Caring for Catholic Institutions

Ronald P. Hamel

Despite their seeming durability, institutions like people require our attention and care if they are to prosper. In this article the author describes the challenging contexts within which Catholic institutions function and proceeds to lay out strategies for maintaining their identity and integrity. He is particularly attentive to the meaning of these terms in a pluralistic environment.

The institutions devoted to teaching, healing and caring for the poor and vulnerable—namely, education, health care and social services—are vehicles by which the Church carries on Jesus’ mission of proclaiming and building up the reign of God (Vision 2000; Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services; To Teach as Jesus Did; Catholic Higher Education and the Pastoral Mission of the Church). They are ways of embodying God’s reconciling and healing presence in the world, ways of responding to the needs of human beings and transforming those personal and societal structures that harm persons and inhibit a fuller realization of God’s reign so that all “might have life and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10).

Because they are rooted in the gospel, the activities of teaching, healing, and caring for the needs of the poor and vulnerable have been central to the life of the Christian community from the beginning. Over time, what began as the informal ministries of individuals and small groups came to be institutionalized in a variety of ways in response to particular situations. That institutionalization in the United States occurred in the mid-nineteenth century to more effectively meet the needs of an immigrant Catholic community (Hehir, 18; Curran, 90–91; Fahey

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and Lewis). Schools, hospitals and social service agencies were founded and largely staffed by religious and clergy and became an integral part of the Catholic subculture. They embodied a distinctively Catholic character.

These same institutions are far different today. The world in which they exist, after all, is very different. Catholics have been mainstreamed into American society, the mission of Catholic schools, hospitals, and social service agencies has broadened to include all of society, lay people have increasingly replaced religious and clergy in leadership and staffing positions, the number of these institutions has grown significantly, the institutions themselves and their staffs have become more professional and are subject to various forms of regulation by a variety of bodies, and they are receiving various types of government financing. In addition, each of these institutions serves populations with a large other-than-Catholic presence and more and more of their leaders and staff persons are other-than-Catholic.

Catholic institutions no longer exist unto themselves; they are players in much larger systems—education, healthcare and social services. In order to remain credible, to function effectively, and even to continue to exist within these larger systems, Catholic institutions must maintain the highest professional standards, provide high quality services, adapt to the changing expressions of their secular counterparts, and deal with all the legal and operational requirements entailed in forming and maintaining such institutions, as well as remain financially viable. All of this is the price to be paid for being Church (and church-related institutions) in the world rather than apart from it or against it. Because they are part of the warp and woof of everyday life, these institutions are not immune from all that whirls about them.

Of course the danger of being in the world is gradually to become of the world. The exigencies and complexities of daily operations, the pressures to excel, to be accepted and even to survive consume so much of these institutions’ focus and energy that what distinguishes them as Catholic Christian is taken for granted and even neglected. The institutions become so similar to their secular counterparts in the services they deliver, in the composition of their leadership, staffs, and clientele and in how they actually operate that their distinctiveness can become diminished or blurred. What ultimately suffers is their relationship to the gospel and to the Church and the consequences of that for who they are...
and become. Given the complex world in which they exist and all the professional, economic, social, and political pressures exerted upon them, it is not surprising that Catholic institutions (with the possible exception of primary and secondary schools) over the past few decades have struggled with the issue of identity (see for example, Catholic Charities USA; Curran; Gottemoeller; Hehir; Hesburgh; Steinfels et. al.).

If church-related institutions are to continue to survive and flourish as “Catholic,” it is necessary to attend to their “core,” in addition to the various practical dimensions of their viability. Care needs to be given to the constitutive elements of the institution, to those elements that make it what it is. Such “attending to” the core of the institution, such care, cannot be a haphazard activity. It cannot be left to chance, otherwise it will not occur at all or will occur poorly. Rather it must be deliberate and sustained. And what are those constitutive elements that need to be cared about and cared for? While there are surely other possible candidates, I wish to highlight and consider two—identity and integrity. Eliminate or neglect either one of these and the institution, as Catholic, will be threatened.

Care for Identity

As previously noted, the issue of identity has been a serious struggle for Catholic institutions in recent years, especially for healthcare, social services, and higher education. While each has made considerable progress at the theoretical level, challenges continue for particular organizations in their given settings. Any articulation of identity by each of these institutions must subsequently be adapted by individual organizations to their local situation and then suitably appropriated. Despite the significant differences among the institutions and the need for local adaptation, it does seem possible to make some general observations about the nature of Catholic identity and attending to it.

