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ANNOTATION

Kier, Scott A. “De La Salle Christian Brothers’ Experiences of Catholic Identity in Higher Education in the United States.” Ed.D. dissertation, University of San Francisco, 2012, 198 pp.

The purpose of Scott A. Kier’s dissertation “De La Salle Christian Brothers’ Experience of Catholic Identity in Higher Education” is “to explore the De La Salle Christian Brothers’ personal experiences of Catholic identity in higher education in the United States as the sponsoring congregation of these campuses.” He cites previous works and authors who maintain “Catholic identity is considered to be the single most important issue facing Catholic higher education in the United States” and “sustaining Catholic identity and preventing secularization depends on the integration of the Catholic intellectual tradition with the sponsoring religious congregation” (iii). Kier’s thesis is that “while a number of variables have been identified with the issue of Catholic identity, the experiences of Catholic identity from members of sponsoring religious communities has not yet been examined” (31). Like many congregations, the Christian Brothers are an ageing and diminishing presence in higher education. That presence and “the rich diversity of the experiences of the Christian Brothers regarding Catholic identity were those voices . . . [the] research intended to capture” (3).

Kier defines key terms and addresses the limits of his research. Citing a previous dissertation, he describes “Lasallian” as both an adjective and a noun; one references the heritage and traditions of the Christian Brothers and one is a name for those who share the mission and heritage today. He distinguishes the terms “lay (laity)” and “Christian Brothers” recognizing that the Brothers are not clergy but lay religious (11). The Christian Brothers in this study are members of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools also known as De La Salle Christian Brothers in contrast to the Congregation of Christian Brothers who also are commonly referred to as Christian Brothers.

The study’s scope, the researcher’s familiarity with the Christian Brothers, the technological abilities of the Brothers with an average age of sixty-eight (68), and conducting interviews online were all identified as possible limitations. Christian Brothers’ universities in the United States account for only six of the nation’s 246 Catholic colleges and universities. The 20 study participants (seven of whom are retired) are associated with four of the six Christian Brothers’ universities in the USA (74).

Kier organizes his study around four questions: 1) How do De La Salle Christian Brothers characterize Catholic identity in higher education? 2) Historically, what have been De La Salle Christian Brothers’ personal experiences of Catholic identity in higher education? 3) Currently, what are De La Salle Christian Brothers’ personal experiences of Catholic identity in higher education? and 4) With regard to the future, how do De La Salle Christian Brothers envision Catholic identity in higher education? (10)

Kier has adopted a constructivist approach to grounded theory as his research method. He cites Glaser and Strauss (1967) for a description of grounded theory as “. . . the discovery of theory from data systemically obtained from social research” (8). Grounded theory was further developed and nuanced by others, particularly Charmaz (2000) who contended that the originators of the theory assumed an objective and external reality from which a researcher distances him or herself. Quoting Charmaz, Kier notes, “a constructivist grounded theory recognizes that the viewer creates the data and ensuing analysis through interaction with the viewed . . . Researcher and subjects frame that interaction and confer meaning upon it.” (9)

This shared meaning-making was facilitated in this study by the use of asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC). This virtual data collection method makes participation accessible for participants beyond those available for face-to-face interviewing; allows for reflection time that would be less available in face-to-face sessions; and provides a practical and cost-efficient means to conduct in-depth interviews with geographically distant participants.

Five major conclusions were identified: 1) the Brothers experienced themselves as animators of Catholic identity at their institutions; 2) there is a need and a desire for education in the Catholic and Lasallian traditions; 3) Catholic identity is strong where rituals and practices of the Catholic faith are a vital part of the religious life of the campus; 4) importance of a critical mass of Catholics on campus (among students, faculty and staff) or those supportive of the Catholic tradition, and 5) presidential leadership is vital to the clarification and articulation of an institution’s Catholic identity (118-119).

Kier’s work is important in that it captures the voices and personal experiences of members of a congregation as opposed to the more familiar items in studies of Catholic identity such as signs and symbols, liturgical practices and the diminishing numbers of religious and clergy among the faculty, staff and administration of universities. Story telling connects at a personal level and contributes to an institution’s particular culture, he believes. Further, in describing their experiences the Brothers interviewed provide a glimpse of how a group understands Catholic identity in a previous time, at the present moment, and what it may look like in the future. Regarding the present and future, the research supports other findings on the critical need for quality university-level formation programs on the heritage of the sponsoring religious congregation.

Kier recommends the study be replicated in the two universities in the District of Eastern North America, as well as in Lasallian secondary schools, where the largest number of active Brothers are present. He also suggests the study be extended to other religious congregations of men and women “to determine the degree of similarity and differences in the nature of Catholic identity the other religious congregations have experienced” (123). Finally, he emphasizes relationships as a key to sustaining an institution’s culture and identity. The positive relationships at Lasallian institutions are often cited by laity and brothers as a particular quality they value most. What exactly that particularly Lasallian relationship entails and how it can be fostered is a study worth pursuing.