

OUR HERITAGE: A LAUNCHING PAD (RIVIER COLLEGE HERITAGE DAY PRESENTATION, JANUARY 31, 2006)

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There is an ancient curse, attributed variously to the Irish, the Chinese and even to the Mafia, that states “May you live in interesting times.”

Frankly, I don’t think of our interesting times as a curse, but nobody can deny that they certainly are a challenge. Those of us who spend much of our professional life in Catholic higher education are constantly challenged to understand the interesting times we live in, and to understand **time present** in light of **times past** from which we derive much of our identity. What is not so easy to come to grips with is the fact that the future will be formed in large part from what we do with the present. It is not possible for us here today to fathom what Rivier College will be like in 50 or 100 years, yet what we do today, this week, this year, in the next decade, will form the heritage that the Rivier Heritage Day speaker in the year 2056 – or the year 2106 – may indeed dwell upon.

Thus I like to think of the history we are about to make, the heritage we are about to forge, in light of what we are challenged to accomplish today, next year, in the next decades – and to think of where we are positioned in time as a launching pad, a place from which we acknowledge what are our greatest contemporary challenges and then think about how we will use them to shape Rivier in the future, indeed, to share in the shaping of all of Catholic higher education in the future.

Before I talk about some of our more specific challenges for the present and future, let me look back for just a moment. Simone Weil, in *The Need for Roots*, has said, “To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.” Our rootedness in Catholic higher education goes back centuries, and one of the most identifiable places is on the left bank in Paris, many centuries ago, when robed teachers (among them the famed Abelard) met with students who seated themselves on the ground. Move forward in time and over centuries to the founding of religious congregations in Europe and America – religious congregations that took seriously both the life of the mind as well as the life of the spirit. Our rootedness in our Catholic colleges and universities is in the charisms and apostolic missions of those congregations just as it is in the inherited intellectual and moral traditions of the larger Church. When we come to the 19th and 20th centuries the rootedness is evident, very tangibly, in universal church documents such as *Rerum Novarum*, *Quadregesimo Anno*, and the documents of Vatican II. And, here in America, our rootedness is proudly imagined in the early efforts of nuns, priests, and brothers who, with a lot more guts than money, dared to serve the young men and women of an immigrant church by starting institutions of higher learning. Some of these institutions began as academies and segued into colleges and universities as the 19th century rolled over into the 20th.

That’s just how Rivier began and understanding our own roots is always a worthy exercise. First, we have the Sisters of the Presentation of Mary educating girls in France after the French Revolution, a time when Catholics were not high on that country’s popularity list. And then, imagine the founding of the college itself here in New Hampshire in 1933 – think of it – there were five faculty sisters and three original students. That is an amazing student/faculty ratio! What imagination and courage it took for

those original women to believe in their dream of a college that would educate the daughters of mill workers. And what imagination and courage it has taken since 1933 for this college to become what it is today.

As a Catholic institution, Rivier's rootedness is proudly imagined in very American documents such as the Bishops letters on poverty and the economy. And our rootedness is proudly imagined in the way that our own institutional leaders have, over the years, exhibited characteristics that are typically American: entrepreneurship, a concern for new immigrants, and an independent spirit that encourages us to say loudly and clearly to the world and to the church, "Yes indeed, we are Catholic. But we also are American and we choose to value things like academic freedom and ethnic diversity."

We should never forget our roots in the 14th century and throughout the hundreds of years that brought us up to today with our multi-million dollar campuses and incredible technology, our diverse student bodies, and the smorgasbord that is the contemporary curriculum. But just as it is necessary never to forget those roots, to forget our heritage, so also is it necessary to look at where we are today and then to imagine forward – to understand that we have the awesome challenge of imaging and shaping the college of the future. We now must see ourselves as REFOUNDING Rivier College for a very new age, with very new needs.

But before we talk about a refounding can begin, let's briefly take stock of where we are today.

During the 1990s the enrollment of Catholic colleges and universities increased by an 18.8% rate – that is three times the national average over the same time period (those statistics come from the National Center for Educational Statistics). There are almost three-quarters of a million students in our Catholic institutions of higher learning.

Why do the students come to Rivier and other Catholic institutions today? There are many reasons that are cited:

- high retention and graduation rates
- many of these schools are categorized by *U.S. News and World Report* as "best buy" schools
- The Templeton Foundation cites Catholic universities and colleges as "character building schools"
- these institutions belong to an educational tradition that stresses spiritual values
- within these schools there is a strong focus on social justice and peace, along with good citizenship
- there is an emphasis on quality teaching
- these schools are known to give attention to individual students
- many of these colleges and universities make special effort to provide access to first generation and minority students
- these schools are typically based on a liberal arts foundation
- they are seen as having a coherent philosophy of life
- they have established global links with other Catholic institutions worldwide.

