

“The Idea of the Catholic University in the 21st Century”

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ABSTRACT:

A Fifth Essential Characteristic of (Today’s) Catholic University

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Ex Corde Ecclesiae, the 1990 apostolic constitution promulgated by Pope John Paul II, articulates the common characteristics of all Catholic colleges and universities. Undoubtedly, the section cited most often, given its succinct summary of the entire document, is paragraph 13. It reads:

Since the objective of a Catholic University is to assure in an institutional manner a Christian presence in the university world confronting the great problems of society and culture, every Catholic University, as Catholic, must have the following essential characteristics:

- 1. A Christian inspiration not only of individuals but of the university community as such;*
- 2. A continuing reflection in the light of the Catholic faith upon the growing treasury of human knowledge, to which it seeks to contribute by its own research;*
- 3. Fidelity to the Christian message as it comes to us through the Church;*
- 4. An institutional commitment to the service of the people of God and of the human family in their pilgrimage to the transcendent goal which gives meaning to life.*

It is rather remarkable that it has been over a quarter of a century since a pope has articulated the qualities of a major ministry of the Catholic Church. As such, to engage members of the Catholic higher education community in reflecting on the document and its relevance today, 109 trustees, faculty, staff and administrators (including mission officers of the A.C.C.U.) were asked the question:

If you were invited [by Pope Francis] to add a 5th essential characteristic to Ex Corde Ecclesiae, what would it be?

Responses clustered into the following six categories:

Activism and service

(28%; “More deliberate community outreach,” “A commitment to respond to injustice constructively”)

Diversity and inclusion

(26%; “An institution that is all inclusive of race, color, origin, religion,” Understanding and cultivating an appreciation for diversity.”)

Academic culture

(17%; “Recognition of the value of conjoining faith and reason,” “Education.”)

Character development

(16%; “Developing people of good character – integrity, virtuosity,” “Civic responsibility to advance empathy and understanding.”)

Catholic faith, charism and values

(12%; “Fidelity to the founding charism or founder,” “Seeing God in all things and peoples.”)

Other (1%; “I thought of this differently... I would recommend not adding a fifth. Key phrase is essential characteristics and I believe adding more simple dilutes the key areas of faith, education and service, less is more.”)

Interestingly, there are trends within populations, such that faculty tend to focus on diversity of perspective, staff on both activism and diversity, trustees on both character development and academic culture, cabinet members on activism, and mission officers on academic culture.

The goal of this (proposed) paper is to share the specific ideas of members of the educational community in the interest of prompting fruitful conversation on the mission of the 21st century Catholic university.