

COLLEGE OF MOUNT SAINT VINCENT
OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

August, 2011

To Alumnae/i, Students, Parents, and Friends of The College:

As some of you are aware, the College has faced some controversy this summer. A national organization, controversial in its own right, is leading a call for the dismissal of one of our adjunct faculty members. The faculty member holds positions inconsistent with, and in some instances contrary to, the teachings of the Church, including her position on abortion. A number of our alums have joined the call for the adjunct's dismissal. While their messages to us differ, there is a lot of consistency: the adjunct's positions are immoral, they are contrary to the teachings of the Church, she is unfit to teach at a Catholic college, and hence she should be dismissed. Other alums, learning of the controversy, have expressed equally strong opposition to the adjunct's dismissal.

I am writing to share with you College policies and explain the essential distinctions we must draw. The College's position is clear: the College upholds *all* Catholic teaching. So why are we not dismissing the faculty member?

From the College's perspective, there are three issues here:

- The College's expectations regarding the faith of those who work here
- The College's expectations regarding the instruction of students
- The College's expectations regarding the scholarly activities of members of the faculty.

Expectations of Faith

The College is an independent institution deeply committed to its Catholic identity and mission. We define ourselves as Catholic, ecumenical, and inclusive. Consistent with that mission and state law, we do not and cannot have a religious standard for the appointment of members of the faculty, administrators, or staff. Rather, we require that employees authentically commit themselves to the mission of the College, including its Catholic purposes.

Although there are no religious tests for appointment, the majority of College employees, including faculty, are Catholic. We also employ Muslims, Jews, members of various Christian denominations, Mormons, agnostics, and perhaps, atheists.

We cannot and do not require that employees share faith in Catholic teaching, even the most fundamental Catholic teaching. It would be impossible to employ Jews and Muslims and Congregationalists and agnostics *and* to require faith in the Incarnation or the Resurrection or other Catholic teaching. Nor can we attempt to determine the orthodoxy of our Catholic employees. The College does not and should not control or seek to control the convictions of its employees. Indeed, we do not believe we have the authority to do so.

In the case of Religious Studies, we want our faculty members to merit and receive the *Mandatum*, which they have. The *Mandatum* is a certification of a faculty member's commitment to fulfill the Church's and the College's expectation that Catholic teaching be accurately and sympathetically represented to

students. Even in this case, however, the *Mandatum* does not and cannot validate individual conscience. When we hire additional faculty members in religious studies, we will require the willingness to request and eligibility for the *Mandatum* for continuing appointment.

This sort of distinction also applies to organizations and membership in organizations. Besides calling for the dismissal of the adjunct faculty member, a few alums have also challenged the College policy/practice regarding employee and trustee membership in organizations with positions that are at odds with Catholic teaching. For example, the College hosts an AAUW program for seventh grade girls encouraging interest in science and science-related professions. The College has trustees and former trustees who are active in the AAUW. Some alums and non-alums object that the AAUW supports positions inconsistent with the teachings of the Church and argue that members of that organization should not be associated with the College.

While the College ensures that the program for seventh grade girls is consistent with the College's educational and Catholic mission, the College does not vet all the positions of the AAUW. While trustees are uniformly committed to the mission of the College, the College does not vet the positions of all the organizations to which they belong. We have, for example, both Republicans and Democrats on the Board. Both parties have supported positions consistent with the teachings of the Church, and in other cases both have supported positions contrary to fundamental Catholic teaching. At least one of our trustees active in the AAUW is a Republican, so some would have her twice disqualified from Board membership. While both political parties are represented on the Board, the requirement is that trustees, administrators, faculty, and staff be dedicated to the College's mission.

This elaboration is intended to provide the background to College policy regarding the faith of those who commit to serve its mission. The College is a college, not a seminary. The College does not believe that law or regulations governing accreditation allow the College to require employees to hold positions consistent with the teachings of the Church. Aside from matters of law and regulation, the College does not believe it should require employees to hold positions consistent with the teachings of the Church. College policy and practice conform to that judgment. The College will not dismiss an employee because her views are inconsistent with the teachings of the Church.

Expectations for Instruction

The College, however, does expect faculty across departments to include religious, moral, and ethical inquiry appropriate to materials and questions at hand. We do expect Catholic teaching to be included in such coverage. We require that Catholic teaching be accurately and sympathetically covered. The College works hard to deepen faculty, student, and staff knowledge about and understanding of the Catholic tradition and Catholic teaching. Consistent with academic principles, the College expects that faculty will not advocate a particular personal perspective—religious, moral, ethical, political, social, or economic. Those academic expectations are professionally and institutionally fundamental. And we include commitment to this mission of the College as a fundamental criterion for evaluation, including evaluation for tenure and promotion.

