

WHAT ARE THE TRUE GOALS OF CATHOLIC LIBERAL EDUCATION?

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In this essay I draw on the founding document of Thomas Aquinas College (Santa Paula, CA), "A Proposal for the Fulfillment of Catholic Liberal Education" (1969, 1981), as a starting point for reflections on Catholic liberal education. Although my ideas go beyond the ideas in the document, none intentionally contradicts what I found in the *Proposal*.

Proposal begins with a critique of contemporary Catholic higher education chiefly criticizing the tendency of Catholic institutions to secularize themselves. It rejects the explanation that the primary cause of this secularization is economic. The problem is rather doctrinal. Doubtful that faith is a source of true knowledge, and that Christian faith, by illuminating understanding, strengthens the process of knowing reality, Catholic institutions have come to be no different philosophically from their secular counterparts. Skepticism corrupts their very self-understanding. *Ex corde ecclesiae* teaches that a Catholic university does not merely relate to the Church; it is part of the Church. It shares the Church's evangelical mission (Matt. 28:19-20) and fulfills that mission to the extent that it conforms itself to a coherent view of the cosmos, principally in its pursuit of true knowledge. Eliminate revelation and faith as sources of understanding and the Catholic university loses its identity.

While in these secularized "Catholic" universities certain areas of inquiry may proceed internally with little effect--presuming they remain within their proper scope (e.g., microbiology, languages, mathematics), others as a result suffer bias (e.g., history), and still others will be intellectually crippled (e.g., anthropology, psychology, sociology). Moreover, the Church's hierarchy, rather than being a guide and protector, comes to be seen as a threat, even an obstruction to intellectual inquiry. "Catholic identity" becomes an empty instrument of institutional marketing.

In such environs, even areas whose inquiry is left internally intact lose their coherence in relation to the whole of human knowledge. For if the cosmos is an orderly intelligible system; if that order derives from God's marvelously spoken Word, who in the beginning was with God and was God; if it has intelligible laws that move all things to their ends so each thing, in its proper order, may flourish, then each subject of inquiry finds its wider intelligibility in relation to the whole. *Ex corde* refers to this when it speaks of "the integration of knowledge." The whole as a whole in relation to its multiple parts is investigated in the subject of theology. Theological inquiry, therefore, in secularized institutions suffers the most. No longer beginning with propositions derived from faith, theological inquiry declines into sociological inquiry--"What are the religions saying?" or worse, "What does secular society say religion should be saying?"

The problem of human freedom for the ethical monotheist provides a good example of the importance of divine revelation as a corrective to human reason. The problem runs something like this. If God's causality causes all created things; and free choices are created things; then God causes our free choices; but if God causes our free choices, then they really cannot be said to be free. So either God does not cause our free choices (i.e., he is not all powerful), or we are not free. Luther's dispute with Erasmus and Calvin's dispute with Arminians, both emphasizing the power, sovereignty and righteousness of God, concluded in the latter way. And Rabbi Harold Kushner in *When Bad Things Happen To Good People* concludes in the former.

How do reason and revelation complement each other in providing a correct answer? Reason tells us that the argument for determinism is self-defeating. In attempting to argue that we are not free, the ethical determinist, like Luther or Calvin, appeals to arguments which he believes are superior to those he is trying to refute, and which he believes all reasonable people ought upon investigation to adopt; but if my mind is capable of being changed by the persuasiveness of rational argumentation--implying I have weighed competing arguments and freely chosen one as rationally superior, then free choice exists. Moreover, the determinist premise is contrary to experience, which tells us that we can and have made

free choices. But it is Divine Revelation that guards us from concluding as Rabbi Kushner does (or as Cicero does when he denies God's omniscience). Revelation teaches both that we cannot come to God without his grace, and that God expects us to respond to his call (see Deut. 30:19, Sirach 15:16-17 Mark 16:15-16 Romans 2:18-21). In light of this Catholic theological argument concludes that, since God is other than we are, and that we cannot reduce his causality to the kind of causality we understand in the created order. (In other words, we know that God causes but do not understand precisely how he causes.) Divine Revelation maintains both the truth of God's omnipotence and human freedom; and since experience confirms that we can make and have made free choices, and the argument for determinism is self defeating, sound reasoning concludes that, God can create a being who makes free choices, and his creative power can sustain-in-being at every moment the creature he has willed to be free. Moreover, as recent studies of St. Thomas Aquinas's theology of divine providence indicate, divine causality is eternal, with no "before or after" and so divine causality in no way determines free contingent events in time.

