It's Good Friday morning, and the newspaper is full of the news from California, about the mass suicide among members of "Heaven's Gate." The cult's beliefs were described by the New York Times's religion reporter as a "skeletal Christian framework" fitted out with "the flesh of a wholly new set of beliefs." So it seems. Imagine a Christian vocabulary (and, perhaps, some Christian concepts) grafted onto a distinctly gnostic metaphysics—with the grafted in the grip of an imagination determined by Star Wars. The 39 cultists took their leave of this world—headed to the "Next Level"—because (as they put in their suicide notice on the Internet) the comet Hale-Bopp was the awaited "marker," that the spacecraft to take them home was at hand.

There is more to the cult's story, including a role for Jesus as a kind of divine messenger, all very sci-fi. Another "interpretation" of Christianity? More sensational than most? We live amidst the rusting superstructure of a Christian society; the infrastructure transformed by so many "interpretations." Gnostic metaphysics (which Heaven's Gate members embraced) changed the Gospel. So did Schliermacher in the last century: once Christian doctrine was transposed from propositional truth into the categories of the heart, it was, well, a different Gospel. Now, we live in a political culture shaped by the demands of the autonomous subject.

The juxtaposition of all this and the rhythms of the Triduum is jarring, and saddening, but it also reminds us to give thanks to God, for sending his Son to save us, and to found a Church with Peter at its head. Last night, the Eucharist; the day after tomorrow, the Resurrection. In fifty more days, the birthday of the church. The body of Christ passing through history—wobbling at times, to be sure, and never as pure and as solid as it should be—not our spaceship; the Ark of Salvation.
Can “Generation X” Learn at a Catholic College?
The Role of Catholic Higher Education in Postmodern America

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Talk of Catholic Higher Education has been, and will be, at the forefront of many ecclesiastical and scholarly discussions. Certainly it has been, and should be, a topic of primary concern for this Fellowship. But what is it that we are all talking about?

Given the fact that the U.S. bishops recently approved a document on the “application” of Ex Corde Ecclesiae, it is clear that the catholicity of higher education is an important, indeed essential, concern for the Church. In this context, however, it seems that the bulk of the issues resonate either at the institutional level (see sections I and III) or at the level of “devotional life” on campus (see section II). In some more particular cases, provision is made for dealing with questions of theological orthodoxy. But what seems to be lacking in all these debates is any talk about what actually happens in the classroom! Perhaps, then, it is time to consider some different questions that focus more on the “experience” of education as it is taking place in the classrooms of contemporary America. What approaches should be employed to give our classrooms a truly “Catholic” character? How can a “Catholic” perspective define the ongoing relationship between teacher and student in our colleges and universities? In light of the present educational subculture in America, answers to these questions may have a more immediate effect as we seek to promote the ideals of the apostolic constitution.

Generation X and Postmodern Education

A fascinating, and perhaps all too accurate, description of what one encounters in the modern day classroom is given in a recent book entitled Generation X Goes to College (Peter Sacks, 1996). In this work, a journalist-turned-professor describes his first day on the job:

Scattered mostly in the back and far side rows were young males with professional sports baseball caps, often worn backwards. Completing the uniform of these guys was usually a pair of baggy shorts, a team T-shirt, and an ample attitude. Slumped in their chairs, they stared ... with looks of disdain and boredom, as if to say “Who in the hell cares where you worked, or what your experience is, of what you know? Say something to amuse me.” (p. 9)

The author goes on to expand his personal analysis of the teaching experience by upbraiding the often rude behavior of today’s students, most of whom prefer that a teacher be more “caring” than demanding. In his view, most students today dwell within a “culture of accommodation” that unwittingly trades “success” for true learning. Yet, he also scolds the entrenched stalwarts of academia. As he sees it, many teachers on the battlefront of this cultural revolution are all too willing to “sell out” the standards of higher education by giving inflated grades in exchange for positive evaluations.

