

9 March 2007

Dr. Frederick C. Miner and Dr. Jacques L'Écuyer
Commission on Post-Secondary Education in New Brunswick
535 Beaverbrook Court, Suite 105
Fredericton, New Brunswick
E3B 1X6

Dear Dr. Miner and Dr. L'Écuyer,

I wish you well with the important task you are undertaking. The Commission's March 2007 Discussion Paper notes central contextual changes that have occurred since the Deutsch Report that are pertinent to provincial policies for post-secondary education in the 21st century. The Discussion Paper appropriately highlights the changing global economy and the changing demographics of New Brunswick. I am writing to urge the Commission to be attentive to a change of less sweeping significance that is nonetheless important to considerations of how best to structure university education in New Brunswick and to deploy public funds appropriately.

In the years since the Deutsch Report, there have been significant shifts in the Vatican's policies regarding Catholic universities throughout the world and these have implications for higher education in New Brunswick. In particular, I urge you to be attentive to the significance of the *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* Apostolic Constitution on Catholic higher education that Pope John Paul II issued in 1990, and its implications for St. Thomas University, where I am currently a professor in the History Department. I have been teaching at Maritime universities for more than twenty years and was chair of the History Department at St. Thomas during its most recent period of retirements and renewal.

As I am sure you are aware, the history of higher education in the Maritimes is rooted in the initiatives of various religious denominations. How education policies have developed in the Maritimes since that time is somewhat different than in Ontario and Quebec, given differences in the legal and historical context for educational funding. The general trend in the Maritimes with the growth of state support for higher education has been toward secularization. Given that we live in a pluralistic society, the trend is an obvious corollary to the use of public funding to sustain higher education. As you know, St. Thomas is currently included among New Brunswick's four public universities and it originated as St. Thomas College, which was founded by the Basilian Fathers in the early 20th century.

Pope John Paul II's *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* document was, in many ways, a call to reverse trends toward secularism and pluralism within "Catholic" universities. I have appended copies of it and of the subsequent Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops' ordinances which provide a national level iteration of the Vatican's new policies concerning education at "Catholic" universities. As you can see, the policies include, among other things, a call for affirmative action to boost the percentage of Catholics within the

faculties of Catholic universities, and a concern to ensure that the content of the education provided by “Catholic” universities be consistent with the mission of the Catholic Church, as defined by the Vatican.

Among the many publicly funded universities in the Maritimes with Catholic roots, St. Thomas University is, to the best of my knowledge, the only one that has taken steps to conform to the Vatican’s directives. I understand that the administration of St. Francis Xavier University considered doing so and was stopped by public resistance when these plans came to light. St. Francis Xavier University now describes itself in its website as having made a transition to being “a modern secular institution.”

To the best of my knowledge, the implications of the decisions of the administration of St. Thomas to buck the regional trend toward secularization and to align St. Thomas’ policies with the Vatican’s new *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* directives have not been a matter of public discussion and debate. Indeed, even within St. Thomas, as far as I know, the only general discussion of the issue occurred after faculty learned, by accident in the winter of 2004/5, that President O’Brien intended to append the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Ordinances for Catholic Colleges and Universities in Canada – the Canadian iteration of Pope John Paul II’s 1990 *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* document -- to St. Thomas University’s by-laws. Two emergency meetings were held on campus at that time, one a meeting of the Faculty Association and the other a meeting for the St. Thomas community more generally. Strong opposition to President O’Brien’s plans led to a lobbying campaign that blocked formal alignment of St. Thomas with the Vatican’s *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* policies, at least temporarily, but it did not lead to a general consideration of the implications of the changes which had been occurring over the previous decade and a half, as St. Thomas gradually shifted its self-description and policies to conform with Vatican policy concerning Catholic universities.

There are two questions that, I believe, need to be addressed. One is whether it is appropriate to continue to use public monies to sustain St. Thomas University if its present and future identity is to be that of a Roman Catholic university -- as opposed to being a secular university with a Roman Catholic heritage. The other is: If the province of New Brunswick chooses to continue to fund St. Thomas University despite these recent policy changes, what are the implications of having one of the major institutions of higher education in New Brunswick define itself as a vehicle of a Roman Catholic mission, given the current historical context and the Vatican’s most recent policies concerning higher education?

As a tax-paying resident of New Brunswick, I think the answer to the first question is “no”; it is not appropriate to use public monies to sustain an institution that is choosing to define itself as a Roman Catholic institution promoting a Roman Catholic mission. And I would think many residents of New Brunswick would agree with me, were they to become familiar with the issue.

As a professor in the History Department of St. Thomas with some experience of the consequences of the post-1990 decisions to align St. Thomas policies with those of the

Vatican, I believe that the answer to the second question is that there would be, and are, negative consequences for the quality of higher education at St. Thomas stemming from having it define itself as a Roman Catholic university. Given St. Thomas University's current profile as one of the four publicly funded New Brunswick universities, these negative consequences have broader, provincial implications.

