

Recovering the Sacred Center: The Resignation of Fr. Dennis Dease

“The aim of liberal education is to unsettle presumptions, to defamiliarize the familiar, to reveal what is going on beneath and behind appearances, to disorient young people and to help them find ways to reorient themselves.”

Final report of task force on General Education
Harvard University 2007

The secular project of attempting to educate without recognizing transcendent truths has caused a crisis in meaning for liberal education. The celebration of the critical thinking, the self orienting, value-clarifying individual has produced a generation of atomistic androgynous souls whose only sense of piety and duty to history and community is their obligation to repay school debt. Individualistic teachers, in the name of academic freedom, have become self centered critics of adult culture. With contempt for the religious and military traditions of sacrifice, the modern faculty members relinquish their public vocations as teachers of tradition while clinging to the individual security of tenure. In a very real sense we can say that the faculty as a community of teachers no longer exists. Another communio sacrificed on the altar of autonomy.

This secular collapse should provide a great moment for the Catholic university. Our tradition of worship, study, work and contest is a much richer and more communal approach to the transmission of culture and learning. For the Catholic, intellect begins with the orienting act of worship. We think there is an external reality - a living Other to Whom we submit and give praise. This act of worship does not render us brain-dead. It orients us

to the personal reality at the center of the cosmos. That does not cut off questions or thinking; it sets them alive and replete with meaning. Likewise, the commitment to certain truths does not cut off argument. Argument becomes a means of engaging a culture that rejects the object of our worship. The Catholic university orients the intellect for engaging that culture and provides a place where the argument may be joined.

As a local Catholic church (in Catholic talk that means a Diocese under a Bishop) the Archdiocese of St Paul & Minneapolis must recognize that Fr. Dennis Dease is no longer capable of the religious, moral and intellectual clarity needed to lead a university in the Catholic tradition. He cannot authoritatively discipline or teach his students; he cannot lead his faculty or resist his board. He sounds an uncertain trumpet in the city for the Catholic intellectual tradition. He is no defender of free speech. Worst of all he has deliberately deceived the students, double talked the faculty and reduced the mission of the institution to a fundraising campaign. He has a great house and keeps a nice lawn but he cannot be trusted morally and is simply over his head intellectually. Those are our charges. Here is our argument.

The best paid priest in the Archdiocese-conflict of interest?

We begin with simple questions of propriety. All diocesan priests are to receive a comparable salary. Visiting priests to the University of St. Thomas are usually paid at a regular faculty rate but archdiocesan priests are paid a standard salary (around \$30,000) and the difference between that and the going rate is considered an in-kind contribution. We assume the practice is the same with Fr. Dease and his \$249,000 salary. How does he return that excess? And why was that salary so hyperinflated for a priest of the

archdiocese? Has there been some agenda to divorce the presidency from the priesthood so the university presidency would better reflect the individual autonomy of the rich man? Is this an attempt to divorce the governance of the university from men bound by the oaths of obedience which mark a priestly life?

There has been a major renovation of Fr. Dease's house (not just adding screen windows). Who paid for that and does it engender any obligations which may compromise the president in keeping his trust to the archdiocese and the mission of the school? What was Fr. Dease's role in the decision to divorce the university from the archdiocese and the impending authority of Archbishop Nienstedt? Which board members were most influential in the discussion? Now that the university is not a diocesan institution does that mean his salary is his to keep? Does a decision that radically changes governance and involves over a million dollars in compensation for a single officer, present a conflict of interest for that officer? These are the questions which we hope the journalism and business ethics students at the University of St. Thomas can seriously explore. While we don't want to listen to the Harvard boys about philosophy or theology, this is a great opportunity to employ their case study model. We seriously suggest case studies of topics that are quite the rage in analyzing non-profits: "Conflicts of Interest: Losing One's Mission by Cultivating a Board," and, "Fostering Venture Philanthropy While Maximizing Executive Compensation."

A Protected Place for Contest-Can We Talk?