But, though the analysis comes from a lone reporter, this account is not an isolated experience. The classroom scenes so poignantly described are really part of a larger educational milieu. Discussed at greater length in the second half of the book, the phenomenon of “post modernism” is a broader, cultural context that almost defies accu-
rate description. Yet it provides the living environment in which the students of today’s academic generation function. In the words of one student:

Generation X is not a thing; it’s the lack of a thing, the lack of a positive theory, or an opinion about anything. They don’t believe in anything, and everything is up for grabs. (p. 139)

Culled from the pages of this book, and from the numerous discussions which it reports, we can attempt to isolate those “values” which a postmodern generation embodies: entertainment, entitlement, and abandonment.

The first of these so-called values, entertainment, seems quite obvious. Today’s generation of students has been reared on the attention-grabbing images of that electronic baby-sitter called television. Able to be turned off and on at the push of a remote control button, the TV or video screen offers innumerable pictures that often are more “real” to students than reality itself. In this context, a scholarly engagement with ideas takes on a whole new, albeit temporary, aspect.

When you’ve grown up locked on to the spectacle, notions of truth, reality, and substance recede into meaninglessness. What is meaningful is what is momentarily before your eyes. (p. 148)

Thus, what the modern media guarantees to students is only “a kind of eternity of noisy insignificance” (p. 148). In turn, what this postmodern focus on entertainment brings to our classrooms is a large dose of anti-intellectualism, otherwise known as the “triumph of the Idiot Culture” (p. 150). As the novice professor concludes:

To the extent that the postmodern generation traffics above all else in entertainment values, popular culture, and image, they are being inundated with the screwy idea that there’s little to be gained from being smart. It’s worth noting again that the smart guy who conceived and wrote the book and screenplay, Forrest Gump, earned for his work on the film about 1 percent of Tom Hanks’s $31 million as an actor in the movie. And let’s not forget the Gump phenomenon itself. Among the most popular movies of all time, Forrest Gump idealizes naive stupidity as something to strive for in life. It pays handsomely. (pp. 149-150)

Is it any wonder, then, what competition teachers face in the world of higher education? Even with the pedagogical aids provided by technological innovations, can our Catholic colleges and universities respond to this challenge?

The second so-called value of post modernism is a growing sense of entitlement. Today’s students are, indeed, “customers” in the free market of education. Theirs is the consumer mentality that envisions “success” as something to be paid for, something to get in exchange for ever-increasing tuition, rather than the result of intellectual motivation poured forth in the pursuit of wonder or academic skills honed to critical precision. Instead, students raised in a postmodern society of hyper consumerism appear to want facile knowledge, served up in easily digestible, bite-sized chunks. They have little tolerance for messy thinking or expansion of their frames of reference beyond the routine and predictable. In short, they view themselves as consumers who pay teachers to provide “knowledge,” regardless of how superficial that knowledge might be. After all, how hard should a consumer have to work at buying something? (p. 162)

And this mentality is not limited to youthful students. Wanting desperately to provide satisfaction for the consumers in desks before us, educators, too, can easily fall prey to this economic trap.

Amid the postmodern shift in power from authorities to consumers, the institutions themselves appear unwilling to draw firm lines in the sand. Instead, they have redefined themselves in the age of hyper consumerism as providers of consumer services, while paying lip service to their traditional roles as gatekeepers and vanguards of academic standards. (p. 164)

What price, then, do we really pay in terms of granting a college degree? And at what cost do we market the tenets of Catholic higher education?

Finally, perhaps the most all-encompassing “value” of post modernism is its sense of abandonment. Cloaked in deconstructionist terms as a “delegitimation” of outmoded structures of power and authority, the attitude which most clearly characterizes this Generation X is its pervasive
cynicism. Embracing as it does a television motto from The X-Files, “Trust no one,” the current generation of students has cast off any pretensions of enlightenment rationality in favor of a “knowledge” that is simply subjective and relativistic.