An example of Divine Revelation guarding practical reason from error is seen when we consider Revelation's contribution to the mind-body problem. Revelation teaches that both body and spirit constitute the human person. The Platonic view that the immaterial soul is other than and imprisoned within a material body, and the Hobbesian, Marxian and general materialist conclusion that the material essentially defines personhood, are rejected. Body and soul are both redeemed in Christ and both have an end, which extends beyond temporal horizons. The human person is neither one nor the other but a unity of the two. In seeking a vocabulary through which to express this truth, Catholic philosophers, particularly Aquinas, have drawn upon Aristotelian philosophy. The person exists as a unified body-soul reality whose soul is the animating principle of the body. As the Ecumenical Council of Vienne defined, the human person's substantial integrity exists in a reality in which the rational soul is *per se et essentialiter*, the form of his body. It follows that human dignity (i.e., the intrinsic value humans have by virtue of being human) is irreducibly predicated of the person as he exists in his substantial unity of body and soul. And therefore that human life, whether conceived in its bodily or spiritual dimensions, is invested with personal value. Moreover, Revelation teaches that the definitive proclamation of the value of human life is found only in the person of Jesus Christ: "Truly great must be the value of human life," Pope John Paul II teaches, "if the Son of God has taken it up and made it the instrument of the salvation of all humanity!" (EV, 33) And again, "*the glory of God shines on the face of man*" (EV, 35). It follows that actions aimed at destroying life before it is expressive of the capacities proper to its spiritual (immaterial) dimension (i.e., self-consciousness and rationality), and after it has irretrievably lost its ability to think and choose, are still actions which intend to kill a human person invested with full human dignity and sacredness, and therefore are wrong.)

What about "academic freedom"? While the term has been abused it has a valid understanding. As *Ex corde* teaches, a Catholic university possesses the "institutional autonomy necessary to perform its functions effectively." Its faculty are assured "academic freedom, so long as the rights of the individual person and of the community are preserved within the confines of the truth and the common good." Academic freedom therefore includes the freedom of teachers and scholars to inquire after truth in their respective fields. It includes the rights of students to a fair and unbiased presentation of subject matter. And it includes the freedom of an institution to be and function "a center of creativity and dissemination of knowledge for the good of humanity."

But academic freedom has come to be construed as a liberty to doubt all premises, and teach students to do so as well. Of course this is never applied to the natural sciences or mathematics. Faculty and students realize that freedom in these disciplines is normed by the valid discoveries of the past. Not so for religion. A secularized conception of academic freedom holds religious doctrines to be a restriction on the proper freedom of a scholar or institution. It adduces the quasi-religious *a priori* principle that every proposition must be equally subject to criticism, refutation and rejection, and that any authority which would limit that liberty is harmful to the academic endeavor.

But it fails to examine the limitations of its own premise. If such inquiry is justified by its manifest aptitude to realize true knowledge, then the principle would either be gradually abrogated by the realization of its defining aim, or be shown to be incoherent. As true knowledge is apprehended, the premises found to be true no longer would fall under the scope of the principle. Further, the principle states that every criticism must be based on premises subject to criticism. But those criticisms too must derive from premises, which derive from premises, and so forth. At some point we must arrive at premises, which are not subject to criticism if there is any hope for arriving at truth. But then those premises would no longer be subject to the master principle. In this case the principle must either yield or be shown to be incoherent in its circularity.

