

The Chancellor of Saint Mary's University

The Cranky Professor

The Journal, the campus newspaper at Saint Mary's, Vol. 73, No. 4, 3 October 2007

Mark Mercer

Department of Philosophy

Saint Mary's University

Halifax, NS B3H 3C3

(902) 420-5825

mark.mercer@smu.ca

The chancellor of Saint Mary's University is opposed to same-sex marriage. Indeed, our chancellor is opposed to adults having sex even willingly and in private unless they meet a whole range of conditions, few of which have anything to do with treating people with respect or avoiding putting people at risk of harm. These conditions are meant to ensure that when a person has sex, he or she is open to the possibility of procreation. That's why our chancellor is against masturbation, oral sex, and contraception, among much else. The chancellor of our university also opposes abortion.

The chancellor of Saint Mary's University is the Archbishop of Halifax. (Right now that office is vacant.) The institution with which he is associated, the Roman Catholic Church, reserves many of its most powerful offices for men. Our chancellor accepts Church doctrine regarding differences between men and women and regarding the significance these differences have for offices in his church and for social life. Moreover, our chancellor believes that God exists, that God appeared on Earth as a man, that we are all sinners who can be saved from damnation only by accepting that God-as-man sacrificed His life for us, and that sometimes the wine he sips is not wine at all but actually human blood.

Now I'm happy to have a chancellor who believes any weird or impossible thing whatever. Let him or her follow the argument wherever it leads and take up whatever position he or she thinks is best evidenced. Weird beliefs is not the problem. The problem is that the chancellor of our university is not free to follow the argument wherever it leads. The man himself, of course, is free to follow the argument wherever it leads. But he would cease to be our chancellor were he to follow it to conclusions contrary to Roman Catholic doctrine. The chancellor of our university doesn't just *happen* to be the Archbishop of Halifax; he is, rather, the chancellor of our university *because* he is Archbishop. Were his beliefs to change—or, in any case, were he no longer to represent himself as believing in accordance with Church doctrine—our chancellor would cease to be Archbishop and, thereby, cease to be our Chancellor.

There are many reasons, each individually sufficient, why the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Halifax ought not automatically be designated the chancellor of Saint Mary's University. For one, it should be possible in principle for us to have a chancellor who is a woman married to one woman and divorced from another, who is a tireless fighter for abortion rights, and who believes that wine is always wine. For another, it should be possible in principle for the university community to reject a candidate for the office of chancellor. Indeed, the person eventually named as chancellor should first of all have been a candidate for the position.

But the reason I've begun to sketch why being archbishop ought not automatically make one our chancellor is neither of these. Saint Mary's is a university and, specifically, an institution of

higher education in the liberal arts. (Or, at least, an important part of it is.) Dogma and closed-mindedness are the great enemies of the liberal arts. Members of our community are free to follow arguments wherever they lead. We hold ourselves answerable to evidence and argument, and to evidence and argument alone. We are not answerable to authority—not in our beliefs or our discussions or our studies. An archbishop, on the other hand, *is* answerable to authority. He can be commanded to set evidence and argument aside. Again, if an Archbishop of Halifax were to disregard such a command, he would, on ceasing to be archbishop, cease to be our chancellor.

We are a community of intellectuals at a university and yet the position of chancellor of our university is tied to an office within an anti-intellectual organization, the Roman Catholic Church, an organization that can remove the archbishop from his Church office for holding the wrong beliefs or saying the wrong things. Should the Church remove a man from the office of archbishop, that man ceases to be our chancellor. Our chancellor does not enjoy freedom of thought in his church office. Fair enough—that’s none of our business. But our university does not extend to him the protection of academic freedom in his position of chancellor. Since we want all members of our community to be free to believe and to say what they want without fear of jeopardizing their place in our community, our chancellor should not be simply whoever is Archbishop of Halifax.

Notice that this argument is not that a devote Roman Catholic ought not be our chancellor. It is not even that a person who happens to be the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Halifax ought not be our chancellor. It is simply that anyone who is our chancellor ought not become our former chancellor just in virtue of changing her or his religious beliefs. Saint Mary’s ought to be such that no one forfeits her position in our community as an immediate result of abandoning her beliefs. “Academic freedom for the chancellor!”, I say.

That there ought be no tie between the office of archbishop and the position of chancellor does not directly imply that we ought to work to sever this tie. We have to think practically. How much would we spend in time and trouble and resources to sever it? Would severing it be worth spending that much? I don’t know. Of one thing I am sure, though. If the Chancellor of Saint Mary’s University happens to lose his faith, it will be our duty to see that he remains chancellor, if that’s what he wishes.