

Taking an Oath

by Tim Drake

STEUBENVILLE, Ohio — When Adrian and Beth Galvez of Williamsburg, Va., looked at colleges for their eldest daughter, Christa, they considered several Catholic institutions. In the end they chose Franciscan University of Steubenville because of its adherence to Church teachings. "We had visited other Catholic universities that appeared to have given up being Catholic for fear of losing grant dollars," Adrian Galvez recalled. "One of the schools had removed the crucifixes from its classrooms." At another school the Galvezes visited, the tour guide seemed to apologize for the presence of religious priests and brothers on campus. "There's no point in considering a school that has abandoned its Catholic identity," Galvez said. "Whatever pursuit our children feel called to, what we don't want is after having been given the privilege of trying to plant the seed to follow God, for them to go to a university and have that driven from them by some apparently well-meaning person." Galvez expects they will seriously consider Steubenville when their remaining three children graduate from high school as well.

Ranked 24th among Midwestern universities in *U.S. News and World Report's* 2004 Guide to America's Best Colleges, Franciscan University of Steubenville is one of only a dozen of the country's 235 Catholic institutions of higher education whose theology faculty have met canon law requirements for the mandatum. The mandatum is a recognition by his bishop of a Catholic theologian's pledge to teach in communion with the Magisterium of the Church. Since 1983, canon law has required that a theologian teaching in a Catholic university receive a mandatum from the local bishop. The requirement was highlighted in a foot-note in Pope John Paul II's 1990 apostolic constitution on higher education, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (From the Heart of the Church). U.S. bishops began requiring the mandatum in 2001. The Register has been investigating Catholic colleges and universities featured in *U.S. News & World Report's* college guide asking: Are parents allowed to know whether those who teach theology even intend to teach in communion with the Church? Or has the opposite happened – is the mandatum being used to protect dissenters? Schools which the Register has identified in compliance with the canon law mandate are listed on the Register's Web site (www.ncregister.com).

During his meeting with the U.S. cardinals in 2001, Pope John Paul II said parents "must know that bishops and priests are totally committed to the fullness of Catholic truth on matters of sexual morality, a truth as essential to the renewal of the priesthood and the episcopate as it is to the renewal of marriage and family life." The majority of the nation's Catholic colleges and universities are treating the mandatum as a private matter between the individual theology professor and his or her local bishop, making it virtually impossible for students or their parents to know which professors have received the mandatum. This, however, is not the case at Franciscan University. Steubenville Bishop Daniel Conlon; Third Order Regular Franciscan Father Terence Henry, the university's president; and theology department chairman Alan Schreck all spoke with the Register about the mandatum's importance to the eastern Ohio university. "We have all applied for and received the mandatum," Schreck said. "The mandatum, for us, is an important thing. It's our pledge of fidelity to the Church and expresses where we have always stood."

"Parents have sometimes been surprised that the outcome of a supposedly Catholic education does not lead to a strengthening of the lived-out faith but the opposite," Father Henry said. "We see our mission as part of a larger mission, which is to be at the heart of the Church. The only way we can be there to produce the next generation of Catholic leaders is to be Catholic." When seminary professors of philosophy and theology began taking the oath of fidelity in the late 1980s as required by Canon 833, Steubenville decided to do likewise. In 1989, long before the U.S. bishops finalized guidelines for the implementation of the mandatum, the university gained prominence by becoming the first Catholic university in the United States whose theology faculty priests and campus ministers publicly pledged fidelity to the local bishop and the universal Church.

At the beginning of every school year those responsible for theology and ministry would recite the Creed and the bishop would administer the oath of Fidelity. It's a tradition the university continues every fall. In the presence of the university's freshmen, those taking the oath "accept all that the Pope teaches, and the bishops in union with him," and promise "to preserve communion with the Catholic Church, whether in speech or action." "This is what we believe," Schreck said. "We want to make a public statement that we are proudly in submission to the Church." Bishop Conlon explained that the oath was in place long before he became bishop 18 months ago. "There is a great openness on the part of the faculty," he said. "I was invited to be a part of that process." Bishop Conlon explained the process: "In the fall the president sends me a list of the new theology professors as well as their

curriculum vitae. There is a Mass at the beginning of the school year at which these professors come forward and make their profession of faith and oath of Fidelity."

The bishop said that after this happened last fall, the professors "sent me letters asking for the mandatum, which I then granted." In addition, as part of the process and as a way of getting to know them, Bishop Conlon invited the new theology faculty members to meet with him as a group. "The faculty is open to the mandatum," Bishop Conlon said. "That's a natural consequence of what they understand their role to be – to teach the Catholic faith in a critical way. To be asked to teach that faith faithfully is not a problem for them. It is a part of their mission."

Last year, in preparation to teach at the university, outgoing Bishop Gilbert Sheldon took the oath of fidelity before Bishop Conlon. "He may be the only bishop in the world to have taken an oath of fidelity before a fellow bishop with regard to his responsibilities as a teacher," Father Henry said. On Oct. 10, 14 of the university's 20-member board of trustees also took the oath. The remaining six planned to take it at a later date. The symbolism of the oath is not lost on either students or their parents. Theology senior Maria Kemper said both she and her parents were impressed. "It was such a strong stand with the Magisterium," she said. "They were saying that they were not ashamed of Catholicism." Kemper said she is thankful for the university's approach to the mandatum. "I can trust the theology that is presented," Kemper said. "I don't have to pull apart the idea to see what grain of truth is locked inside. To be able to trust helps me both in my studies as well as in preparing me for life outside of college."

Right to Know

According to canon law, that trust is something that is the right of any lay Catholic. Canon 217 states that Christ's faithful "have the right to a Christian education, which genuinely teaches them to strive for the maturity of the human person and at the same time to know and live the mystery of salvation." University president Father Henry likened the mandatum to accreditation. "If a parent asked whether a university were accredited by a particular agency and the university responded that it was a private matter, a parent would probably not consider that school," he said. "How can a parent find out if a school is Catholic if the school is not helping him with the information he needs?"

In November 2001, Archbishop Daniel Pilarczyk, chairman of the committee that drafted the U.S. implementation of the mandatum, told a meeting of U.S. bishops that the mandatum "has no teeth." "This is not about hiring and firing," Archbishop Pilarczyk said. Franciscan University of Steubenville, however, is one of a number of Catholic colleges that require the mandatum for hiring theology faculty. These include the University of St. Thomas in Houston, where the new secretary of the Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education, Archbishop J. Michael Miller, was president until recently.

"In hiring, the chair knows the professional competence of the candidate," Father Henry said. "I screen with regard to mission. The professor needs to understand that part of our mission is the mandatum, so if an interviewee told me he wasn't going to seek the mandatum, that is not someone I would want teaching here." Father Henry said the university has turned away candidates for that reason. "We have told interviewees that we thought they would be better off somewhere else," he said.

Despite the common objection of most Catholic colleges, neither faculty nor students at Steubenville find the mandatum an infringement upon academic freedom. "This does not violate, in any sense, responsible academic freedom," Schreck said. "We're open to exploration of other points of view as part of an academic study of religion, but we express allegiance to the Catholic Church. We see theology as an ecclesial vocation." Theology senior Kemper agreed. "Freedom should be limited by truth," Kemper said. "You can teach about Buddhism, but when it comes down to it, you must inform your mind in accordance with truth. Learning about other things is good, but saying that it's all one is quite false."

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