There are certainly other reasons also why students choose Rivier and other Catholic institutions – program selection, proximity to home, and so forth. What is important to see here is that our 220 Catholic colleges and universities in the U.S. are, at the moment, in a seeming moment of health because of what they have done in the past and what they are doing in the present. But we all know that health can be momentary, and as we look to the future, our schools could very well be in peril and rendered useless unless we face the challenges that are very much with us today.

Just what are some of these challenges? There are many and what I offer here is not by any means an exhaustive list.

But let's begin with the Catholic Church because we are identified as a Catholic college. One huge challenge for schools such as Rivier is to imagine them as places where adult conversation **for and within the larger church** is initiated and takes place. What do I mean by this? In the fall of 2003, at a gathering at BC that was taking place on the heels of the church's priest/sex scandals, Father Bryan Hehir called for a change in attitude within the American church that would allow for really adult conversation. And what can we mean by really adult conversation? I think that this means that persons in positions of authority in the church have to develop a maturity that is comfortable with scientific findings as well as with complexity and ambiguity. For example, within our Catholic colleges and universities we have highly skilled social psychologists and bioethicists working on issues having to do with human sexuality; within our Catholic institutions we have well grounded historians, anthropologists, and sociologists making tremendous contributions to our understandings of human society, human behavior, moral reasoning and so on. Sociologist Mary Johnson has pointedly appealed to church leaders to pay attention to the sociological research and other data that has been gathered for years. She has pointed out that the bishops are ill at ease with data they cannot control – and indeed, it would seem that many are ill at ease in academic settings.

And so, because we can have little faith in Church leadership's ability or willingness to listen to data and respect the experts, I think that Catholic higher education has to make efforts – perhaps heroic efforts — to have its experts listened to. Think about it. We have linguists and social psychologists who have expertise and ability to counsel the church in matters of vocabulary and cultural idiom. Could not these experts in language and psychodynamics be the ones who can help find a needed common ground for adult discussion among those who are conservative and those who are liberal – and even the so-called radicals at both ends of that spectrum?

Our scholars in Catholic higher education also need to make their voices heard beyond American shores. Who better than historians, political scientists, and philosophers to make their voices heard in adult conversations about issues of religious pluralism and extremism? We have appalling examples in our world of how populations are manipulated in the name of religion – including the Catholic religion. I read with horror about the Croatian Catholic men, who, in the name of their religion and with rosary beads in their pockets, were raping Bosnian Muslim women. That is a single example in a very large world filled with extremes, but such an example reinforces the need to imagine that our experts in history, ethics, politics, science, and so forth can bring adult conversation to the world's tables.

While I am on this tack of adult conversation that must come from our Catholic colleges and universities, I would be remiss if I did not bring up two other areas crying out for mature understanding. First is the issue of women in the church –and of course in society, all societies. But here let me just focus on the church. Some of our country's – and the church's – finest women writers, teachers, and researchers are connected in one way or another to our Catholic schools. As members of the Catholic higher education community, women need to insist that they be treated, talked to, and listened to as adults and as the experts that they have become. There still exists stunning disrespect of women within the church and an outrageous inability on the part of male church leadership to take women seriously. Anything less than full respect and equal partnership is unacceptable. We need to model, in our universities and colleges, and perhaps especially in schools like Rivier that are historically women's institutions, how such a demand for full respect and equal partnership can be mounted. Equality should never be negotiable.

Another area crying for maturity of conversation has to do with the hypocrisy that is rampant within our church. The sex scandals were the example with the most egregious ramifications. However, there is another layer of hypocrisy that just goes on and on. Peter Steinfeld, of the *New York Times* and author of *A People Adrift: The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America*, says this on page 218 of that book, "...the well-documented disagreement of Catholic laity with church positions on issues touching on gender and sexuality cannot be excluded from the Catholic classroom; the gap cannot help but introduce a note of reserve, uncertainty, dissimulation, or even hypocrisy into teaching." Peter goes on to say that "Good teachers have probably worked out ways of preserving the integrity of both the church's teaching and their own convictions – but can this be discussed in an open way that would help others?" I truly believe that the Catholic colleges and universities have both the responsibility and the opportunity to lead such discussions with honest respect and education (not just opinions!) for all sides. If not, we continue to have an American church that is just as hypocritical as our American government is with its famous "don't ask, don't tell" policy regarding gays in the military.

