

# Shifting Ground in the Church, Higher Education, and Seminary Formation

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*Opening Address to the Academic Department*

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My opening talk this morning is titled “Shifting Ground in the Church, Higher Education, and Seminary Formation. For the most part, this is a set of reflections that have occupied me since I attended the biennial meeting of the Association of Theological Schools in Denver two months ago. Actually, I had the joy of attending three different meetings in Denver. The first was a wrap up from the Emerging Models Project which ATS lead using a grant from the Lilly foundation. The purpose of this project which Linda Couri and Nelly Lorenzo also participated in over the last couple of years was to explore the ways in which theological education has broken out of the traditional framework of a graduate professional degree. While we all found it tedious and frustrating, it did point to the dramatic changes that theological education has been undergoing in the last twenty years, changes which will no longer be denied.

The second meeting was of the deans of ATS. We have our own separate professional society, which someone with a great sense of humor named the CHief Academic Officers Society, which if you visualize that for a moment abbreviates as CHAOS. The unofficial motto of the group is “it must be true because you can’t make

this stuff up.” Finally, we had the meeting of the presidents and deans at which we vote on the business before the association. This year was quite consequential as the business at hand it was a motion to completely revise the standards of accreditation. For those of you new to this world, every school must be accredited in order to offer recognized degree. In some states, it goes further in that offering degrees or even courses that are not accredited is criminal, as it is seen as a form of fraud.

Undergraduate schools must be accredited by one of the regional accreditation agencies. Graduate and professional schools, if they do not have an undergraduate division, can be accredited solely by a national accreditation agency. We fall among the latter.

Accreditation covers three broad categories: institutional, educational and degree program. The category of institutional standards of:

- Purpose, planning and evaluation
- Institutional integrity
- The Theological Curriculum – which includes learning, teaching and research
- Library and Information resources
- Faculty
- Student recruitment, admission, services and placement
- Authority and governance
- Institutional resources

The second category is educational standards which apply to all degree programs. This covers:

- Degree programs and nomenclature
- Campus-based education
- Extension education
- Distance education
- Faculty-directed individual instruction
- Assessment of student learning outcomes
- Academic guidelines on admission, transfer of credits, shared credits in degree programs, and advanced standing.
- Non-degree instructional programs

Finally, there are the standards for the different degrees which ATS accredited schools are authorized to offer. It was this final category which generated the most conversation at the biennial meeting, as the article I shared with you demonstrates. As a result of these meetings I decided that my first talk of the year needed to have the title “Shifting Ground”.

The article, “More seminary students leave the master of divinity behind” describes in the survey fashion one of the questions it's been occupying ATS for the last few years. Actually, want to thank Melanie for calling my attention to this article which is a very accurate reporting by the Religious New Service of many of the things the deans and presidents talked about at ATS.

Divinity is one of the three historic professions. It's called a profession because along with law and medicine, one entered its practice by taking a public oath. The "profession" of that oath gave you entry into the community of practice in medicine, law or divinity. The education which allows a person be admitted to these communities of practice varies from one country to another and one educational system to another. But, each of the three professions had, until recently, the same notion about their educational purpose. The educational purpose was to train any individual who would possess the knowledge and skills necessary for *independent* practice. Said another way, the graduate of these professional degree programs would carry within all that was necessary for practice.

This model for graduate professional education spread beyond medicine, law, and divinity into other specialized areas such as business administration, social work, health sciences and beyond. Basically, all professional degrees (those leading to regulated practices) followed the same pattern. But in the last 15 to 20 years it has become apparent, at least in these United States, that the business model for such education is no longer tenable.

In theological education, we saw it first in the seminaries affiliated with the Episcopal Church, one of the oldest and most established of religious denominations. As their congregations began to shrink in size and the salaries of their ministers followed, it became more and more difficult for seminary graduates to pay off the increasing debt that they had to take on to fund their three-year Master of Divinity courses. Instead of developing the scholarship programs where by the diocese would

offer support for the candidates, they did something entirely different. The dioceses is begin to set up their own, local, non-credit certificate courses in pastoral ministry. Said another way instead of the church helping her seminaries, she went into direct competition with them.

