

# DOES CATHOLIC MEDICAL EDUCATION HAVE A FUTURE?

*Faced with Ambiguity and Conflict, Schools Must Clarify Their Purpose*

Of the 126 medical schools in the United States, 7 are connected with Christian churches—5 of these with the Roman Catholic Church. It is useful to ask why we continue to operate Catholic medical schools today. At present a larger pool of qualified applicants exist than U.S. medical schools can accommodate, but the total graduating class in 1992—more than 15,000—is probably large enough to meet the nation's needs. Some would argue that it is too large. Thus the five Catholic medical schools could close their doors without significantly affecting either the national production of physicians or access to the profession by special categories of applicants.

Is there a special role that Catholic medical schools should play, both for the country and the Church? Can our schools maintain their distinctive Catholic identity and be the leaven they were once felt to be? Or have they already compromised their roles irretrievably?

Questions such as these are important for any institution serious about its mission and seriously facing its future. Clarifying an

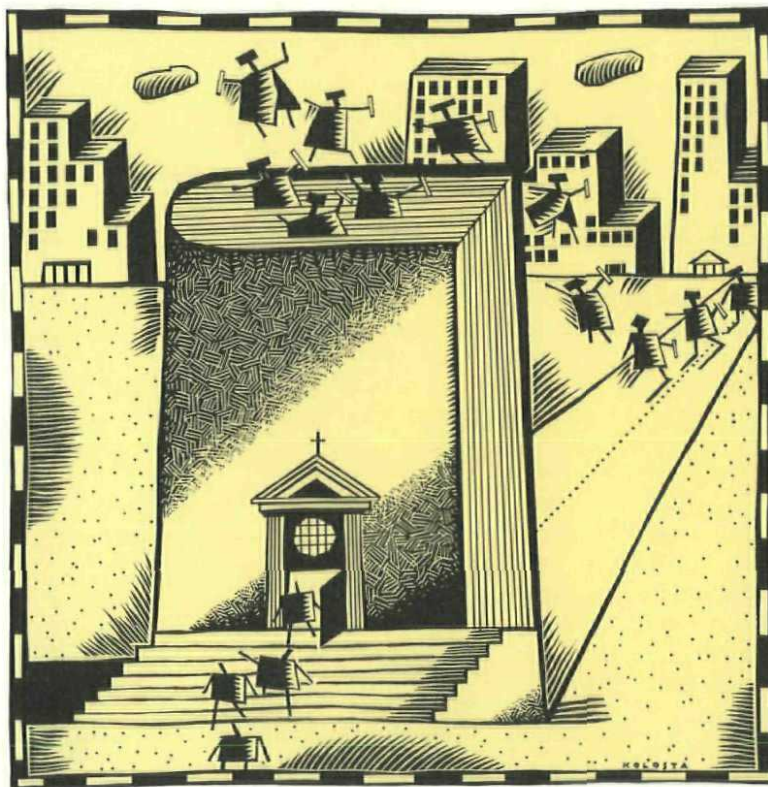
institution's purpose is hard work. The task is made even harder by the social ambiguities of the past three decades. In most contemporary universities—Catholic no less than others—these ambiguities have led to the coexistence of what are in many respects mutually incompatible sets of expectations. It may no longer be just a question of where we are going, but of how we get there from *here*. The conflicting views of who we are and why we exist affect all our constituencies—faculty, students,

trustees, alumni, and patients.

However, facing these discordant values and objectives honestly is only part of our task. The identity of a Catholic institution depends not only on how we operate, but on why we do what we do. It is this sense of purpose which needs to be shared and articulated. And it is in trying to say what we stand for that we may, perhaps, be most vulnerable. As Cornell University President Frank Rhodes noted in his 1989 keynote address to the plenary assembly on Jesuit ministry and higher

education, "The more I read in the recent literature of Jesuit higher education, the more confused I become. A clear statement of mission is essential, but what is it? And who will develop it?"

Last year Creighton University's medical school, one of the five connected with the Catholic Church, celebrated its 100th birthday. To inaugurate the celebration, the school convened a colloquium on the future of Catholic medical education. Four speakers reflected with us on some of the issues and challenges Catholic medical schools will face in the coming decades. The articles that follow are condensations of their presentations. □



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