This construal also strikes at the heart of a scholar's vocation. If his vocation is the dedicated pursuit of truth, and academic freedom requires that towards this end all premises remain (at least in principle) subject to doubt and refutation, then the end and means of the scholarly vocation are in conflict. Moreover, if prioritizing certain premises of human knowledge is excluded because inappropriately 'value laden,' then the evaluative status of an academic within his institution or scholarly community becomes abstracted from the question of his competence in relation to the purpose of his academic life. The question of the quality of his teaching, research and service must prescind from the question of truth and falsity in relation to subject matter in his area of specialization. It either must fall back upon 'accepted standards' of competence--"the accepted rather than the true is the standard not only in fact (because of human fallibility) but also by intent" (*Proposal*, 20), or, what is more common, hidden judgments as to what is true and false are imported incognito into the calculus.

What then is liberal education? In many institutions, including my own, the educational ethos resembles more a professional school than a center of liberal education. The formation of habits of mind, aptitude for logical thinking, and inculcating of intellectual wonder are not the focus of concern. The ethos rather is increasingly defined by goals common to the corporate world, with 'focus groups' and 'action plans' for defining short and long-term institutional aims, outcome based curricula, emphasis on student retention (without regard to intellectual aptitude!), and job placement among the high priorities.

Consequently, faculty in traditional liberal arts subjects routinely have the lowest salaries in the university. Administrative decisions favor the development of business, law and other professional schools over arts and sciences. Libraries are downsized in favor of e-media. Reading and writing is increasingly replaced by pointing and clicking. Student satisfaction is prized higher than student performance and a strenuous effort to engender self-esteem has replaced a stern emphasis on discipline, preparedness and self-motivation.

What are the goals of a Catholic liberal education? To begin with to equip students to think. But what do we want them to think? Since all thoughts are not of equal value the question is important. The ultimate goal of a liberal education is to bring a student into intellectual contact with reality, the self-manifestation of which is truth. We want him to develop what John Henry Newman calls *a philosophical habit of mind*, one which will last throughout his life. Its attributes, Newman says, are freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom.

Knowing truth, however, is not the end but, rather, grasping the thing which truth signifies. And so the pursuit of true knowledge is a means of coming into contact with reality. The goal of Catholic intellectual life therefore is to be intellectually shaped by reality. When the mind awakens to reality, it takes its first step towards God the source of what is real.

Now natural reason is fit to know the totality of created things, but not things of a higher order. To apprehend them faith is necessary. Hence for a fuller apprehension of reality both faith and reason are necessary. Both give rise to the apprehension of truth, and through such apprehension to the thing signified, most importantly to God. Believing and knowing are not two types of mental acts, but rather the

apprehension of things, which exist at different levels of reality; their difference is not in the act of the mind but rather in the nature of the object apprehended.

Therefore Boethius says, *fidem, si poteris, rationemque conjunge* ("if you are able, join faith to reason"), a maxim for Catholic liberal education. The created universe, in the Incarnation, has been taken up into the Godhead and divinized, and the ineffable Godhead in the Incarnation has been humanized. Therefore, to turn toward all aspects of God's universe is a disposition required by Catholic education, as much as it is to turn the God who created it. Central to this endeavor is theology. Theology concerns itself with the totality of reality. Its inquiry is opened up upon the world and no part of the world escapes its view. Its inquiry is concerned with the divine in relation to the human, with nature in relation to the absolutely supernatural gift of revelation and redemption. Theology strains to know all that can be known about this relationship.

Towards this end, the thought of Aquinas is most important. His thought and method illustrate the best of what Catholic liberal education can and ought to be. In Aquinas' cosmology from *exitus* to *reditus* no aspect of reality escapes his purview. His return to the ancients, especially Aristotle, is a model for pedagogical method. We return to the ancients to gain the wisdom informing their knowledge and inquiry.

Modern western intellectual life has, to a great extent, lost any notion of wisdom as an attunement to the whole of reality created by God. So modern science and scholarship are in need of precisely such a metaphysical wisdom and the gifted wisdom of theology in order that science and scholarship conform to the eternal and natural laws informing the whole movement of creation towards the Triune God.

The task is still that of the Leo XIII "*vetera novis augere et perficere*" – to show, as John Paul II has outlined in *Fides et Ratio* how our challenge today is to integrate the wisdom and holiness of the great saints and doctors of the Church with the science and scholarship of today to overcome the culture of death and promote a culture of life.