For an Episcopal diocese, it was self-defense. They needed to fill their pulpits. The diocese could not entertain the idea of a scholarship program because priests of the Episcopal Church are not incardinated in a specific diocese, but rather in the national church. This means they can move anywhere in the country. So, the diocese had no incentive to invest in clergy. Instead they took the route of competition.

All of this reveals how the larger megatrends in society eventually affect even the most stable institutions. Not to put too sharp a point on it, but higher education as a business model is broken. And it's a bad break. If you want a personal example of how bad, after this meeting look up the tuition at the place you did your undergraduate education and your graduate professional degrees. This will give you a sense, in today's dollars, of just how bad the situation is. I ran the numbers for myself I went to a private liberal arts university which currently has a tuition around \$40,000 a year which is equivalent to what Mundelein seminary charges so if you add that up my education only counting my BA and M.Div. adds up to over \$300,000. Since most Episcopal congregations are small, less than 200 members, a priest can find a first call which pays between \$26,000 and \$32,000 a year. That friends, is a broken business plan.

While things play differently in the Catholic Church, we are not unaffected affected by this shifting ground. I was speaking with one of our sending bishop and he shared

with me that 2/3 of his budget for the diocesan curia goes to seminary tuition. It's true that we have a scholarship structure that any Protestant seminary would envy, 100% scholarship for M.Div. students, but those scholarships come from somewhere. The broken business plan of higher education simply affects the Catholic Church a little further up the financial stream.

The shifting ground that I'm describing and the problems in higher education are actually the result of larger megatrends beyond education in American society. Said simply, there is a wholesale shift away from the liberal arts vision of education where the goal is forming a person to be a virtuous human being and a good citizen, and toward, what I can only call, a trade school approach. The trade school trains people in a discreet set of skills that they can use to get a job for a few years until they move on, take new training, and start another job. There is a "planned obsolescence" to their education.

On average the college graduate of 2018 will have 10 jobs over her or his career. This megatrend, which is really nothing more than the abandonment of any loyalty by American business to its workers, is having a corrosive effect on the entire educational enterprise

How this touches a Catholic seminary is a little bit different, but the megatrend has effect none the less. Years ago, when we conceived the vocation of lay ministry and the training necessary for it, everyone simply took the seminary model of the master of divinity degree and adapted it for lay ministers. Similarly, some dioceses took the same approach with their permanent deacons, requiring them to have master's degrees that

mirrored the education of the priest. The idea was to form a true professional, who could be a colleague with the priests that she or he would serve with. It was also envisioned that the master of divinity was a necessary qualifications, as in many diocese is these lay ministers would take over the care of a parish as pastoral coordinators. It was necessary because as the only full-time minister in a parish, then needed to meet that ancient idea of the professional, one qualified for independent practice. Such was the model 40 years ago as professional lay ministry began in this country.

All of the pressure is affecting Protestant divinity schools are touching Catholic schools of theology and ministry. Loyola University Chicago was the first to offer a master of divinity degree for laity. Its model was based on that of Mundelein Seminary as the first director had been a faculty member here. In recent years though Loyola has shifted most of their emphasis to extremely short master's degrees, because they simply can't sell the M.Div. for all the reasons the article names.

The work that we are doing with Renew My Church has revealed another problem. Even though we have three schools of theology and ministry in the Archdiocese of Chicago offering the master of arts in pastoral studies degree (the current requirement for Lay Ecclesial Ministry) it's apparent to us that the three schools cannot produce a sufficient number of graduates to allow the diocese to adequately staff the lay positions that will fall vacant in the next five years.