Another area crying for maturity of conversation is that issue very dominant in the media and the courts today. I am referring to the collision of cosmologies, the never-ending critique of science by those who espouse creationism. Our Catholic colleges and universities need to be places where intelligent conversation can guide the public discourse, where it is understood that science is a method and not a creed, or as Judith Shulevitz wrote recently in the *Times*, science is "a way of finding things out about the natural world, not a refutation of anything beyond that world." In our Catholic colleges and universities we have theologians and philosophers – and we have chemists, anthropologists, physicists, geologists, and biologists. These are the people who can – better than many people in the media – contribute to mature conversation about science and about religion.

Let me move on now, beyond the need for our colleges to be places where adult conversations can lead the national discourse, to a next challenge. This has to do with what we are trying to do in an institution such as Rivier. What makes a Rivier education different from the educational packages offered at Keene State, for example, or from New England College? When someone gives a Heritage Day talk in the year 2076, what will she or he look back upon that made this college different? Or to put it in business-speak, what is value added about the Catholic higher education experience? How are we Catholic and catholic – with large and small C? And even ask the question, if Rivier dropped its Catholic identity today or tomorrow, would it matter? Who would care? Would the educational experience be different than it is today?

I personally believe that teaching and learning can be a religious activity in the sense that the tension between faith and learning should always be a positive force. There is a very rich Catholic intellectual tradition. There is a rich Catholic moral tradition. There is a rich tradition of social justice praxis in the Catholic Church. Our challenge here is to convey to our students what of human wisdom comes from our tradition. Among us are Christians of many stripes, Jews, Muslims, perhaps Buddhists and followers of Hindu tradition. Our challenge is not to – never, never – try to convert these people. Our challenge is to help all of our students to explore, through all of the disciplines, what makes a person a good person – what makes a good life. What makes a good society?

If, when a Jewish student graduates from Rivier, he or she can honestly say that the Rivier educational experience has made him or her a better Jew, then we will know we have been successful. If a Buddhist or a Muslim student can say upon graduation that he or she is a better Buddhist or Muslim – then we will have been successful.

But we can also hope that the Rivier experience will have formed some better Catholics as well.

And this brings me to what an institution such as Rivier can specifically do for our Catholic students. I recently read a fine book entitled *Tomorrow's Catholic* by Michael Morwood. He lucidly helps his readers understand that much of what he calls the “package” of beliefs, attitudes, and practices we inherited in our Catholic upbringing “was shaped at a time when the church was at the center of western society and when its authority was unquestioned. The package was also shaped within a worldview which was quite primitive by the standards of the new millennium.”

Morwood puts into words what we already know: “The church no longer holds center stage; people in western society readily question authority; our understanding of planet Earth’s place in the universe has changed, and with it our knowledge about its age and the way life developed here. Scripture scholarship now provides us with different ways of understanding and interpreting Scripture. Historical scholarship reveals to us that some beliefs and practices we thought went back to the time of Jesus and the apostles appeared only in the Middle Ages or later.”

Morwood tells us, and I very much believe this, that we face a choice. We can immerse ourselves in the old “package” and try to fight off all of the new knowledge, the new experiences that could influence us to radically change our beliefs and practices. Or, he says, “We can educate ourselves to understand and be conversant with key influences that impinge on our faith, then engage in the challenging task of deepening our appreciation of what we believe in the light of these influences.” The influences that can challenge our faith come from inside as well as outside of the church.

I think that Catholic colleges and universities are the places where study of the new theological challenges should take place. The Catholic colleges and universities are the places where the basics of the faith can be both re-imaged and re-languaged; the colleges and universities are the places where a cohesive religious worldview can be openly and honestly explored—a worldview that is in harmony with scientific understandings of our place in the cosmos. To do this means that we have to be mature enough to live with a certain amount of mystery, ambiguity and even contradictions as we seek Truth. We can go either way – we can, as Morwood says, take a position that “God’s surprises are finished” and that “we have fully worked out and put into neat theological categories all there is ever to know about God”

OR we can accept the challenge presented by Michael Dowd as he says, “The Christian movement today is still in the elementary stages of working out for itself and for the world the implications of the Gospel. There isn’t the slightest doubt that the greatest and boldest creedal assertions are in the future, not the past.”

I would add here, also, that the colleges and universities are also the place where old and emerging Catholic worldviews can be examined in light of other world religions and other approaches to spirituality.

A related challenge for colleges such as Rivier is the acceptance of responsibility for the church’s future leadership. We don’t need to be reminded that the numbers of priests, nuns and brothers are becoming vastly diminished; lay leadership is a current and future necessity. But where will those lay leaders come from if not from Catholic higher education? Can colleges such as Rivier be the places that provide continuing education programs to parish council members, to youth ministers, to ministers of the sick and elderly? Imagine if our colleges and universities partnered with seminaries. Imagine if our psychology faculties, our sociology faculties, our history and philosophy professors were invited to be visiting faculty in the seminaries. Imagine if male seminary students studying for ordination had more opportunity to interact with lay students in classrooms and other programming of our Catholic colleges and universities – lay students who one day will be their parishioners, their parish council members and leaders, the teachers in their schools, and yes, their parish administrators. Such interactions might

contribute to a healthier priesthood in the short and long term, and to a healthier and more well-rounded corps of lay leaders.

