

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

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ABSTRACT:

Catholic in a Religiously Plural Context: The Case of Seattle University

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When considering the work of the Catholic university to “embrace, support, and encourage the flourishing of students and faculty” including those from different faith traditions and no faith tradition, it is important to understand this work as rooted in an understanding of post-Vatican II Catholicism and of the Catholic university in the 21st century. Such work is not simply a pragmatic response to the increasing number of students and faculty who come from diverse faith backgrounds but rather living into Catholicism today. Second Vatican Council document *Nostra Aetate* opens the door for valuing the great religions of the world. The Society of Jesus in its 34th General Congregation in 1995 showed the connection between its commitment to a faith that does justice and the need for dialogue with religions and cultures. While it is Catholic Church in continents like Asia and Africa that recognized that “to be Catholic is to be interreligious,” the religious pluralism of these continents is being reproduced in Catholic universities in the United States today.

The presence of religiously diverse faculty and students presents both opportunities and challenges to religiously based institutions like Catholic universities. The demographic shift to diminishing Catholic populations within Catholic universities requires increasing clarity in the communication of the Catholic identity of the university, something which could have been taken for granted in a university populated by predominantly Catholic faculty and students. At the same time, such clarity must not alienate but instead encourage and support the development of the distinctive religious identity of all members of the community including those of different faith traditions and the increasing number of those who identify as religiously unaffiliated, agnostic or atheist.

In this paper, the authors intend to offer the experiences and learnings from Seattle University, a Jesuit Catholic university in one of the most unchurched regions of the country. We begin by arguing that the work of interfaith, interreligious, and increasingly interspiritual dialogue is the manner of being Catholic in a post-Vatican II Church in the pontificate of Pope Francis. We provide a historical overview of the shifting demographics that necessitate an increasingly interreligious approach to engagement with faculty and students. We name some of the concrete challenges presented by a religiously plural context and strategies to begin to address these challenges to remain faithful to the mission, vision and values of the institution. Finally, we offer some imaginings of ways forward as the institution continues to hold the tension of maintaining its Catholic identity while serving a religiously plural university community.