A Catholic university that vigorously defends the teaching of the Church is not afraid of debate. Certain honorific forums and public addresses are not allowed for enemies of human dignity or of the Church; but with so many enemies and so few places to engage in debate, a Catholic university can have no fear of engaging error. There are two limits of speech which abide in a Catholic community. Our speech code forbids blasphemy (commandment II) and obscenity (commandment VI). Blasphemy and obscenity are verbal violations of the sacred - a Catholic category which we protect by the rules of our common life.

There are three notorious failures of President Dease to teach students about civil discourse and to present the Catholic university as a community dedicated to both liberty and truth. The speakers involved were Bishop Desmond Tutu, Ann Coulter, and Tommie of the Year, Ben Kessler.

The Tutu insult was an embarrassment for the university displaying the deep flaws of Father Dease's almost adolescent impressionability. Some Jewish friends of Fr. Dease thought Bishop Tutu less than kind to Israel. Fair enough. Personally I support all of Israel from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean and I wouldn't like Desmond Tutu arguing a justice case in the UN. And yes it is true; Bishop Tutu has said things about Israel which were "hurtful." Hurtful? In the Mideast? Someone was hurt by something said about the rights of states in the Mideast? Wow! Now there is some news! Well, when Fr. Dease found out that the last Jewish guy he talked to was "hurt," he decided there will be no more hurt at his university. So Fr. Dennis Dease, President of the largest Catholic university in the upper Midwest, declared there would be no lecture by Bishop Desmond Tutu.

After some well deserved bad press and a quick planetary check, Father got himself back on earth. Possibly he had lunch with a different

Jewish friend who said it was ok, or maybe he met a Moslem or maybe he met a grownup. And we wonder why “Catholic intellectual” is considered an oxymoron.

Now slide over on the right side and picture the huge overflow crowds for speaker Ann Coulter for her speech on campus in April of 2005. She was flanked by several guards because members of the tolerant left in the school had made threats. She held her own amidst shouts, including several male students using the F-word. The policy of the university, which Fr. Dease is supposed to execute is that “the university will ensure that these dialogues occur in an arena free of fear of reproach or reprisal.”

The next day Fr. Dease added his thoughts. An apology that a speaker needs an armed escort on a Catholic university? An apology that young men yelled obscenities at a woman, speaking as a guest of the university? No, Fr. Dease labeled her talk “hate speech.” “Hate speech” is neither obscenity nor blasphemy - the Catholic categories of the forbidden. “Hate speech” is the forbidden category of the perpetually offended. Fr. Dease let the aggrieved catcallers know he was with them. What are a few shouts? She should have been banned! You see, “hate speech” is even worse than hurtful. The lesson that public catcalling would be tolerated was well-learned and the new barbarians were given their own commencement to demonstrate the benefits of their Catholic university education.

Fr. Dease assures us that St Thomas is the antithesis of a secularized university. He states that Catholic identity is getting stronger. Ask Ben Kessler. He addressed the graduating class of May 2006 as Tommie of the Year. He spoke on happiness - the real meaning of happiness. He made a classical kind of Catholic argument relating man’s final ends and nature to real happiness. He named several examples of selfishness - the opposite of

true happiness. He related happiness to the giving of self. He listed several of the school year's controversies as evidence of selfishness - using birth control, food fights in the refectory requiring security guards, and sex out of wedlock. He confessed that he too was selfish. He named men who were not selfish: "Ghandi, Martin Luther King and dare I say... Jesus Christ." When I read his speech, I was a little miffed that he said "dare I say" before mentioning Christ's name on a Catholic campus. Then I watched the speech on U Tube. Sure enough, when he said Jesus Christ; like a catcall from hell there were loud and persistent boos. For a second time he repeated his refrain that to be happy is to give, give, give. A fellow graduate stood up and yelled in time "Gay, Gay, Gay." Kessler asked rhetorically, "What would make you happy?" A student rose and yelled "If you quit this **** speech. That would make me happy!" They booed, they yelled. Some more sensitive souls wept. Father Dease's ever-more-Catholic university and his petulant graduates had their participatory Tommie speech. The next day the president apologized - for Ben Kessler, that he had made remarks in an inappropriate setting. Ben Kessler apologized too. He had learned his lesson from the Catholic president. The progressives on campus were livid but proud, as several letter writers wrote that the Kesslerian assault on their sensibilities had been answered immediately with direct action. The "orthodox" faculty ducked for cover in a Catholic Studies closet. The administration's spokesperson noted that mail had been overwhelmingly negative toward Kessler. We might label this the new "What is your mail running?" test for Christian witness.

