

# THE STATE OF CATHOLIC HIGHER EDUCATION

Anne Hendershott

Anne Hendershott, *A Lamp in the Darkness: How Faithful Catholic Colleges Are Helping to Save the Church* (Sophia Institute Press)

For faithful Catholics, the loss of a strong Catholic identity at most of the 230 Catholic colleges and universities has been a great disappointment. Earlier generations of Catholic immigrants built the majority of those schools during the late 1800s and early 1900s at great personal sacrifice because they wanted to nurture the faith of their children and protect them from the anti-immigrant nature of the existing colleges.

Unfortunately, there are few faithful Catholic colleges left today which share the vision of helping young Catholics maintain their faith. From internships at Planned Parenthood, and “reproductive choice” clubs at schools like Georgetown, to Catholic campus GLBTQ celebrations and Drag Shows presented annually at campuses like the once-faithful University of San Diego, and several of the Jesuit schools, parents can no longer assume that their children will receive a faithful Catholic education on a Catholic campus. Even the once-venerable University of Notre Dame appears to have given up much of its commitment to supporting Catholic teachings on life and traditional families by giving awards and speaking platforms to notorious pro-abortion politicians and GLBTQ activists. In 2016, Notre Dame awarded its most prestigious award, the Laetare Medal, to then Vice-President Joseph Biden in recognition of his “outstanding service to the Catholic Church,” even though he had long promoted both abortion and same-sex marriage. The Laetare Medal is an award that was originally created by Notre Dame to honor an American Catholic

“whose genius has ennobled the arts and sciences, illustrated the ideals of the church, and enriched the heritage of humanity.”

And although the award to Biden created scandal among the faithful, nothing could have prepared them for Ash Williams, the transgendered pro-abortion speaker who was given a platform at Notre Dame to present her position that “abortion is a type of birth.” Williams, a self-described “transgender man” who calls herself an “abortion doula,” told students during her Notre Dame presentation on March 20, 2023, that she draws upon the experiences in her own “Black, trans, abortion-having life” to question and demean what she called oppressive norms against abortion. As a self-described “abortion doula” Williams claims to provide physical, emotional, or financial help to people seeking to end a pregnancy, suggesting that the reason we don’t understand an abortion as a type of birth “is because it has become so disenfranchised.” Williams, who shared with Notre Dame students that she had undergone two abortions, has a tattoo on her left forearm of a surgical instrument used for manual vacuum aspiration abortion. Glib about her own abortions and celebrating the abortion success stories of those she helps, she told the Notre Dame students that she tells her abortion stories “as often as a broken record.”

This latest abortion doula scandal was not just a fringe event sponsored by a renegade Notre Dame Gender Studies department on campus. Rather, Ash Williams, the transgendered abortion advocate was sponsored by the Dean’s Office in the College of Arts and Letters, as well as by seven other major departments in the university including the Center for Social Concerns, a Notre Dame institute that was created to apply Catholic social teaching to societal problems. It is clear that the loss of the Catholic identity is a systemic or structural problem at Notre Dame—like that at most Catholic colleges.

In fact, rather than embracing the good, the true, and the

beautiful, most Catholic universities have adopted the same curricular fads as their secular peers, trading their commitment to the Catholic faith and the liberal arts for trendy departments of gender studies, black studies, ethnic studies, and gay and lesbian studies. Most of these schools host GLBTQ social clubs and celebrations of Pride Month using student affairs funds so that all enrolled students contribute to the festivities. Campus leaders on these now-faithless campuses claim that their Catholic campus commitment to social justice differentiates them from non-Catholic colleges, but they neglect to mention that their definition of social justice is so broad as to include “reproductive justice,” transgender rights, and equal access to marriage for same sex couples as among the social justice issues they promote.

The situation is dire but not hopeless. There are still some Catholic colleges that are true to the original mission of Catholic higher education. *A Lamp in the Darkness* introduces readers to 14 faithful Catholic colleges and universities that have resisted the cultural pressure to conform to the world and have instead, stayed true in their mission, their commitment to the liberal arts and academic excellence, their liturgies, and to the magisterial teachings of the Church. These schools have made significant sacrifices to continue providing students with a faithful Catholic education that not only prepares them for careers but also prepares them to live lives of integrity, goodness, holiness, and authenticity. When any of these “faithful few” schools have fallen short—as some of them have—they have quickly recovered because they have never lost sight of the salvific mission of authentic Catholic higher education.

Many of these faithful Catholic colleges like Christendom, Thomas More and Thomas Aquinas College were born from the ashes of the secular revolution that gripped the Church following Vatican II and have become some of the most faithful Catholic colleges in the country. Others, like Belmont Abbey,

Franciscan University of Steubenville, Catholic University, the University of Mary, and the University of Dallas were founded in the late nineteenth or early to mid-twentieth centuries, but have each, in their own way, sought continuous renewal in faithfulness and mission orientation.

