

# Land O'Lakes 50 Years Later: How the Statement Affected Academia

by Stephen Beale

It was meant to modernize universities and carry out the vision of the Second Vatican Council, but the “Land O'Lakes Statement,” released 50 years ago July 23, has instead contributed to a range of unintended consequences, including a loss of their distinctive identity for many of the top institutions of Catholic higher education. “On the one hand, in many respects, Catholic universities are better than ever in terms of financial resources, scholarly productivity and the beauty of campuses. On the other hand, Catholic identity in terms of faculty, students and commitment to the liberal arts continues to weaken,” said Christopher Kaczor, a professor of philosophy at Loyola Marymount University.

The often-criticized statement was formulated during a period when many Catholic academics were bristling against the conception that Catholic universities must serve as beacons of fidelity. They argued that this commitment to Catholic identity compromised their academic freedom and injured the capacity of Catholic institutions to compete with their secular counterparts.

So, in 1967, a sampling of college presidents and other leaders in Catholic higher education assembled at a retreat center in the town of Land O'Lakes in northern Wisconsin. Their mission: to apply their understanding of the principles of the Second Vatican Council — in particular, the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* — to Catholic universities in the United States.

The gathering, which was hosted by Notre Dame's president, Holy Cross Father Theodore Hesburgh, was part of a series of regional meetings in advance of a summit of the International Federation of Catholic Universities the following year.

Father Hesburgh invited representatives from only six U.S. Catholic universities: Boston College, The Catholic University of America, Fordham, Georgetown, Notre Dame and Saint Louis. Four other non-American universities also sent representatives, but the large majority of U.S. Catholic colleges were excluded from the discussion.

The outcome was a six-page document known as the “Land O'Lakes Statement,” which critics say sparked an unintended revolution at many of the most prestigious institutions of Catholic higher education, such as Notre Dame, Georgetown and Boston College, leading to a disastrous decline in Catholic identity and mission and even outright rejection of the teaching authority of the Church.

The 26 signers of the statement included Archbishop Paul Hallinan of Atlanta, who was a member of CUA's board of trustees, and Bishop John Daugherty, who participated as the chairman of the Episcopal Committee for Catholic Higher Education. Father Theodore McCarrick, who was then president of the Catholic University of Puerto Rico and who later became the cardinal-archbishop of Washington, D.C., also signed the document.

## Freedom to Dissent

The opening paragraph of the statement — which was formally titled “Land O'Lakes Statement: The Nature of the Contemporary Catholic University” — articulates the document's central objective. “To perform its teaching and research functions effectively the Catholic university must have a true autonomy and academic freedom in the face of authority of whatever kind, lay or clerical, external to the academic community itself,” the statement declared.

The statement's spirit was on prominent display by the following year, when several U.S. theologians took a lead role in dissenting publicly against *Humanae Vitae*, Paul VI's 1968 encyclical affirming the Church's teaching regarding the immorality of artificial contraception.

Jesuit Father Charles Curran — who had been dismissed from CUA's theology department in April 1967 for advocating dissenting views on contraception and then rehired shortly afterward following protests that his dismissal contravened the tenets of academic freedom — was in the forefront of this theological dissent.

In subsequent decades, public actions similarly challenging or contradicting Church teachings, particularly in the area of sexuality and the sanctity of human life, became commonplace on many Catholic campuses. Among the most egregious examples in recent years have been annual performances of the pornographic play *The Vagina Monologues* and high-profile events providing platforms for abortion advocates like the April 2016 speech at Georgetown by Planned Parenthood President Cecile Richards.

Other adverse consequences, according to critics, include a steep decline in the percentage of Catholic faculty at many colleges; the adoption of secular models of curricula; the reassignment of authority over many colleges from Catholic entities to independent boards of trustees; and the removal of crucifixes and other Catholic symbols from classrooms and other campus spaces.

Speaking to the *Register* in February 2008, the late Cardinal Francis George discussed the effects of the statement:

“The sense of academic freedom that came in with the ‘Land O’Lakes Statement’ is just like the sense of academic freedom in the secular universities,” he said. “Namely, it’s a way to protect the independence and the autonomy of an individual professor, not as a way formally to protect the search for truth, as it is in the Catholic understanding of freedom: Freedom is for the purpose of discovering truth, not just to protect somebody’s privileged position.

“So those are tensions that are ongoing that haven’t been resolved, and I’m not sure we have the means to see our way out of those problems now.”

### **Unintended Impact?**

But the impact, critics say, was largely unforeseen and unintended. “A movement was unleashed by Land O’Lakes. It was an unintended movement, and that unintended movement has really borne fruit in terms of increasing secularization,” said Jesuit Father Robert Spitzer, the former president of Gonzaga University and current president of the Magis Center, a California think tank that seeks “to provide a comprehensive and rational response to today’s secular myths.”

The statement’s priorities reflected a belief that the foundational principles of Catholic colleges should be largely the same as for secular universities; according to the statement, “institutional autonomy and academic freedom are essential conditions of life and growth and indeed of survival for Catholic universities as for all universities.”

“So essentially what they are saying is university first; then you add on the Catholic dimension,” said Holy Cross Father Bill Miscamble, a historian at Notre Dame. “My critique would be ... that [regarding the words in the phrase] the ‘Catholic university’ — one informs the other. They’re sort of integral. You don’t separate out ‘Catholic’ from ‘university’ or say ‘university’ first, then we’ll add on ‘Catholic.’ No, ‘Catholic university’ helps define the kind of university you are.”