One of my concerns relates to faculty recruitment and retention. I have appended three St. Thomas University advertisements to this letter. One dates from 1993, the other from 2002, and the other from 2006. In the first, St. Thomas is described as "a small, undergraduate, liberal arts university where excellence in teaching is an institutional priority." In the second it is described as "a small Catholic, undergraduate, liberal arts university where excellence in undergraduate teaching is the highest institutional priority." And in the most recent advertisement, St. Thomas is described as a "Roman Catholic university where excellence in teaching is the highest institutional priority." The language and the images of the advertisements track broader post-1990 changes in how St. Thomas is choosing to characterize itself. I have also attached recent advertisements from St. Francis Xavier University and St. Mary's University to highlight the contrast with the choices other universities in the region that have Catholic roots are making. As you can see, neither of these Nova Scotia universities define themselves in religious terms in their advertisements.

The History Department's experience with using advertisements that assert a religious identity, a requirement at St. Thomas since the articulation of the new Vatican policies in the early 1990s that call for this, is that advertisements that assert a religious identity pose an impediment to recruitment. The assertion of a religious institutional identity raises the issue of candidates' religious suitability for employment at St. Thomas and in so doing discourages applicants. This is, of course, the intention behind the inclusion of religious identity language in St. Thomas' advertisements. Article 4.1 of the Catholic Bishops' Ordinances for Catholic Colleges and Universities in Canada requires that Catholic universities inform potential employees of the "specific duties that stem from the Catholic identity" of the institution at the time of their hiring. Article 4.6 describes the need to discipline or dismiss instructors if they fail to provide "a faithful reception of Catholic doctrine and morals in research and teaching." This is not to say that the new language St. Thomas is now including in its advertisements is preventing non-Catholics from applying or from obtaining employment. But if the Commission on Post-Secondary Education in New Brunswick is interested in finding ways to enhance the province's ability to attract academic talent, it should be aware that St. Thomas University's initiatives to conform with recent Vatican directives in higher education pose an obstacle to that – and to the retention of talent as well. Although my own direct experience is only with the extensive recruitment and hiring the History Department has done over the last six or seven years, I have been told by people who have been part of the hiring process for other departments and programmes at St. Thomas that the problem is more general.

It is worth considering as well what impact this new assertion of a Roman Catholic identity is having, and will have, on the ability of faculty working at St. Thomas to get external funding and to have their academic credentials and research taken seriously in

distant settings. A person unfamiliar with St. Thomas University who turned to the internet to find out more about its character might easily be led to believe that St. Thomas is a private, Roman Catholic university, as both the brief description that appears on a Google search and the longer description that appears on the St. Thomas home page describe the university as a Catholic school and neither makes any mention of it being one of New Brunswick's four publicly funded institutions of higher learning. For the most part this may be irrelevant to the interests of faculty seeking funding and/or recognition for their research, but I can imagine some settings and audiences where being linked with a Roman Catholic institution rather than a publicly funded institution of higher learning would not be advantageous. It certainly is an issue I have come to worry about when students and faculty ask me to provide letters of reference for employment outside the region.

The current administration at St. Thomas University has been promoting the assertion of a Roman Catholic identity as a useful strategy for recruiting students. It seems to me that this is a rationalization for policies that originate with the Vatican policies of the early 1990s and thus predate the concern to attract sufficient students to maintain enrollment levels. But it is an issue that should interest the Commission on Post-Secondary Education in New Brunswick, given the student recruitment challenges that lie ahead. I don't doubt that some students can be attracted by religious marketing, but is it appropriate to use public funding to do so and to provide the "Roman Catholic education" that they seek? As well, I wonder whether sufficient attention has been given to the very real possibility that more students will be deterred from attending one of the leading universities in New Brunswick because of the affirmation of a Roman Catholic identity than will be attracted?

I believe that Pope John Paul II's 1990 *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* Apostolic Constitution on Catholic higher education and the more recent Catholic Bishops' Ordinances for Catholic Colleges and Universities in Canada, coupled with the responses of St. Thomas University's administrators to these policy initiatives, have significantly altered the landscape of higher education in New Brunswick. The decision to align St. Thomas University with the new Vatican policies concerning higher education is not consistent with having the institution remain a public institution of higher learning or with it effectively playing a foundational role in the future of higher learning in New Brunswick. I think it is time to clarify the university's nature and future. If St. Thomas University is going to be defined as having a Roman Catholic identity and mission – and I hope this is not the case -- I do not believe that it should continue to be included in the ranks of New Brunswick's publicly funded universities. A religious identity and mission may be appropriate for private universities in 21st-century New Brunswick, but not for public ones.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Rusty Bittermann