A courageous isolated Catholic youth went too far in thinking he could say in public what a few of his teachers taught him in class. The progressive bullies enforced the "Don't talk about your Jesus to me!" rule.

That was Fr. Dease's ever deepening Catholic culture at commencement, 2006. Since commencement addresses are our subject and Harvard a model, let us close this section with a few words from a Harvard commencement back in 1978.

“ A Decline in Courage may be the most striking feature which an outside observer notices in the West in our days. The Western world has lost its civil courage, both as a whole and separately, in each country, each government, each political party and of course in the United Nations. Such a decline in courage is particularly noticeable among the ruling groups and the intellectual elite, causing an impression of loss of courage by the entire society. Of course there are many courageous individuals but they have no determining influence on public life. Political and intellectual bureaucrats show depression, passivity and perplexity in their actions and in their statements and even more so in theoretical reflections to explain how realistic, reasonable as well as intellectually and even morally warranted it is to base state policies on weakness and cowardice. And decline in courage is ironically emphasized by occasional explosions of anger and inflexibility on the part of the same bureaucrats when dealing with weak governments and weak countries, not supported by anyone, or with currents which cannot offer any resistance. But they get tongue-tied and paralyzed when they deal with powerful governments and threatening forces, with aggressors and international terrorists... Should one point out that from ancient times decline in courage has been considered the beginning of the end?”

Alexander Solzhenitsyn at Harvard University
Thursday June 8, 1978

St. Thomas, Moral Incoherence and Race

As recently as the academic year of 2007, three black female students have had racist remarks and notes placed in their rooms. They required security guards in their hallways. How can a Catholic school, thirty years after the real civil rights movement, sink so low? What is the experience of

black students on campus? Is there a Catholic community to greet and embrace them? Not really. The few black students at St. Thomas are perpetually separated for multicultural events and segregated facilities. Blackness trumps all other loyalties and interests. When President Dease goes to lunch with a student, he tries to pick a Saudi or black student if possible. (If you wonder why there are more Saudi Moslems than Sudanese Christians at the school, think “petrodollars vs. refugees.”) A black girl complains that speakers continually say we have to “tolerate African Americans.” She objects to this and students look on with bewilderment. Toleration is the by-word here, not love. The black male head of diversity writes in homosexual magazines of the need to accept homosexual acts as love, not sin. When he says “brother,” who knows what he means? And people wonder why healthy young black males shy away from St. Thomas. As if the College of St. Catherine’s feminist fantasy campus is not enough, the diversity world at St. Thomas lumps wealthy females (see Dummer center), homosexuals and cross-dressers as the vanguards of the oppressed. The few black and Hispanic students are then welcomed as part of this diversity circus of aggrieved pathologies. What an insult to the black Baptists who fought and died in the real civil rights movement.

White students, of course, come to quickly resent this mindless fragmentation of students and erection of barriers. Far too few make any attempt to break through the institutional segregation with the normal forms of Christian friendship. The black students experience what the black Anglican bishops of Africa have so forcefully objected to. Being black really is not the same as being homosexual. That is a revolting insult even in the mouth of an official black homosexual salaried by the school to “live out the experience of a salaried holder of double oppression-being black and being

gay.” The resentment on campus is high and given the general permission to act out when offended it is a risky place for defenseless women of color. One wonders; where is the chivalry? The notion on this old military campus that every male is a protector of every female is considered a primitive and unsophisticated old-style Catholic belief, assigned to that same discarded category as the physical resurrection of Christ. There is no wide-radius identity which students share together. Walk on the campus. There once was a deep communal core. It has disappeared. The culture is a sick cross between the individualistic world of the aggrieved and the individualistic world of the careerist. There is an occasional tip of the hat to the common good but that has been reduced to service projects for resume building.