The adjunct at question was appointed with these College expectations. Her work is evaluated by the chair of the department and the dean consistent with College policy, including these expectations and criteria. These criteria and that process govern whether that adjunct can teach here. No faculty member can or should be dismissed because any of us are offended by her convictions, her faith, or her lack of it.

The chair's evaluation of the adjunct faculty member's teaching has been very favorable. She is evaluated as a student-centered "caring educator who effectively uses media to promote discussion and

develop critical thinking skills in her students.” To the College’s knowledge, the adjunct instructor has conformed to College policy and met College expectations in her work as an instructor.

The Faculty Member’s Scholarship

As I understand it, a few of our alums put forth an additional basis for the demand that the adjunct be dismissed. A scholarly presentation that the adjunct delivered on the sociology of sex and gender at a meeting in Maryland included among various materials drawn from art offensive paintings regarding the Virgin.

The sociology of sex and gender is fraught, but cross culturally it is about the what, the why, and the implications of what people variously believe, what people do, what people assume, what people uphold, and what people object to. That’s the subject area. The critical examination of what is objectionable can be not only important to that inquiry but also is probably essential.

In Catholic cultures and in other traditions, the role of the Virgin or virgins is significant and is a legitimate subject for inquiry. The very different popular characterizations of virginal men and virginal women illustrate the point. Thousands of years of popular culture surrounding Mary Magdalene and her redemption are not insignificant. In contemporary society, matters of sexuality seem to be particularly fraught and sensitive. That does not place them off limits, but it does increase the likelihood that we can offend one another.

Apparently two paintings of the Virgin included in the scholarly presentation have been characterized as pornographic. They are not erotic. The paintings are unsettling and objectionable because they demand that the viewer contemplate the Virgin as an actual human being. One of them portrays the Virgin as chubby. As I understand it, that was in part the point. Their inclusion in the presentation was consistent with commonly used methods of every discipline in the social sciences and humanities. The effective (and ineffective) analysis of such symbols is neither new nor newly offensive. It was at play in the reception of the Sistine Chapel ceiling. It is at play in Henry Adams’ Education on “The Virgin and the Dynamo.” It and controversy about it have run through Western history and, with various permutations, the histories of other civilizations, as well.

Scholars examine not only what we uphold but also what offends us for insight into our assumptions and aspirations. This is equally true of topics and materials on non-sexual and gender subjects. For example, scholars study the Holocaust because we can learn from it about evil, our understanding of evil, (perversely) about virtue, (perversely) about our understanding of virtue, and about very, very real challenges to faith. There is even a literature that says, basically, teachers should be grateful for the topic of the Holocaust, if only because it is among the few topics that effectively help students to doubt relativism.

In presenting their scholarly work, as in all matters in the public square, College policy requires all members of the faculty to make clear that their positions are not the College’s positions: that they do not speak for Mount Saint Vincent. The adjunct appears to have conformed to College policy. She has been reminded of her obligation to do so.

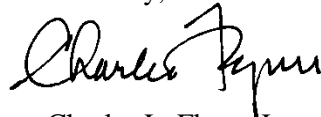
All those things being said, however, there is no subject that is off limits to inquiry at Mount Saint Vincent. The quality of scholarly work is evaluated following generally accepted professional criteria. The College’s agreement with the scholar’s analysis or conclusions is not among those criteria. The College is deeply committed to this understanding of academic principle. I would also note that these principles (and debate about them) have been a vital part of the life of Catholic (and non-Catholic) colleges and universities for centuries.

Those who object to the College's employment of this adjunct (and implicitly other employees) are raising very important questions about what the College means by our Catholic identity and questions about what it means to teach. Translated into policy, principled answers to those questions can have many implications, some of which can be very uncomfortable.

Within the context of our deep dedication to Catholic teaching and to the academic and educational mission of this Catholic College, I hope this letter helps to explain the College's answers to those questions. The College's policies and practice are consistent with—indeed, they are a manifestation of—its commitment to its Catholic identity and mission as an academic institution.

With all best wishes always,

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Charles Flynn, Jr." in a cursive style.

Charles L. Flynn, Jr.
President