Social Sciences." "Humanities and social sciences are dealing in one way or another with human convictions, actions, ideas, institutions. Christianity deals with all these things as well," said Prof. Gregory, who will be joined throughout the program by colleagues serving as guest presenters in their respective fields, including political science, economics, literature, law, philosophy, anthropology, and psychology.

"My seminar will provide exposure to the relationship between specialized research assumptions and presuppositions in a range of different humanities and social scientific disciplines in relationship to what one presumes are big human questions that people actually care about," said Prof. Gregory. "Those questions somehow seem to be lost when you pick-up a specialized journal in a discipline like sociology, colonial American history or analytical philosophy because its hard to find in the minutiae where the big, motivating questions and issues are."

The secularization of knowledge, as well as its specialization has struck a chord with many of the applicants for Prof. Gregorys seminar. One student from an Ivy League institution wrote in a personal statement, "Initially, the development of my academic and religious lives complemented one another, allowing me to pass from one to the other with greater insight. But specialization has diminished this dialogue over the course of four years...[Unfortunately,] religions place is in the realm of extra-curricular activities; knowledge and reason are the creative forces at [my university]."

Joseph Wawrykow, Associate Professor of Theology, will be running the other concurrent seminar, entitled "Catholic Intellectual Traditions" which will include readings of Augustine, Aquinas and Bonaventure, as well as Alasdair MacIntyre and John Paul II, and hopes to delve deeply into the necessary relation between Catholic faith and

intellectual work for an aspiring Catholic academic.

“This is a way for them to be more knowledgeable about the Catholic faith, to learn something about the doing of theology, and become more reflective as theyre about to get into the real nitty-gritty of an academic going into their training,” Prof. Wawrykow said.

The student response for these seminars has at once been overwhelming and exciting, as the program received far more applications than they

could accept, making competition for the slots quite stiff. The Erasmus Institute already has funding to do the program in the summer of 2007, and if possible, Fr. Sullivan and others would like to extend this initiative to include similar seminars (although at a higher intellectual level) for upper-level graduate students, as well as assistant professors at major universities, as a way of drawing these people within the Notre Dame environment.

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