

Grateful Response to Thoughtful Critiques

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I find few things more encouraging than thoughtful academics commenting on, questioning, criticizing, and (it's true) complimenting something I have written. It is a sacred service we offer to each other in the disciplined search for truth. At the same time, it is challenging to respond to just one careful scholarly critique, let alone five.

Let me begin with the comments made by Andrew Downing and Nancy Dallavalle. Both observe that the concept of the "open circle" provides a much-needed path forward, but rarely exists in the present. Both paint a sobering picture of the current state of Catholic higher education in the United States. Downing fears that we might be going down the same path that the major Protestant universities did at the beginning of the twentieth century. On his account, one difference is that Catholic schools increasingly have the language to talk Jesuit or Augustinian or Marianist or Mercy, but Downing wonders whether they have the substance. In other words, he worries about the loss of the doctrinal basis of Catholicism. Dallavalle describes current trends and pressures that endanger the liberal arts, the traditional home of the Catholic intellectual tradition. She worries about the lack of shared presuppositions between junior and senior faculty and about the loss of the members of the religious order that founded her university.

One of the underlying difficulties raised by both Downing and Dallavalle concerns the way the media treat religion. The typical representation of religion leads many academics to equate Catholicism with contested issues of morality, especially sex and gender. Growing polarization, both in the Church and in our country, makes conversation difficult if not impossible. Nearly every issue is politicized and weaponized—immigration, abortion, gender. Dallavalle rightly recommends the advice of St. Ignatius of Loyola: we should learn to put the best interpretation on what others think, especially if they oppose what you think.

Downing and Dallavalle are not making up or exaggerating the challenges facing Catholic higher education. Three factors might help us put these current challenges in perspective. Historian Una Cadegan remarks in her essay that it is very hard for us to understand just how isolated Catholic

higher education was, even until the 1950s, from the rest of higher education in the United States. When Catholic higher education entered the mainstream of higher education in the 1960s, the country was in the midst of a booming economy, an important civil rights movement, assassination of politicians and leaders of the Civil rights movement, the major loss of members in religious orders that had shaped Catholic higher education, and the immense turmoil that opposed the Vietnam War. In my opinion, we are still working our way through the repercussions of that turbulent period.

Besides the challenges the country faced, the Church itself changed many of its own teachings at Vatican II. In his important book *What Happened at Vatican II*, the late Jesuit historian John O'Malley begins with forty pages explaining what he calls the "long nineteenth century," which stretched from the French Revolution in 1789 to the end of the pontificate of Pius XII in 1958.¹ Only by keeping pre-Vatican II assumptions in mind does the radical character of the changes made by Vatican II become clear.

The pre-1950s history of Catholic higher education in the United States was hardly its Golden Age. Despite the declension narratives of authors like James Burtchaell, most of those educational institutions were sexist, racist, and clericalist, prone to dictate rather than collaborate. An ahistorical and non-biblically grounded form of Thomism dominated the curriculum. Until the late 1950s, theology was taught by priests, not to lay student, but only to seminarians. In the 1960s, Catholic colleges and universities introduced tenure and faculty governance, affirmed academic freedom, and created lay boards of trustees. The authors of the 1967 Land O'Lakes Statement could not have anticipated the turmoil over the Vietnam War and the exodus of so many of the member of their religious orders. In my opinion, we are only now beginning to understand what we need to do in this new cultural and academic environment.

Katherine Greiner's comments highlight the major contributions, largely unrecognized and uncelebrated, made by congregations of sisters. Religious sisters, more than religious men, educated the poor, Native Americans, and African Americans. Against racism in the South and in the Catholic Church, the remarkable Katherine Ann Drexel founded in the 1920s the first African American Catholic college in the country, Xavier University of Louisiana. I mention in my book similar heroic efforts by Sr. Madeleva Wolff, who in the 1940s created a graduate theology program for sisters and lay people, mainly because the universities founded by the religious orders of men refused to allow women to study theology at the graduate level. One of the unintended consequences of banning the ordination of Catholic

women is that many have gone on to acquire doctorates and are now tenured at Catholic universities where they contribute some of the most articulate and creative explorations of Christianity in the United States.