The most recent wave of faithful Catholic universities emerged after 1990, apparently in response to the release of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, the apostolic constitution on faithful Catholic higher education promulgated by Pope St. John Paul II in 1990. These schools, including Ave Maria University and John Paul the Great Catholic University, both founded in 2003, and Wyoming Catholic College in 2005, all had the ability to form their mission and identity while drawing directly upon the evangelical spirit of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. In fact, the influence of the 1990 papal constitution is seen most explicitly in the mission statement of Ave Maria University which describes itself as “Founded in fidelity to Christ and His Church...dedicated to the advancement of human culture, the promotion of dialogue between faith and reason, and the formation of men and women in the intellectual and moral virtues of the Catholic faith.”

Although *A Lamp in the Darkness* is not a book specifically about Franciscan University, the renewal of orthodoxy on Catholic college campuses cannot be properly understood without acknowledging the important role played by that university so an entire chapter is devoted to understanding the 1974 revitalization and renewal of Franciscan that transformed a struggling school into the center of evangelization that it is today. In a 2021 interview with Dr. Scott Hahn, a theology professor at Franciscan, Monsignor James P. Shea, the president of the University of Mary in North Dakota—one of the faithful colleges profiled in this book—spoke of the “ripple effect” of Franciscan on his own campus: “What does St. Thomas say? *Bonum diffusivum sui*—the good is diffusive of itself. The ripples of the renewal of

Catholic higher education, of which Steubenville is an exemplar, are felt all around. The students that we get to serve here are recipients of that as well, and so I am grateful. May we be worthy of that legacy.”

Franciscan University was not always the vibrantly Catholic place that it is today and certainly not the center of a dynamic orthodoxy that is “diffusive of itself.” In fact, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, when it was still called the College of Steubenville, the struggling school was known as one of the premier party schools in the country, featuring a hook-up culture that involved heavy alcohol and drug use. Established in 1946 by Franciscans of the Third Order Regular (T.O.R.), the school had lost its way and was on the verge of collapse in the early 1970s. But in 1974, with the arrival of the university’s dynamic new president, Father Michael Scanlan, the newly renamed Franciscan University of Steubenville became the vibrant center of Catholic orthodoxy it is today.

That ripple effect continues. One person who was inspired by Father Scanlan was Tom Monaghan, who, in 1986, while still at the helm as founder and president of Domino’s Pizza, Inc., provided the following endorsement for the back cover of Father Scanlan’s book *Let the Fire Fall*: “This book has given me inspiration and a road map for my life. Never in one book have I learned so much about my religion and how to live it.” Monaghan actually used the book as a “road map,” creating Ave Maria Law School, and later Ave Maria University, as a way to honor God. Both vibrantly Catholic and faithful to the Magisterium, these schools continue to flourish as Tom Monaghan often says, “to help as many people as possible get into heaven.”

Today, Ave Maria University and the faithful few continue to attract students who desire an authentically Catholic education. They come to these schools because they want to be part of a faith-filled community that enriches their lives.

Faithful Catholic parents who want their children to be nurtured by the faith while receiving an academic challenging environment are drawn to these schools. The stories of the founding and constant renewal of these faithful schools can inspire other Catholic colleges which have lost their way. The 1974 transformation of Franciscan University into today's passionately Catholic college occurred because one charismatic priest—Father Michael Scanlan, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit—devoted himself to that renewal.

It is easy to feel bleak, looking at the state of modern culture and particularly at the decomposing state of higher education. It is tempting to think that all the battles have been lost, and that the secularization of society and of our Catholic schools is a *fait accompli*. Indeed, it may appear that from a sociological point of view, the battle has been lost. The faithful colleges and universities are too few and too small to make much of a difference. However, God does not see as humans see. God chose one-hundred-year-old Abraham to father a nation. He chose David, the smallest child of Jesse, to be a king. And He chose the teenage virgin Mary to bear His Son. That same God chose a lawyer-priest to redeem Franciscan University, a pizza mogul to start Ave Maria University, and a penniless historian to found Christendom College. The pattern that unites all these figures is not their strength, wealth, or wisdom, but rather their willingness to say yes to His plan. The hope that inspired this book and that caused Pope John Paul to prophesy of a new flowering of Christian culture is not borne from particular signs of worldly success, but rather is founded on the person of Jesus Christ and on His promise that we would not remain in darkness. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5). The same light burns in the lamp of each faithful school today, and, by God's grace, the darkness has not overcome it.

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