... GenXers have grown up in a world in which “truth” and “reality” are what Coke or Connie Chung or the American Medical Association might have invented through persuasion and technique. Reality for GenXers is an image created on a video screen, or how you employ digital technology to alter that image into a completely new reality. Members of Generation X are cynical and sophisticated, and their reality is not objective, measurable, or fixed. In the postmodern world, reality and truth are a fiction. (p. 124)

In such a fictive world, any attempts at higher education must deal with the students’ oft-uttered, hardly unalterable belief that everything is either completely corrupt, deceptively illusional, or patently mythical. The result, quite simply, is an “epoch of slackening” (Jean-Louis Leotard, p. 120) to which persons on both sides of the desk may succumb. At the same time, it poses a definite challenge to Catholic higher education, which must respond to the fact that postmodernism leaves an entire generation of students “on their own to establish a plethora of new belief systems” (p. 134).

“Catholic” Higher Education

To meet the challenge posed by our postmodern culture requires bringing the matter of Catholic higher education down from the lofty heights of institutional governance and devotional practices to the lived reality of classroom experience. In this respect, the “Catholicity” of higher education is more an organizational milieu than a juridical structure, more an approach to values across the curriculum than to actions defined as liturgical. To explain, let us first contrast the values of a Catholic higher education with those supposed “values” of postmodernism. We will conclude with a few simple suggestions for classroom use.

Distinct from the identifiably “scientific” approach to reality championed in the enlightenment, an approach which Generation X has cast aside in favor of anti-intellectual entertainment, a Catholic education issues forth from the perspective of biblical wisdom. That is to say, as the sages of old were able to see in all things the hand of a providential God, so in our classrooms a revelatory imagination should carry the day. Whether in the words of literature, or the experiments of science, or the marketing of business, or the performance of the arts - in these and all studies the place of God need not be dismissed as ancillary to the educational task.

Rather, for a generation enamored of so much “entertainment,” teachers today can offer the Word made flesh. Following the lead of the gospel writers, who portrayed the Son of God without describing him physically, teachers today can and should promote students’ imagination, in such a way as to envision the hand of God at work in all things human and to appropriate this truth in their own experiences. To lead students from nature to the Creator, from history to Providence, from words to the Word, from medicine to the Healer, from philosophy to Wisdom — this is the task of a Catholic higher education. And, in contrast to the fictional characters of TV and film, we have in our tradition the models of the saints - real life versions of the soap-operatic ups and downs of a human life lived in accord with the gospel. Even without media make-over, these biographies are capable of capturing the imagination of any generation.

Distinct from the capitalistic worldview that has given way to consumerist entitlement, the “ethic” of Catholic higher education needs to be virtue-based. Rejecting any “financial Pelagianism” that envisions success as the result of strictly human schemes and endeavors, a Catholic education is founded on the virtue of humility. This virtue brings with it its own “Attitude.” Consonant with all fields of study, it recognizes the primacy of grace in human achievement. It is the virtue which acknowledges the truth of the gifted-ness of our lives — and the Giver at the
source of any and all advancement in civilization.

At the same time, this virtue-ethic, properly disclosed, will mitigate any sense of free entitlement. Rejecting that “nannyism” which all too willingly holds the hands of its students, Catholic education engenders and encourages the real effort it takes to learn and to live. Catholic higher education subscribes to and transmits an ethic of individual responsibility in the context of the common good. In this way, the “me” generation which revels in its market savvy will encounter the values of a transcendent kingdom and will learn to glory in the universal dignity of all persons.

Finally, distinct from a pervasive cynicism that delegitimizes knowledge and power, a Catholic education promotes an optimistic worldview. Far from being dissociated with modern living, Catholic higher education embraces our many and varied cultural experiences so as to transform them. Looking to the historically valuable tradition of the lived experience of the Church, Catholic higher education can counter the relativism and subjectivism of Generation X with a forthright and courageous upholding of moral standards, of a way of living and acting that is not imposed from without by some arcane authority, but which is inherently reasonable and ultimately fulfilling.

Supported by this optimism, students of the postmodern generation need not distrust everyone and dwell lost in their own little universe. Rather, the exhortation that characterizes the current pontificate in the Church, “be not afraid”, might well become the slogan for our present age, for teachers and students alike. Now the question is: how do we translate these “values” of Catholic higher education into the day-to-day experience of life in the classroom?