I am well aware that what I wrote about the contributions and struggles of women in American Catholic education hardly does justice to their trials and accomplishments, a failure on my part that Greiner was too kind to point out explicitly. In recent years, many women have published great books, people like Lisa Cahill, Cathy Kaveny, Elizabeth Johnson, Eleanore Stump, Mary Ann Glendon, Jean Porter, and Shawn Copeland. I could add still other examples of such scholarship, including that of Una Cadegan, whose book on Catholic literary criticism broke new ground on the complex issues of censorship and standards for acceptable Catholic literature.² Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, married with four children, observed recently that, until latter part of the twentieth century, nearly all of the theology of the Christian church had been written in the absence of women and children. Men have done nearly all the writing. That is now finally changing, thanks to Kathy Greiner and others like her.

David O'Brien and I have known each other for years, worked together, discussed many things, and still seem to have our differences—differences, I believe, of emphasis, not of substance. We share not only a deep friendship, but also a firm commitment to our Church and our country. I first heard of David when I began to read about his role in leading, along with the late Sr. Alice Gallin, O.S.U., the 1976 Call to Action, which paralleled and celebrated the 200th anniversary of the founding of our country. Sr. Gallin described their collaboration and David's vision of the mission of the Church in her introduction to the 2007 Festschrift put together in his honor.³ Their goal was "to encourage the 'grass roots' in the Church to analyze their experiences as Americans and Catholics and submit them for study and critical reflection by experts, preparing materials for a national assembly seeking 'action on behalf of justice.'"⁴ Led by Cardinal John Dearden, Call to Action brought together laity and clergy from around the country to recognize and support the political achievements of the United States and recommit Catholics to their civic responsibilities.

David raises three important questions about my book. First, is the "open circle" really that open, or is it more like a family firm in which the business is generously shared with others, but "possession, and power remain with the family and its chosen, insider friends"? Second, how much should America matter for American Catholics? Finally, to what extent do politics—that is, money and power—affect Catholic higher education and hinder the implementation of Vatican II?

To respond to the first question, in my book, I explicitly oppose what I call “closed circle” Catholicism. I also describe how some Catholic studies programs at Catholic colleges and universities unfortunately set themselves up against the rest of university that has gone irretrievably secular. While it is possible for the open circle to collapse on itself, I argue that this depends on how the circle is understood and its Catholicism practiced. David is right that I do believe there needs to be an “inside” to the circle—a center point, if you will.⁵ Further, I ask David what he would propose to sustain a robust Catholic intellectual life in a Catholic university. That said, first, if there is any control in the open circle, it is less in its outcome than in its starting point. Second, we must hope that the outcome will ultimately be guided by the Holy Spirit, likened in the Gospel of John to a wind that blows where it will. Theologians, bishops and the entire body of the faithful (thank you, St. John Henry Newman!) all have important and often contentious roles to play in constantly rethinking and exploring the tradition of the Church.

With respect to the second question, though the Church is not a democracy, it is also not a dictatorship. There are certain givens—the creed, the sacraments, the core teachings of Jesus about caring for the poor, loving one’s enemies, and practicing sacrificial love—that are non-negotiable, even though how to understand, live, and practice these core teachings changes over time. Sorting out what the Church should defend, change, or adopt, on the one hand, and what it should challenge in our culture, on the other, has been, and always will be, a process of debate—a debate the more open the better. It will also require patience. As Bernard Lonergan once remarked, the Church always arrives in the present moment late and out of breath.

Finally, the third question: What about politics?—not just in society, but also in the Church. Politics can end wars and pass laws for the common good. Politics can also be dirty, mainly about money and limiting legitimate rights and freedom. Of course, the Church is not immune to dirty politics. If you try anything new, whether in the Church or in society, prepare for pushback. David refers to the history that I plan to write about the Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies at the University of Southern California. Two cardinals tried to shut down the Institute, and two other cardinals defended us, one of whom was Cardinal Ratzinger, soon to be elected Benedict XVI. Those stories I will tell in detail at another time. Both David and I seek genuine reform in our Church. Both of us have experienced pushback that history, we hope, may judge did not represent the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

If I understand David correctly, he takes the issue of politics a step further. He asks if it is a good thing for people who want to bring about change to organize such efforts within the Church. I have no difficulty with this as long as the people leading these efforts do their best (nobody and no

movement is perfect) to keep their focus on what they believe is the common good of the Church and act with both courage and compassion. Must BLM be condemned? Gay marriage denounced? Discussion about the ordination be silenced? St. John Paul II claimed that the Church does not have the authority to change the teaching that bans women from priestly ordination; he added that there was to be no further discussion of the matter. In my book, I cite approvingly the questions Nicholas Lash asked: On what grounds is it possible for the pope to claim that the Church has no such authority, and what degree of authority should be attached to his teaching?⁶ Asking for warrants for teachings is the duty of theologians. Catholicism makes use of both faith and reason. Theologians ask not for proof in matters of faith, but they also do not defend blind faith. Ironically, saying that there should be no further discussion ensures further discussion, just as condemning a book increases its sales.

