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A Divinity Activist

Father J. Bryan Hehir from the start was on loan to Harvard. When he came to teach at the Divinity School and be part of the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs in 1992, he also had an ecclesiastical assignment as pastor of St. Paul’s Church in Cambridge. When President Neil L. Rudenstine asked Hehir (pronounced hare) to take on the leadership of the Divinity School in 1999, the diocesan priest was spending part of each week in Baltimore, providing policy analysis and advice to Catholic Relief Services, the relief and development agency of the Catholic bishops of the United States. To signal that he had responsibilities elsewhere, Hehir was not called dean, although he functioned as dean, but rather chair of the Divinity School executive committee, and in announcing his appointment, Rudenstine noted that Harvard might not have Father Hehir’s services for long. Now the church has called him to a new set of tasks, and on January 1, 2002, he will become president of Catholic Charities USA, a network of more than 1,400 social-service agencies with headquarters in Virginia.

The appointment of a Roman Catholic to lead Harvard’s divinity school was a first and seemed to some observers remarkably ecumenical. Hehir says today that he found dealing with the complex life of the school, with its multiple constituencies, challenging and stimulating, and through his contacts with the president and other deans, he came to sense what an extraordinary number of things go on at Harvard and how much people expect of it. Though brief, his time at the top was “very satisfying” and “a great experience.” From his perspective, the fact that he is Catholic was “neither a burden nor a problem,” and he encountered nothing but “openness and cooperation.”

The faculty of the school, he points out, is “very rich and diverse in its background and traditions.” He made it more so, overseeing the establishment of newly endowed professorships that will enhance the school’s work in Buddhist, Islamic, and women’s studies, and on the role of religion in international conflict. He also brought to fruition a campaign to raise $11 million to add two floors and a modern infrastructure to the Andover-Harvard Theological Library, and he saw through to completion the transformation of historic Divinity Hall from a down-at-heel dormitory to a spiffy new facility with many faculty offices.

Hehir has regularly taught “The Use of Force: Political and Moral Criteria,” a course offered both in the Divinity School and the Kennedy School. He explores the ethics of war and to that end looks at weapons of mass destruction, large-scale conventional war, and the problems of humanitarian interventions. With University Professor Stanley Hoffmann, he has taught a Core course in the College on ethics and international affairs. And he has taught about Catholic social ethics and bioethics.

What are his views about stem-cell research? “I’m a great believer that if you deal with the intersection of ethics and some field,” says Hehir, “you’ve got to be immersed in the nature of the problem. I don’t understand the science of stem-cell research and couldn’t offer any more than a layman’s view.”

Interviewed for this article in late August, he was asked what he thought of the Bush administration’s stance in the world, which at the time seemed noninterventionist. “It’s part of a much larger debate that has been going on since the end of the Cold War about how the United States should understand its place in the world,” says Hehir. “One argument is that the U.S. is a great power and should act like one, and what great powers do is to deal with other great powers and not get involved in situations like Somalia, Rwanda, even Kosovo. The alternative argument says that the U.S. ought to be something else in addition to a great power: that it ought to be willing to expend time, treasure, talent, money, and lives in situations where there are mas-
more inclusive—set of committee chairs: “They had meetings in places that were lighted and accessible.” Murphy and her cochair changed things even more a year later: they advertised meetings, putting up posters and sending out announcements over the House e-mail list. House-wide parties filled the Molotov Café, drawing in students who’d previously feared that shadowy, candle-lit basement lair. The new master and co-master, Judith Palfrey and Sean Palfrey, coordinated a series of “Life Seminars,” inviting experts to give presentations and lead discussions on such useful topics as cooking the basics, fixing a bicycle, and preparing one’s taxes. Immediately post-randomization, attendance at traditional House events—not just Drag Night or the masquerade, but also the Winter Swing and the Spring Waltz—dropped severely. Since then, House chairs have been working to bring the crowds back. “We had a tough time trying to dispel this image of the House as gay, black-wearing, and artsy,” says Murphy.

But the loss of that image, and the move toward mainstream, inclusive events, means that something real is also lost. Drag Night and the masquerade, for instance, live on, but the culture that went with them is relegated to further reaches of the College. “Drag night started as a celebration of being out,” says Ciocco, who dressed up in a peach-colored, floor-length bridesmaid’s gown and matching dyed satin pumps to sing a song entitled “Bridesmaid Blues” for last year’s Drag Night. “It was much more of an activist event. Now, for better or for worse, it’s become kind of campy, and it’s become a lot safer for straight students.”

President Lawrence H. Summers has yet to name a successor to Hehir, and an interim dean may occupy the office while a search goes on. Hehir can suggest many items for his successor’s agenda, but one that has occupied him is the development of closer ties between the Divinity School and other parts of the University. He sees lots of potential in dialogue “on a range of issues, particularly in the public dimensions of religion as it relates to politics, and law, and business, and medicine.”

Catholic Charities, says Hehir, is devoted “to placing the social teaching and the resources of the Catholic church at the service of those most vulnerable in this society, and its focus tends to be on poverty, social and economic justice, and the stability of family life and how you reinforce that. What my new post does for me is to take my concern with the issues I’ve taught for 30 years—Catholic social teaching and the role of the church in public policy—and place them in the context of another institution in the Catholic community. I’m just interested in making sure that the church maximizes its potential in the service of people and, secondly, that it can contribute intellectually and substantively to the public-policy debate in the United States.”

Father Hehir, the renewed Divinity School library behind him, moves on to the next stage of a career devoted to dialogue and service.