White kids who have known real black people (some jerks and some friends) in high school or the army are told they are holders of white privilege. Black people are continually set apart and told to emphasize their racial identity above any other communal grouping which might make them commit that horrible sin against diversity: that they might “forget” for a nanosecond they are black. They might think they are a man or a woman or an American or a Catholic... or even a busy student. Only in sports is the racial highlight pen put away. In dating, racial barriers seem unassailable walls but then dating itself, as a formal ritual of male-female meeting, has given way to the house party. Racism is fostered institutionally at St. Thomas by clinging to a failed separatism movement made laughable by the paucity of black students maintaining their black identity under the stern glance of middle class middle-aged white women whose job is to keep races and sexes apart while fostering deeper bonds of acceptance between homosexuals and their homophobic peers. Does this sound incoherent? Welcome to the University of St. Thomas. If you are black and nineteen,

expect to be confused and alienated. There is no larger community you are being welcomed to. You will be separated and branded. Your skin color puts you in a category aligned with sexual perversion. It's a lot like the Jim Crow days. The likelihood your picture will be on a student pamphlet is ten times that of a white student. Fr. Dease is much more likely to take you to lunch. But if you came to a Catholic university to deepen your prayer life, receive a rigorous education, and form friendships with fellow Catholics regardless of skin color—we can arrange counseling to help you find your real identity as an “African American.”

Moral Incoherence and Hypocrisy

In March, 2006, 140 faculty and staff members at St. Thomas signed a petition accusing the administration of hypocrisy and a lack of integrity in dealing with a faculty members who wished to bring unmarried partners on a school choir trip. The faculty petition argued: (We will use initials for the name referenced. If her faculty supporters can't blush, we can.)

A.S. came to St. Thomas under the impression that it does not discriminate based on sexual orientation. This was a reasonable assumption given the school's publicly posted non-discrimination policy.

However, when A. planned to travel abroad with the St. Thomas Liturgical Choir accompanied by her partner and son, university officials forbade her family's attendance, citing the “moral dilemma” such arrangements would cause students.

We do not believe that a couple in a committed, loving relationship traveling with students presents a moral dilemma.”

They concluded their petition with:

It is the administration's hypocritical behavior that has served as a bad role model for our students, not the behavior exhibited by our colleagues.

We align ourselves with these three colleagues who have been discriminated against by our administration because none of us can find sure footing on the slippery slope upon which the administration has placed its faculty and staff.

We do not accept the administration's retroactive application of an unwritten policy that is contradictory, discriminatory and applied without due consideration for those affected by it."

Yours in solidarity,

140 names (mostly faculty, some staff - no students).

This petition is a stunning argument against Fr. Dease's contention that the school is growing more Catholic under his leadership. In fact, the only group of faculty members with the courage and clarity to speak are clearly opposed as a matter of principle to fundamental Catholic teachings. There was no similar faculty defense for the Christian witness of Ben Kessler, nor any serious faculty response to ripping the college from its diocesan center. But once we recover from the effect of the desacralized sensibility of human sexuality in this petition, we have to grant the 140 their due. They have made a reasoned and quite irrefutable argument that the Dease administration has been contradictory and retroactive in applying standards that all at St. Thomas had come to believe no longer existed. They did this in an admirable manner in keeping with the intellectual tradition. They came together and made a common argument. They signed their names though it did entail a matter of risk. They fashioned their argument like a concerned and reasonable faculty at a secular school. Since the docsociety is all about public face to face dialogue, we appreciate this aspect of the petitioners.

