

Notre Dame's Catholic Identity

Thank you, Mr. Dempsey and friends of the Sycamore Trust. I am both honored and humbled to be speaking to you today.

Ever since I was a young boy, it was my dream to attend the University of Notre Dame. I distinctly remember the excitement of freshman orientation and the first week of classes. I wondered what my first weekend as a college student would be like here, surrounded by people with the same interests, background, and of course, Catholic faith as me. Coming from a small, conservative Catholic school, I was appalled when I saw the immorality of the activities going on around me. It seemed that Our Lady's University was really no different on the weekends than any other college I had ever heard about. Why was this? Notre Dame was supposed to be a Catholic university – and not just any Catholic university – THE premiere Catholic university in America and throughout the world. I felt like I had been tricked.

Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith writes in one of his seminal works that the predominant religion practiced by youths and adolescents is not Christianity but is instead something called Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. The youths and adolescents of today are only interested in religion insofar as it makes them feel happy and good. When they are feeling particularly religious, they will call on God when they feel like He could help them with something. Religion is limited to its “feel good” elements and there is no thought of “repentance from sin, of keeping the Sabbath....of saying ones prayers” or even “of building character through suffering.” Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is largely a means by which God is uninvolved with individual lives on a day-to-day basis, allowing people to keep God out of affairs in which they do not want him involved. This allows people to pick and choose their own morality – a morality which amounts to the idea that we are free to do whatever we would like insofar as no

one else is harmed in the process. The caveat is that “harm” seems largely limited to physical violence, allowing “perfectly moral teenagers” to engage in alcohol, drugs and sexual promiscuity.

This concept that we are free to choose our own morality and our own beliefs plays a central role in the crisis of Catholicism occurring today at Notre Dame. At the heart of the matter is the idea of Catholicism, of what it means for a faith community – in this case a university – to be Catholic. So, what exactly is Catholicism? And what does it mean for something to be Catholic? The definition of this term is crucial and because it is difficult to define, people tend to subscribe their own definition to Catholicism. To be Catholic according to what the Church teaches means to accept wholeheartedly the doctrines of the Catholic Church. I cannot say that other Catholics would agree with my definition nor will I take up the slippery question of what exactly constitutes a doctrine of the Catholic Church. If one does not accept this definition of Catholicism, it allows one to pick and choose between individual beliefs to which they adhere – a practice known as 'Cafeteria Catholicism.’’ This is no different than a person creating their own religion because they make themselves the sole arbiter of their beliefs rather than the Church. Indeed, cafeteria Catholicism is as popular today as it ever has been. Wealthy celebrities such as Melinda Gates have declared themselves to be “devout Catholics” while acting in distinctly “anti-Catholic” ways. In Gates' case this included providing contraception to 120 million of the world's poorest women. She stated that she and the Church were “not going to agree on everything...but that's OK.”

My biggest fear is that this mentality of cafeteria Catholicism – of picking out the popular or “feel good” parts of Catholicism and separating them from the stricter moral requirements – has run amok at Notre Dame. There are parts of Notre Dame's Catholicism that are truly

exceptional. Every building on campus has a chapel, with Mass celebrated more or less daily. Each residence hall has a priest, brother or sister living and interacting with the undergraduate students. Access to the sacraments and Eucharistic adoration is frequently available to students and taken advantage of by many of them. Campus Ministry even offers a number of retreats, events and get togethers for deepening and enriching the Catholic faith. These are experiences that are rare – if not impossible – for students attending public universities. Yet I sometimes wonder if these opportunities are hollow, embodying the superficiality of “feel good” Catholicism without any deeper Catholic sentiment behind them.

Take Mass in the dormitory, for example. Mass in Dillon Hall was always very popular and held at 10:30 PM on Sunday; it had a very informal feel to it. People often dressed down and some even wore pajamas. The attire worn seemed to detract from the importance of Mass as one of the most important practices of the Catholic faith. With regard to the liturgy itself, everything was fine except for one part – the sign of peace. The sign of peace could go for as long as 5 minutes, with people criss-crossing the chapel to hug each and every one of their friends. The excitement of the participants and sheer length of the sign of peace seemed to emphasize the human aspect of the community to such an extent that it overshadowed the real reason for gathering together – the Eucharist. Yes, the Mass fulfilled Sunday obligations for many students who otherwise may not have come, but it also seemed to shift the focus from one that is Christ-centered to one centered around the human community with Christ as some sort of subsidiary sideshow. These types of Masses were by no means limited to Dillon Hall, but were characteristic of all 29 dormitories.

On a similar level, but to a larger scale, Notre Dame (or at least its administration) has often striven for solidarity with the human community, emphasizing Catholic agreement with

and similarity to the rest of the world rather than focusing on Christ and where our beliefs diverge. Notre Dame exists, like all Catholic individuals, in tension between the demands of the world and the demands of the Church. While a common foundation is essential for Notre Dame to initiate a relationship with the rest of the world, erring too much on the side of agreement leads to Catholic conformity and assimilation, ultimately causing a loss of its distinct Catholic identity. Notre Dame must be firm and confident in the beliefs it holds that depart from the popular opinions of the world, particularly its teachings on abortion, contraception and other bioethical issues with which the world does not necessarily agree. The lawsuit against the HHS Mandate is a prime example of one of the ways in which a reaffirmation of our moral beliefs can be proudly and publicly reaffirmed. If Notre Dame is still proud to be a Catholic institution, it should have no problem bringing Catholic moral beliefs - glaring differences and all – unashamedly to the public square in more of its statements, actions, and advertisements.

As a graduate of the University of Notre Dame, I can honestly say that it was one of the best times of my life. I grew significantly as an individual in my time there and know that I am a better version of myself as a result of the education I received there. Is it perfect in its adherence to the Catholic faith? No, it's not. Can I make a judgment as to whether or not it can even be called Catholic? No, I have only experienced Notre Dame for four years and I defer my judgment to those who have a significantly longer history with the university. In my past year as Editor of the Irish Rover, I had the privilege of upholding and defending the Catholic faith at Our Lady's University. Although the Rover is often very critical of Notre Dame and its Catholic identity, it is only because The Rover cares about Notre Dame so much and it is difficult to watch such a great force for good fail to live up to its full potential. I hope that I am wrong when characterize the cafeteria Catholicism of Notre Dame as focusing on the positive, world-accepted

views and glossing over the contentious, difficult, and necessary Catholic beliefs. Yet even if I am not, I believe that Our Lady's University can and will change for the better, conforming more to the Catholic conception of a university by the grace of God. Thank you.