Employing the descriptor “Catholic” of an institution must mean more than some form of affiliation with the Church, having been founded, operated and staffed by clergy or religious congregations, the presence of images and symbols distinctive of Catholicism, the presence of a pastoral or campus ministry program, the occurrence of liturgical celebrations, times for prayer and other religious observances, or adherence to the teaching of the Church in matters of faith and morals. These are all critical dimensions (some more critical than others) of what it might mean to be a Catholic institution, but they are not sufficient. It is quite possible for each of these elements to be part of a Catholic institution and that institution lack something vital at its core and, ultimately, not really be Catholic.
If these elements are not sufficient, do Catholic institutions' mission and values statements contribute anything further? They might, depending on the content of those statements. Here too it is possible that over time, as mission and values statements are reformulated, that the distinctive aspects of being Catholic are lost from those statements. But it also may be that these statements get us closer to what it might mean to be Catholic, for mission and values statements are what “characterize” and define who and what an institution is. In light of this, it would seem safe to say that part of what ultimately makes an institution “Catholic” is its character, its core religious and moral identity (Hamel).

The character of an institution, like the character of a person, consists in the constellation of operative beliefs, values, attitudes, intentions, motives, dispositions and patterns of behavior that define the institution. It is what the institution is in the core of its being. Ideally, these dimensions of character are consistent with what the institution claims to be in its defining documents, namely, mission and values statements. It is not the latter, however, that constitute the identity of the institution, but rather the elements of character that are in fact operative in the institution's day to day functioning.

But what could it mean for an institution's character to be “Catholic” as opposed to Lutheran or Jewish or Islamic or secular? What is it that contributes to the distinctive nature of Catholic institutions (Morrisey)? It would seem that the answer to this question must have something to do with the core elements of this particular faith tradition, namely, the life and teaching of Jesus as interpreted in the Catholic tradition and a relationship to the organized community of faith that calls itself the Catholic Church. In a fundamental sense, the identity of Catholic institutions is rooted in, as well as shaped and guided by, God's self-revelation to the people of Israel and, especially, the life and ministry of Jesus as mediated through Scripture and the tradition. The character of Catholic institutions should be marked by features of a gospel way of life, by some of the beliefs, values, attitudes, dispositions, intentions, motives, and habitual ways of being that arise from the life and ministry of Jesus and from the tradition's theological reflection upon them.

Likewise, the mission of Catholic institutions should at their core also be similarly grounded and shaped. These institutions are not only providing a service, they are also doing as Jesus did. They are carrying on Jesus' ministry of teaching,
healing, and caring for the poor and vulnerable, albeit in radically different ways and in radically different circumstances. Hence, there is something more to what Catholic institutions do because there is something more to who they are and to what they are about. In fact, not only are they extending Jesus’ healing, saving and reconciling presence in their own time and place, they are also doing so on behalf of the Church. They are participating in the Church’s mission to proclaim and build up the reign of God.¹

Character gives rise to a particular worldview. If one is a certain kind of person, one will likely see things in a way that is consistent with who one is. The same beliefs, values and attitudes that shape one’s character also shape one’s worldview. Part and parcel then of the identity of Catholic institutions is a distinctive worldview, one that is grounded in and shaped by the same realities that form its character. This worldview is critical. It affects what is seen and not seen, what is valued and not valued, what stands out and what recedes into the background. Both character and worldview ultimately affect the choices that are made and the actions undertaken. And all of these together shape the culture of the institution.

Five Implications

Several observations are in order at this point. First, the Christian story and participation in the Church’s mission are not all that define the character and worldview of Catholic institutions. As with individuals, there are many other formative influences—professional, social, political and the like. But it would seem that for institutions to truly be Catholic, the Christian and ecclesial influence would have to be dominant.

Second, church-related institutions’ characters will be different though there will be some commonalities. While all are about carrying on the ministry of Jesus, each is about a different aspect of that ministry. This different emphasis gives rise to a somewhat different constellation of beliefs, values, attitudes, etc. that will shape the overall character of each. Additionally, because of a variety of different influences, each individual educational, healthcare, and social services organization will develop its unique version of the larger institutional identity.