Just as a college like Rivier needs to be a corrective in the church it also has the challenge to do the same in the larger society. Ours is a culture of excess and extreme commercialism. Many, perhaps even most, students go to college to get a job that pays well. I hope as we move further into the 21st century, schools such as Riv. will more and more see themselves as places where young people can have opportunities to explore their decisions about future work and life commitments in light of faith. Can our institutions help students to define where their lifetime loyalties will lie – within themselves in a desire for wealth and prestige – or outside of themselves in a desire to serve others, help solve environmental problems, help those whose lives are mired in poverty, use technology in ways that are non-violent and not solely for self-gratification.

Our institutions can be counter-cultural if they are willing to take up that challenge. Our colleges can transmit to students the skills and knowledge that enable them to interrogate all cultural messages and live their lives in ways that are not self-centered. This can be done, but it will take imagination and will to make it happen.

Finally, I would like to pose another challenge for Colleges such as Rivier. We need to become more aware of the vast discrepancy between the resources available to us and the resources available to colleges and universities in the third world. Tom Friedman tells us that the world is flat – and in this flat world I believe that our first world Catholic colleges and universities must become creative about how we can share our resources with schools in the third world. This is a serious challenge. But if we truly believe in social justice, then we will find ways to make this happen.

I have just outlined 11 challenges for Rivier and for all of Catholic higher education. Let me briefly recap:

1. We must keep on exploring our heritage – to keep on learning from those women and men who came before us and who created the institutions that we have inherited and upon which we must continue to build
2. We must be places where adult conversations for and within the larger church can take place. Frankly, if such conversations do not or cannot take place within the Catholic colleges and universities, I do not see any other place within the church where they will happen
3. We must make efforts to have our experts listened to – both by the Church leadership and by society at large
4. Our Catholic colleges and universities need to be models of places where women have full respect and equal partnership
5. We must also be places where we examine our own complicity in hypocrisy – when, how and where it is manifest
6. When it comes to engaging in the public discourse in our so-called culture wars and the collision of cosmologies, we must help to clarify that science is a method and not a creed – that science is a way of finding things out about the natural world and not a refutation of anything beyond that world
7. We must keep examining how teaching and learning can be religious activities
8. We must be places where the basics of faith are re-imaged and re-linguaged – where a cohesive religious worldview can be openly and honestly explored
9. We must accept greater responsibility for the church's future lay leadership – if our lay Catholic leaders do not come from our Catholic colleges and universities, where are they going to come from?
10. We must be a corrective to the larger society and be counter cultural – challenge our students to go out into the world to do more than just make money
11. Find ways we – as institutions – can share our vast resources with the third world.

The challenges I have just outlined for schools such as Rivier can truly seem daunting. And I know these are not our only challenges. That is why it is important to adopt an attitude of adventure as we contemplate them.

Stanley Hauerwas has a wonderful quote. He says, "...the most basic task of any polity is to offer its people a sense of participating in an adventure. For finally what we seek is not power, or security, or equality, or even dignity, but a sense of worth gained from participation and contribution to a common adventure. Indeed, our 'dignity' derives exactly from our sense of having played a part in such a story."

I love that quote because it reminds me that as women and men, engaged in the ongoing life of Catholic higher education with both capital C and small c, we need to relish that we have such opportunity to participate and contribute at what we might call the tipping point in the Catholic higher education endeavor. If you have read Malcolm Gladwell's book you know that the tipping point is that time when an idea takes hold. I like to think of it as when the adventure begins in earnest.

Contemplating the heritage of Rivier is like watching an old movie – it allows our imaginations take us back to appreciate and enjoy another time. But that cannot be all that we let our imaginations do – we have to let our imaginations write the new scripts, tell the new stories, see the new vistas. **If schools such as Rivier do not consciously make their new history – they will be history.**

So I conclude by saying that understanding and cherishing our heritage is an important thing to do. BUT – if understanding and cherishing our heritage consists of nostalgia and a restoration of the "good old days" we are in deep trouble. Rivier and the other Catholic colleges do not need restoration back to the "good old days" – what is needed is a refounding. Ask yourselves, what would Mother Rivier, what would Sister Madeleine of Jesus be doing now given the challenges I have just outlined. I pray that faculty, administrators, students, alumni, trustees will capture their spirit of adventure, their imagination, their wisdom that met the needs of their era, and apply that spirit of adventure, that imagination, that wisdom to the needs of the 21st century. Then we all can delight that we live in "interesting times."

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