In light of the “culture of accommodation” that envelops the postmodern classroom, Catholic educators need, quite simply, to be more fearless in making demands of their students. For a variety of reasons, either in the name of promotion or “charity”, today’s teachers may easily slip into the guise of service providers who too generously offer to student-consumers the effortless education to which they believe themselves entitled. However, this only cheapens education for all. Requiring that students read critically at advanced levels, that they write coherently in correct fashion, that they speak convincingly with rhetorical clarity. These and other demands associated with intellectual achievement need to be respected, however unsettling such demands may seem. Catholic educators should learn from the Master who, while disclosing the mercy of God, also challenged penitents to “go and sin no more.” This same Master would eventually be scorned and put to death on the Cross; but only in and through the unaccommodating event of the passion and crucifixion does the splendor and glory of the resurrection take place, both for Himself and for His followers.

In light of the entitlement mentality that suffuses a generation clamoring for “success” in school, Catholic educators need to demonstrate increased vigilance in the awarding of grades and the conferral of credits. The fact is that all students are not equal, despite the egalitarian espousal of inflated grades. The more that grade averages tip the scales at B and better, the more that grades are seen as flexible and negotiable, the harder it will be to claim that there are any standards at all. And once relativism enters by way of the classroom door, it will become ever more difficult to dissuade it from inhabiting the realms of conscience and all moral action. This is not to say that care and compassion for students should be disregarded. Catholic educators should, of course, be respectful of the inherent dignity that befits all the children of God. Nevertheless, equal in dignity does not mean similar in above-average performance. Educational paradise may be a world in which there are no grades, but here below standards do exist —
and educators must make them matter, for everyone's sake.

Finally, in light of the delegitimization that enshrouds a cynical generation, Catholic higher education must return to its roots in the gospel relationship between Jesus and his followers. For students, this means adopting and developing the role of disciple. In contrast to the "Attitude" with which the modern day classroom was depicted at the beginning of this essay, students need to once again become followers, those actively engaged in the search for knowledge, not passive recipients of the learning of others. Similarly, teachers need to become masters — not in the authoritative sense of purveyors of otherwise unattainable insights, but as living models of that intellectual research and cooperative service that is part and parcel of the educational venture. In this renewed relationship between student and professor, education will be more convincing than amusing and learning will take place by way of persuasion rather than imposition.

If a Catholic higher education is to make some difference in our postmodern culture, each of us — student and teacher alike — needs to be reminded of the fundamental call of the gospel. When the disciples sought from Jesus the answer to their question, he said to them "Come, and you will see." This was not a statement of institutional mission or a norm for devotional exercise. Neither was it a pedagogical ploy meant to be entertaining or entitling or even cynical. It was an invitation. And only when those searching for an answer actually went and followed Him — by listening to his wisdom and witnessing his virtue and sharing his optimism — only then did they learn and come to know what really matters most: "We have found the Messiah" (John 1:35-41).

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**O Tempora, O Mores**

[National attention has been drawn to the drama of which Professor Blakely of the Notre Dame Law School speaks below. His report is compelling, pellucid and self-explanatory. Fellow's will be amused by dissenting theologians who cannot abide dissent from their views. The motto of Notre Dame, incidentally, is not "God, Country and Notre Dame," but Vita, Ducedo, Spes. Those interested in following the continuing saga can consult Fred Fredoski's "personal page" at www.nd.edu. Ed.]

Investigation of the Presidential Appointment
Dissenting Views
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**DISSENTING VIEWS OF PROFESSOR BLAKELY**

**THE RESOLUTION**

When Vice Chair Professor Jean Porter, on September 11, 1996, presented to the Senate, in behalf of the Executive Committee, the original Resolution, which we do not report out, concerning the appointment of a candidate by the President to the Department of Theology, I was deeply troubled. Professor Porter, in summary, told the Senate — Two years ago the department was informed that a priest of the Congregation of Holy Cross was completing his doctoral studies shortly and would be applying to the department for hiring as a teacher; a budget line for his salary would be provided to the department by the University for this purpose. In February '96, he officially applied, and in April he was interviewed and gave a public lecture. In the course of its procedures, the department did not consider him qualified for an appointment and turned down his application. In May at the request