For all these reasons ATS has been making exception after exception to their educational and degree standards as various seminaries both Protestant and Catholic try to adapt to this change in situation. In all honesty, they said to us that it's reached

the point that the exceptions are becoming the norm. So they proposed a comprehensive revision of the standards. This was placed before the business meeting and it passed unanimously. So, in addition to the new Ratio and the awaited new PPF, we are now in the process of developing and eventually receiving new accreditation standards from ATS. The next five years are going to be quite interesting.

When I say interesting, I do not mean it as a threat. It is really an opportunity and one for which we are far more prepared than the Protestant schools. As you know ATS is composed of kind of three wings: the mainline Protestant denominations, the Catholic Church, and the Evangelical communities. Mainlines are suffering the most from the forces I've just described. Catholics decades ago embraced the master of divinity as the normative degree for ordination, yet at the same time ask ATS to evolve the degree so that it would take into account the formation work which is done in Catholic seminaries. As a result, we forced a change on all of the Protestant seminaries who are now required to provide human, spiritual, and pastoral formation in some form, in order to have their degrees accredited. Like our intervention, we are now seeing the newest members, the Evangelicals, for whom extensive higher education while valued, was not an entry requirement for ministry. They tend to take a more pragmatic approach to seminary education, preferring short master's degrees, which allowed their graduates to quickly enter the ministry workforce or preferably to allow those already ordained and working in local churches to acquire a graduate credential after their ordination.

It will be a lot of fun trying to harmonize these three different tendencies. Add to that that the Catholic Church is now looking for ways to make our seminary course of studies longer according to the Ratio and all of this adds up to uncertainty and an interesting future for those of us in graduate theological education.

That's all background to say that two of the things that our accreditors, both civil and ecclesiastical, are going to pay much greater attention to in the coming years: competency-based measurement, and outcomes assessment. This shift will involve all of us learning some new skills and changing some of the ways we do things academically in order that we can continue to meet our requirements for accreditation. Fortunately, here at Mundelein Seminary, specifically in terms of outcomes assessment and competency-based measurements of education, we have the extensive work that was done by several of our faculty as part of the Keystone project which eventually produced the document *In Fulfillment of Their Mission*. I have given this book to all of the new faculty as a source text for their work as instructors. I have to tell you that this work by Marty Zielinski, John Lodge and Chris McAtee, along with some of the other members of the National Association of Catholic Theological Schools, puts us light years ahead of most other seminaries and certainly ahead of most other professional schools and universities. We are quite simply about 10 years ahead of where most other graduate professional degree offering institutions are. This is solely due to the exceptional work that members of our faculty did years ago. In the short term what Marie and I will be doing in the academic office is looking for ways to build the outcomes they identified into measurements, building them into our existing syllabi

and into a new curriculum map that will help the entire faculty visualize how the pieces of the program fit together. This will position us to plan for the outcomes assessment work that we will have to do in the coming years.

The presidents and deans left the ATS meeting with a sense of relief and hope. The sense of relief came from the fact that someone had finally given voice to what everyone knew, that the business model was broken due to megatrends in society. Hope came from the fact that, with a unanimous decision to revise the standards, the ATS staff has permission to creatively engage the three major constituencies and find a way to accommodate the different needs that this body has.

The process is going to take two years in the drafting stage. I asked the presidents and deans of the Catholic seminaries to see if we could set aside part of next year's annual meeting of the National Association of Catholic theological schools for a detailed study and review of the first draft. This proposal is under consideration by the leadership of an NACTS.

I'll have more to tell you about this as the year progresses but this explains in part why, as we re-ordered the academic office after Chris McAtee's move, we gave Marie specific portfolio responsibilities around student learning and outcomes assessment.

So that's my report on the ATS meeting and some of the mega trends that are swirling around us. With that I'd like to turn our attention inward to USML. And I'm now ask our new assistant dean of the graduate school to take the floor and introduce our working session.