Catholic educators still wanted a Catholic presence on their college campuses — the statement asserts that Catholicism must be “perceptibly present and effectively operative.” But Land O’Lakes adherents saddled theology departments — themselves in the midst of transformation and turmoil — with the task of carrying this out, according to Father Miscamble. “In throwing the burden on theology, they gave little serious attention to fashioning a curriculum appropriate for a modern Catholic university, and they gave almost no consideration to the task of recruiting capable and committed faculty to teach in it,” he said. The result, said Father Miscamble, is “a fraying of Catholic mission and identity at many Catholic universities.”

### **Problematic Reforms**

The universities’ slide away from their solid Catholic identity is not only a case of neglect, however. Many of the reforms implemented as a result of Land O’Lakes are also deeply problematic, according to Father Spitzer. One was a move to separate Catholic institutions from the religious communities that had founded and run them and put the governance of colleges in the hands of lay boards of trustees who were more interested in fundraising, competitiveness and how to manage a large organization than how to preserve Catholic identity, Father Spitzer said.

Some universities, however, formed boards of members from the religious orders that sponsored them. While trustees focused on more secular matters, the board members focused on Catholic mission. Those universities, he said, fared much better in the long run than those that only had lay trustees, according to Father Spitzer.

Independence from the Church was supposed to bring two things, according to Father Spitzer: One was additional funding — the farther away from the Church, the easier it is to get funding from the state and other secular sources. The second purported benefit was academic prestige. “Once you let that out the door ... how long do you have to wait before it starts taking over, almost like a cancer, where it becomes more important than the actual Catholic mission of the university?” Father Spitzer said.

Another troubling reform was academic freedom, which was interpreted far beyond what Land O’Lakes envisioned. Father Spitzer said there is a difference between hosting a debate on atheism and having to hire an atheist to teach. The latter situation is an example of how academic freedom has, according to the Jesuit priest, gone “hog wild.”

“Theology courses became theological studies or religious studies courses taught no longer by a believing Catholic and focusing primarily on figures such as Augustine and Aquinas. Instead, courses might be taught by an atheist about Hinduism,” Kaczor said. As a result, the traditional vision of a Catholic university, in which individual disciplines were integrated into an overarching vision of the human person, his or her place in the world and the relationship to God faded away. “This idea of integration is not only pooh-poohed; it’s almost viewed as naïve,” Father Spitzer said.

### **Defending Land O’Lakes**

But Land O’Lakes has its defenders. One is David O’Brien, a retired historian at the College of the Holy Cross. He says it’s important to not overlook the many real benefits of Land O’Lakes. “Look at all those schools: their great work, the devotion of the alumni and friends, the spirit on their campuses,” O’Brien said.

“Do I wish they made a greater contribution to the life and work of our Church? Of course! But the shortcomings are on both sides, and Catholics, not just bishops, ought to think about that,” O’Brien added. He also suggested that the rampant secularization on many Catholic college campuses today may not be the result of Land O’Lakes as much as the product of broader cultural and societal trends in the 1960s.

“I would want to look at the word ‘secularization’ and try to locate the discussion in the wider context of U.S. Catholic history — much of what one would say about the 50-year movement of Notre Dame and Holy Cross could be said about many, if not most, laypeople of my generation and since — less intimately linked to formal ‘church’; boundaries between us and others more permeable; loyalties more shared,” O’Brien said.

Father Spitzer doesn’t dispute that broader trends were a factor — in particular, he notes a real dissent movement in higher education that took shape from the 1940s to the 1960s and was led by figures such as Catholic University of America historian John Tracy Ellis. But it was Land O’Lakes that empowered and unleashed such latent forces, according to Father Spitzer.

### **Faithful Alternatives**

Rather than Land O’Lakes, Father Spitzer and Father Miscamble say Catholic universities should adopt the principles of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, Pope St. John Paul II’s encyclical on higher education, which appeared more than two decades later, in 1990. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* better defines what a Catholic university should be, in particular stipulating that a majority of faculty should be faithful Catholics, Father Miscamble said.

While larger legacy institutions — Boston College, Georgetown and Fordham are often mentioned — declined in terms of their Catholic identity and mission, other smaller Catholic colleges have sprung up that embody John Paul II’s vision for Catholic higher education. Note: For a list of colleges who share this approach see the “Catholic Colleges and Universities” section of the links page ([staycatholic.com/catholinks](http://staycatholic.com/catholinks)).

One is Christendom College, which was founded in Front Royal, Virginia, 40 years ago. “We’ve continued to do what Catholic higher education was created to do. We have not waned from that. We have not run from it,” said

Tom McFadden, the vice president for enrollment and marketing at Christendom. As at many of the colleges that have rejected the Land O'Lakes approach, the contrast between Christendom and many of the older schools' campuses is striking. Male students wear slacks and ties and female students wear dresses and skirts/dress pants to class, Mass and lunch. There are separate men's and women's dorms, and coed visitation is not allowed. The school has an 86-hour core curriculum, and its professors all take an oath of obedience to the magisterium.

Christendom has eschewed the attitude of academic freedom that says "We want to teach whatever we want to; we don't want Holy Mother Church telling us what to do," McFadden said. "Holy Mother Church, as we believe as Catholics, has the truth ... and for a college to say we don't want to have to teach the truth, that's a problem."

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