Third, there is not and cannot be an expectation that everyone within the institution and everyone its serves must share its grounding religious convictions. That is, these individuals are not required to believe in the Christ event or in the Catholic expression of belief in that event. It does seem reasonable, however, to expect those who work within Catholic institutions to act in ways that are consistent with the core values that shape the identity of the institution and to be willing to carry out the institution’s mission in a manner consistent with those values. It is important that they understand when they are hired that what they are doing is not just a job, but that they are intimately involved in carrying out the institution’s mission and doing so within a particular culture. They may not be able to espouse beliefs of a specifically religious nature (e.g., the incarnation,
redemption, resurrection, Eucharist), but they must be willing to embody, at least while carrying out the mission of the institution, its fundamental values. If they are unwilling to do that, then perhaps they belong elsewhere. Their talents might better fit in an organization with an identity that is more suitable to their own.

Fourth, and related to the previous point, in order to preserve institutions’ identity over time, it would seem to be essential that the institutions be composed of a critical mass of people who share the Christian faith in the Catholic tradition. It is critical that others who do not share that faith tradition are at least sufficiently comfortable with the worldview that issues from it that they are able to embody it in their work. As the number of employees who do not share the institutions’ identity and worldview increases, the distinctive character of the organizations decreases. Their identity, their character changes to the point where being Catholic is only in name.

Fifth, of utmost importance in shaping and maintaining institutional identity is leadership. An organization’s leaders must understand and be committed to the distinctive nature of the organization. They must at least be comfortable with its identity, its mission and values, its worldview and culture. This is true not only of the president or CEO, but also of other top leadership and of other key but lower level leaders within the organization. They are entrusted with the character, the identity, of the organization. By their example, their words, their decisions and their actions, they will make a difference in what the organization is and becomes. They will also do much to legitimize the identity of the organization in the eyes of staff and various publics. Hence, choice of leaders is critical and is an essential part of the care of institutions. So is the adequate preparation of future leaders, especially at a time when more and more leaders of Catholic institutions are lay and have not likely had the intense formation in the tradition that has been true of religious and clergy. Leaders of Catholic institutions must come prepared not only with the professional skills to do their job but also with what is needed to assure that the institution’s identity as Catholic flourishes.

Identity or character, then, is the first challenge in caring for Catholic institutions. More precisely, care requires attending to the nature and quality of that identity and ongoing formation and nurturing. Attending focuses on whether
institutional identity is what it can and should be. Ongoing formation strives to refashion or refine the identity. Nurturing seeks to sustain it over the long haul. Each of these is a different activity and requires different methods and tools to bring it about. How these activities are carried out will vary with each of the institutions and their individual organizations. There is no uniform formula. However, it is difficult to see how institutions can flourish as Catholic institutions without deliberate attention to these activities.

**Care for the Integrity of Catholic Institutions**

Intimately related to the identity or character of institutions and also an essential aspect of caring for them is the matter of integrity—the wholeness, the undividedness of the institution. Integrity is the flip side of identity. Identity refers to character, while integrity refers to behavior—the consistency between institutions’ identity and their decisions and actions, between who they say they are and what they do. Integrity is actually an ethical concern that lies at the heart of institutional life.

The real test of an institution’s identity is whether what it claims to be is embodied in its everyday activities and operations. It is these that reveal who and what the institution actually is—what beliefs, values, attitudes, intentions, motives, dispositions, and habits *in fact* constitute its core. As with individuals, one cannot expect complete consistency between character and behavior. There are times when people and institutions act “out of character.” But if an institution claims to be Christian in the Catholic tradition, one should be able to expect that most of the time, the institution conducts itself accordingly. To the extent it does not, it weakens its identity and, over time, can even alter it. Decisions and behavior that are consistent with identity strengthen it, while those that are contrary to it weaken and erode it. If a Catholic institution’s behavior is not consistent with its claimed Catholic identity, one would have to wonder whether that identity is anything more than a name, a legal entity, or words on the page of a mission statement.

Maintaining institutional integrity is difficult. It is for this reason that it is being identified as a vital, essential dimension of care. Like the shaping of identity, maintaining integrity does not happen on its own. It too requires deliberate and sustained attention and effort, especially given all the complexities associated with Catholic institutional life in the mainstream of American society. Once again, because these institutions are in the world, they are buffeted by all the forces of the world in which they exist. Because they continuously interact with secular organizations and are staffed by and provide services to people all of whom do not share their religious perspectives and commitments, Catholic insti-
tions experience competing beliefs, values, intentions, motives, etc., and conflicting demands. Maintaining integrity in these circumstances is no small task.