The feminists in the faculty might have also noted that with all the male homosexual liaisons in the deep underbelly of St. Thomas culture in the last forty years that it was odd to publicly chastise two lesbians interested only in one another. One might think the homosexual “housemother” in Rome (part of Fr. Dease’s litany of great Catholic achievements), who shares his apartment keys and counseling advice with unsuspecting college males in the program, might have been criticized. Or possibly, St. Thomas might stop giving awards to notorious campus chaplain, Fr. Greg Tolaas. Since his tyrannical relativistic reign, homosexuality has been accepted and fostered in numerous departments and throughout all student services especially the chaplaincy, student housing, the women’s center and the diversity department. The last award Tolaas received was accepted posthumously by another openly homosexual priest who lived with him as his “best friend.” Wink, wink, wink! Everybody who was anybody knew all of this but officially it is just Father this and Father that. The choir lady who was outed was quite accurate in sensing she served as a special case for sabotage. The faculty is certainly right that there has been both an unspoken and implied(in the codes of discrimination and diversity) acceptance of homosexuality as a personal choice and just one more form of committed love. It began with a priest chaplain who substituted gay identity support groups for the confessional and has ended with a core contingency of the disoriented now teaching our Catholic youth.

There is no reason to expect that the dissatisfied faculty members will be acting as a group against the contradictory administration in our fight to win back St. Thomas for the Church. The sexual revolutionaries will much prefer the duplicity of Fr. Dease to the clarity of Archbishop Nienstedt. We should not expect too many of these petitioners to join a principled fight

against this larceny of a Catholic institution. In fact, the faculty protestors will see that an autonomous board and an unencumbered President Dease will actually lead to just the free-lifestyle world they want. In a year or two the lesbian couple will probably be honored on Martin Luther King Day as civil rights heroes. Fr. Dease will apologize for their previous persecution and Judge Diana Murphy will beam with pride as she considers that this joyous day would never have happened if she hadn't schemed to liberate the university from the patriarchal stranglehold of the Catholic Church. By then the white homosexual students will vastly outnumber Black and Hispanic men students. The October revolution will be complete.

Fathers Murphy and Dease and their Boards:

The Difference between Leading and Being Purchased.

It is the responsibility of the president to lead in developing among all elements of the university a spirit of understanding, mutual respect and a common understanding of the Catholic mission. Such a spirit is especially important in the relationship between the faculty and the board of trustees.

Msgr. Terrence Murphy, President of St. Thomas (1966-1995)

Throughout his excellent book, *A Catholic University*, Monsignor Murphy emphasizes leadership and the proper selection of the Board of Trustees.

The fear that lay board would lead to secularization - as happened in some protestant universities - was groundless. Lay members are as committed to Catholic identity as clergy...great care must be exercised to get people who are competent, fair-minded and do not have a special cause to advance, and who are committed to the goals of the University. Generally such people are available to the university because there is little the university can offer them in their business profession. Certainly the experience at St. Thomas has been that no one has asked for special consideration.

Here we see the difference between a war veteran - the big-hearted and self-assured Monsignor, and his secretive confused and easily bedazzled successor. Monsignor Murphy knew a lot about business management and leadership but he hadn't heard of venture philanthropy. He had a chivalrous attitude toward women and it disposed him to grant female requests. He did not imagine that a feminist ideologue would argue that, by its nature, designated male leadership is a violation of justice. He had never seen a board member ask for special consideration. He had not met the new kind of board members that Fr. Dennis Dease brought to campus. He had not met Diana Murphy or John Morrison. In *Abortion's Handmaid* we introduce Diana Murphy. The board changed its bylaws at the recommendation of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. The mission of this aggressively secular group is to help college and university presidents handpick boards and then institute self-perpetuating elective boards in the name of democracy - "this country's form of governance." They are adamant secularizers trying to divorce universities and colleges from their sectarian (read: religious) roots and authority structures. Diana Murphy is a financial donor and the Vice Chair of that organization. Who is driving whom? Judge Murphy had been favoring this change for a long time with little effect on the Archbishop. Suddenly in the fall of 2007, Archbishop Flynn reversed his long-standing opposition and the deed was done. Fr. Dease needed no convincing. He had been on board long ago.

We tell more of this tale in *Trust Betrayed*, as we look at the incredible expenditure of money and time by faculty and administrators for Allina Healthcare's project to train primary care physicians. As spokesman

Doug Hennes told us, “It was Allina’s idea - they came to us. We were launching a \$500 million campaign and none of it was for a medical school.” When asked what Morrison thought, he said, “He wanted us to pursue it.” That is putting his role mildly. The ex-Allina CEO and board member did some steering of his own. We have to remember Mr. Morrison is not Mr. Schulze who built Best Buy from a single store or Mr. Rauenhorst who built Opus Corporation by constructing great buildings. This is a venture philanthropist using his board membership as a career move. ***Trust Betrayed*** is what happened when Mr. Morrison ran into a real apostle- Archbishop John Nienstedt. It is not a pretty tale.