It is difficult to answer David's question about politics. Official Church teaching has defended the rights of workers to organize unions, but Church institutions often opposes Catholics who organize to bring about change within the Church itself. There is a gap between what the Church recommends *ad extra* and practices *ad intra*. The 1983 Code of Canon Law did more to spell out the rights of Catholics in the Church, but it remains tempting for some bishops to exercise stricter control about discussion and lay initiatives in the Church than they should. On this matter, Pope Francis has been a breath of fresh air.

I want now, finally, to refer to two points made by Una Cadegan. Like Dallavalle and Downing, she believes that the current historical and cultural moment is not promising for Catholic higher education. Nevertheless, she has written an accurate and gracious description of what I believe the present moment calls the leaders of Catholic higher education to do.

She notes that, throughout the book, I argue that the mission must involve faculty in all the disciplines and that they constitute the core of a Catholic university. In my book, I describe how, for nearly thirty years, we at Dayton (Una was a key part of this work) committed ourselves to thinking about the Catholic intellectual tradition. Instead of creating a Catholic studies program within the University, we developed a core curriculum that exposed all students, regardless of their major, to key themes of Catholicism. We also developed overnight workshops designed to help departments conducting searches for new faculty who might best understand the mission of the University as it applied to their teaching and research interests.

Administrative support helped a great deal. The long-time president of the University, Bro. Raymond Fitz, a systems engineer and student of the

Catholic intellectual tradition, supported all these efforts. Being in administration does not have to mean ending one's scholarly work. For myself, serving as chair of the religious studies department, then provost, and finally again as a university professor gave me positions of influence.

At the beginning of her study of her study of literary criticism and Catholicism (on the dedication page), Una cites one of the many extraordinary statements of Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor:

I write the way I do because (not though) I am a Catholic. This is a fact and nothing covers it like the bald statement. However, I am a Catholic peculiarly possessed of the modern consciousness, that thing Jung describes as unhistorical, solitary and guilty. To possess this within the Church is to bear a burden, the necessary burden of the conscious Catholic. It's to feel the contemporary situation at the ultimate level. I think that the Church is the only thing that is going to make the terrible world we are coming to endure; the only thing that makes the Church endure is that it is somehow the body of Christ and that on this we are fed. It seems to be a fact that you have to suffer as much from the Church as for it but if you believe in the divinity of Christ, you have to cherish the world at the same time that you struggle to endure it.⁷

All who are committed to the mission of Catholic higher education have suffered for and from the Church. We should not be surprised. Many opposed Jesus, after all, and we remember Mary as the Mother of Sorrows. I open my book with a chapter entitled "Jesus and the University," which is followed by a chapter entitled "Mary and the Intellectual Life." Few mission discussions at Catholic universities start with Jesus, and few conversations about the intellectual life ever refer to Mary, the Mother of Jesus. Yet, if it were not for Mary's consent to the initiative of the Holy Spirit and her ability to ponder the Word, there would have been no Jesus. Mary and Jesus keep Christians grounded. May they also help keep Catholic universities open circles.

¹ See John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 53–92.

² Una Cadegan, *All Good Books Are Catholic Books: Print Culture, Censorship, and Modernity in Twentieth Century America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

³ See *U.S. Catholic Historian* 25/2 (2007).

⁴ Alice Gallin, O.S.U., “Called to Action: The Historian as Participant,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 25/2 (2007): 1–12, at 1.

⁵ Compare Bernard Prusak’s reflections on my book, “A Circle without a Center: The Crisis in Catholic Higher Education,” *Commonweal*, July 12, 2022, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/circle-without-center>.

⁶ See *The Future of Catholic Higher Education* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 97.

⁷ See Flannery O’Connor, *Collected Works*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Library of America, 1988), “Letter to A.,” July 20, 1955, 945.