



COLLEGE OF THE HOLY CROSS

Center for Religion, Ethics and Culture

December 12, 2001

Edward P. Kirby
379 Harvard Street
Whitman, MA 02382

Dear Mr. Kirby,

I was deeply disappointed to read your group letter to alumni dated September 2001. You and I have talked of these matters several times, and I feel you must have no respect for me or my thirty years work here at Holy Cross. Your ideas are presented with no more nuance, or understanding, or generosity, than when I first met you and your friends. At that time you were, quite appropriately, expressing your views to our new President. And, as I told you then, there were many promising opportunities before the College to deal constructively with its Catholic and Jesuit responsibilities. You ignored all we discussed and now write this uninformed and misleading letter at the start of a major capital campaign, an action I have to judge irresponsible.

You well know that I am no apologist for the College on these matters, and that I have often expressed views on questions of Catholic and Jesuit identity quite critical of College policies. But I also asked you to be fair on two scores. First, much more is being done than you acknowledge and, second, many of the problems you cite, such as the Chaplain's assessment of students, are problems in our whole church (and our culture) not just at Holy Cross.

On the first you ignore (and insult) the work of the Chaplains, the retreats and counseling and spiritual direction, the liturgies and music and all the rest. You do not mention the writing and teaching of our distinguished and devoted theologians. You do not inform your friends among our graduates of the Edward Bennett Williams Fellows, the Loyola Professorship in Roman Catholic Studies, the Catholic Studies reading group, the John Courtney Murray Society, and the many other academic projects I told you about. This year the College administration went out of its way to bring to the College one of the nation's most distinguished art historians, Elizabeth Johns of the University of Pennsylvania, who is trained in the spirituality of St. Ignatius of Loyola and wishes to work at helping faculty, staff and students integrate their faith and their vocation. Already she has launched a student group, "Seeking an Understanding Heart," and spoken with dozens of faculty. As I write she is preparing to lead the third of her Wednesday noon Advent service of guided meditation, attended by an impressive group of faculty, staff and students.

Most of all you do not even mention the Center for Religion, Ethics and Culture, whose work and aspirations and support from Trustees and administration I explained to you at great length. I told you of the major investment of time and treasure our Trustees are making in this project so deeply rooted in Holy Cross tradition. For its first two years the work of the Center has been entrusted to me and Tom Landy, Catholics, active in Catholic organizations, consulted by the Bishops conference. Tom is founding Director of Collegium, one of the most constructive initiatives in

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recent years to support Catholic intellectual life, which you profess to cherish. I have recently been President of the American Catholic Historical Association and I presently chair the Catholic Commission on intellectual and Cultural Affairs and Holy Cross entrusted us with leadership of one of its most significant academic investment in many years.

The Center is many things, but it is at least an effort to give substance to the thing you worry about, the preservation and renewal of an intelligent Catholicism here in our United States. It would be a shame if caring faithful Catholic graduates were persuaded by your uninformed and ungenerous letter to withhold their support for this creative, intelligent and faithful project which is a centerpiece of the capital campaign.

On the second point, student attitudes and behavior, you are simply wrong. Any recent study of American religious practice will show you that these attitudes and behaviors are widespread. Holy Cross does a better job dealing with them, challenging students, offering better alternatives, helping them look at the gaps between behavior and belief, and all the rest, than the Archdiocese of Boston or most local parishes. We all have our faults but the chaplains staff here owes no apology to you or the bishop or anyone else. Quite the contrary we should feel toward them as we should toward so many of our dedicated high school teachers and youth ministers, gratitude for what they give--for so little pay and respect--and awe at their ability to enable so many young people to encounter God in unexpected places. On that score, encountering the holy and developing a serious spiritual life, our students would stand comparison with those of your generation, and mine. On many other scores, they are our superiors.

I know you love Holy Cross, and the church, and you desire an intelligent community of faith. I am sorry you cannot listen when others who share your hopes and anxieties when they explain why they must choose roads other than your own.

Be assured that I, and everyone connected with the Center for Religion, Ethics and Culture, remain ready to speak with you and other concerned alumni at any time.

Sincerely yours,



David J. O'Brien
Director, Center for Religion, Ethics and Culture
Loyola Professor of Roman Catholic Studies

- cc: Rev. Michael C. McFarland, S.J.
- Stephen Ainlay
- Thomas M. Landy
- Patrick McCarthy