Msgr. Murphy titled one of his chapters *Many Lead, One Governs*. The Dease legacy is that many govern and one complies. When the governor is weak, agendas multiply.

“...lay members are as committed to the Catholic identity as the clergy. As long as persons are selected for the board based on solid principles of commitment to the principles of the university and “fit” its spirit, the board will continue to discharge its basic responsibility of holding the university in trust from generation to generation.”

Msgr. Terrence Murphy, President of St Thomas (1965-1995)

Protecting a Sacred Center - Giving a Credible Witness

Monsignor Murphy began his book on the Catholic University with a brief discussion of the two most respected historians of the secularization of American universities, James Burtchaell and George Marsden. He wrote his Ph.D. and a book on *Censorship: Government and Obscenity*.

“Nothing,” he said, “is more vital to the college than strengthening its religious character.” Read through the last few talks by Fr. Dease to his

assembled college faculty and students. See if you will find a trace of such intellect, a whisper of Catholic character for faculty or students. Listen for the name of Christ. The idea of the Catholic tradition has become a kind of biographical inheritance. There is no duty to the new believing Catholic immigrants nor to the old believers who went before. There is no sensibility of “a trust from generation to generation.”(John Ireland) Instead, a new set of “stakeholders” share employment and status interests, some of whom went to local Catholic schools. Catholicism becomes a kind of alumni club defined by whatever group of individuals happen to be employed at a particular place and time in the life of a particular institution. The alumni Catholics were almost all confirmed; but that peculiar sacrament of initiation, binding the baptized to a local living bishop, seems strangely forgotten in this present moment. What we are witnessing under President Dease is an emerging faculty of protest and a Board of Trustees dominated by a few aggressive abortion advocates. It is the Boston College model of Catholicism, not a tradition to safeguard but an inherited entitlement to redefine.

At the center of Catholic culture is a definition of life as sacred. A man’s seed, a woman’s virginity, the sacramental conjugal act and at the very center the incarnational presence of God in Christ and the Eucharist. All of these sacred centers in a world of evil must be protected and defended. So we teach young men and women sexual purity and temperance. We initiate courting rituals and formalize consent in wedding feasts. We personalize a sacred private space for sexual expression in marriage. The Body of Christ is surrounded in every diocese by a protective body of celibate men under the fatherhood of a bishop. All of these sacred centers need personalities and communities of protection to safeguard them. This

ordering for beauty to protect the sacred is the Catholic masculine culture that unites the priest, the soldier, the scholar and the father. It is why Archbishop Ireland created a college for classical studies (for future doctors and lawyers) tied to a seminary centered on theology and philosophy. It is why St. Thomas has always had a strong military tradition and why Archbishop Ireland saw patriotism and love of Church as deeply resonant communal bonds of love. There will be no sacred center where life can be lived at its highest and most beautiful level if there are not men in communion who unite to protect and safeguard what has been given to us.

Our present campus culture treats what is sacred as disposable. The University chapel is being renovated to make a moveable altar so the space is more amenable to concerts. King David cried to the Lord “How can I live in this palace when thou art in a tent?” Fr. Dease has renovated his own house and asked the Lord to share His quarters with performers. In personal morality and public worship, the university is losing the sacred center which defines its mission inside the larger communal mission of the local church. Only a strong bishop grounded in sacred worship can reorient the university so we might reorder student life, reinvigorate faculty coherence and remind a board they are serving a trust. Father Dease has lost his own sense of the sacred. He has become disoriented. He is no longer a credible witness to the good news. If he would resign and reflect, there is no doubt he could return some day to serve the Church in some other capacity. We urge him to a heroic repentance which would insure the many good things he has done will not be lost to the Church he once served and loved so well.

David Pence for the docsociety