If an institution is going to be true to itself, to have integrity, then its identity must permeate the entire institution, from the CEO or president to environmental services. At minimum, those who work within the institution should be willing to embody its core convictions and values in all that they do. This ought to be a basic expectation, one that is communicated and agreed upon in the hiring process and that subsequently enters into performance evaluations. In addition, it must permeate the institution's decision making and behavior in all venues and at all levels, including strategic planning, budgeting, pricing, marketing and development, as well as its policies and procedures, particularly those relating to personnel. It is quite easy for institutions that call themselves Catholic to limit their Catholicity to the externals mentioned earlier and to neglect its implications for daily operations. But it is precisely an institution's success at integrating its identity into all that it does that determines the depth of its claimed identity.

Perhaps one of the most important areas of integrity for Catholic institutions is how they relate to personnel, whether administrators, professional staff, faculty, or support staff. Justice is so much at the core of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures as well as the Catholic theological tradition that it would seem to be a constitutive element of the identity of Catholic institutions and a central focus when integrating identity into daily operations. If consistency between identity and action is required anywhere it is with respect to how Catholic institutions treat their people. One should be able to look to Catholic institutions and see there examples of a just workplace. Creating a just workplace, with all that phrase encompasses, is a critical component of care for the integrity of Catholic institutions. To call oneself Catholic should mean, at least in part, to foster justice within the institution. In effect, besides identity and integrity, care for Catholic institutions also means care for the people who make up those institutions.

In fact, institutional integrity ultimately points to the quality of the institution's relationships and of relationships within the institution. The distinctive character of the institution should be embodied and manifested in how the institution conducts itself in its various relationships and in how its members conduct themselves in their multiple relationships. These relationships are both

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internal and external. They encompass the institution’s relationship to its employees, those to whom it provides services, its vendors, other institutions, corporate entities, and professional organizations with which it has dealings, the local and regional communities in which it exists and society at large. They also encompass individual members’ relationships to one another, to the institution as a whole, and to the various other entities mentioned above. This is where the rubber hits the road so to speak, where identity is really challenged to express itself. If it does not mean much in these relationships, then being Catholic does not mean all that it can and should mean.

In order to be successful at identity integration (or mission integration), institutions will most likely need a variety of mechanisms and structures. Some Catholic healthcare facilities and systems, for example, employ a decision-making process that is developed around their core values. The process, at least theoretically, is employed when making the more important institutional decisions. Others employ a tool to assess values integration, highlighting key indicators or institutional commitments such as respect for human dignity, service to the poor and the community, employment practices and the like (SSM Health Care System). The Catholic Health Association is currently involved in a project for benchmarking adherence to the Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services (Catholic Health Association). Many organizations, even of a secular nature, include explicit attention to core identity, mission, values, and behavioral expectations in their hiring practices and in new employee orientation. Some also build it into annual performance evaluations for everyone in the organization. Statements of the institution’s commitments to students, patients and clients can also be of assistance if they are supported by policies and procedures that assist in implementing those commitments.

Conclusion

Care for Catholic institutions can undoubtedly include considerably more than has been discussed here. It is difficult to imagine, however, more important elements than care for the character and integrity of these institutions and, by implication, care for those who people them. Success in these areas, even though always partial, would likely contribute to healthy and flourishing institutions that could rightly claim the descriptor “Catholic.” The challenge to Catholic institutions is ongoing—preserving identity and integrity while participating effectively in the society of which we are a part. There is and will continue to be considerable tension in doing this. It comes with being in the world, but not of it.

The struggle is worthwhile both for the Church and for society. These institutions are critical to the Church’s mission of preaching the gospel and building up the reign of God. And they play a critical role for society. As Bryan Hehir points
out, after noting that Catholic institutions constitute the largest not-for-profit healthcare system, social service agency, and educational system in the country: “If one seeks to influence, shape, direct, heal, elevate, and enrich a complex industrial democracy, it cannot be done simply by the integrity of individual witness. It is done by institutions that lay hands on life at the critical points where life can be injured or fostered, where people are born and die, where they learn and teach, where they are cured and healed, and where they are assisted when in trouble” (Hehir, 17). And in addition to their direct impact on people, these institutions can help make present and further build up the reign of God by making present in society increased respect for the dignity of the human person, care for the poor and vulnerable, concern for the common good and more.

For all their struggles, their imperfections and their limitations, Catholic institutions are a vital and powerful resource. They could be an even more powerful force for good and for change if they increasingly joined hands in various types of collaboration. There are indications across the country that this is beginning to occur more frequently and efforts are being made to spur that on even more (New Covenant Steering Committee). But unless deliberate and sustained efforts are made to care for the identity and integrity of Catholic institutions, their effectiveness will be diminished both for the Church and for society.

Note

1 Catholic higher education is less likely to feel comfortable with such an approach. For a good explanation of this issue, see Curran, 103–08.

References