Although theology is central, it is not sufficient for a Catholic liberal education. Since all branches of knowledge are interconnected—insofar as each piece contributes to the picture of the whole of reality, to emphasize one at the expense of the other would, as Newman says, be "unjust" to the other: "there is no science but tells a different tale, when viewed as a portion of a whole."

A Catholic liberal education includes the trivium, that is, grammar, logic and rhetoric, each perfecting in its own way method of human discourse, as well as the *quadrivium*--"the mathematical disciplines"-- that is, mathematics and geometry, and applied mathematics or music, and applied geometry or astronomy, each concerned in its own way with quantity and the quantitative. It too includes inquiry into natural science, the created stage upon which the drama of human redemption was played out. And it includes study of the classical languages of Latin and Greek.

I would like to conclude with a few thoughts on human freedom. Revelation teaches (and Catholic tradition affirms) that only through freedom can humans be good. It rejects the false notion that freedom is essentially for license and affirms, with Aquinas, that freedom is most free when its object and inclination is authentic human good.

Free choice is an existential (albeit non-normative) principle of moral goodness and badness, i.e., it does not indicate how we ought to act, but rather that we can act; it therefore underlies both goodness and badness. It is the central reality in us by which our actions are able to enter the realm of the moral. Whatever happens to us as a result of factors outside us, and any behavior which does not derive from free choice is not, strictly speaking, an action, it is not doing, is not something for which we should be held responsible. Free choice is one way in which we are like God. Humans, like God, are creators; through free choice they bring about things that once were not (e.g., offspring, works of sculpture, paintings, songs,

movements for social reform). God in choosing is not determined by anything other than himself; humans in freely choosing are not determined by anything other than themselves.

In its transitive dimension free choice shapes the world around us. More importantly, in its reflexive dimension, free choice shapes the chooser. In choosing we nurture our moral selves. And step by moral step our minds and wills, our dispositions of taste and temperament bend in the direction of good or evil, and gradually, over time our choices become in us fixed dispositions of virtue and vice; we in a sense become what we do. To be sure, the process is not solitary; like a lily or a tomato plant, soil is of the utmost importance; but in the end, it is I and only I who am to thank or blame for the man or woman I become.

Aquinas with Aristotle and Augustine asserts that choice aims at happiness. Indeed all men seek happiness in all they seek, but happiness is only sought for its own sake. But while happiness is wanted by all, its nature is not known to all. It is true therefore that we both will to live happily, and do not will to live in a way, which will make us happy. The question of the proper objects of choice is therefore all-important if humans are to reach fulfillment. Now just as all material bodies are subject to laws like gravitation and entropy, and biological organisms to laws like growth and decay, so the rational creature is subject in his action to a law of his own. With one major difference. A stone has no choice whether it will obey the law of gravity, while humans can and must choose whether they will obey the law of nature. What is the 'law of nature' or 'of human nature'? Aquinas says it is a law of reason, a light of understanding infused in us by God, whereby we understand what must be done and be avoided; it is an imprint on us of divine light, a participation in God's eternal law inclining us toward right action and ultimately toward our end.

How does the content of the natural law correspond to the moral teaching of Divine Revelation? The Patristic distinction taken up by Aquinas between the "moral" precepts of the Old Law and its merely "ceremonial" and "judicial" precepts is helpful. Moral precepts, Aquinas says, pertain by their very nature to good morals. If a moral precept is taught in the Old Law, that precept belongs by nature to good morals and hence to the natural law. (Aquinas calls it a secondary precept of the natural law.) The moral precepts of the Old Law are reducible, Aquinas says, to the precepts of the Decalogue. So with respect to moral norms, the teaching of Sacred Scripture underwrites the law of nature. Although the precepts of the natural law can be known by reason unaided by Revelation, God willed to promulgate them also by Divine Revelation so we would be without doubt in regard to what is required. But the precepts of the natural law pertain to good morals as defined by imperfect beatitude, that is, happiness as defined by our natural end. Humans however not only have a natural end, but also a supernatural end, which the natural law is inadequate to direct man toward. Hence God willed to reveal to man the proper subject matter for realizing his supernatural end, which is the *depositum fidei* (deposit of faith). A liberal arts education therefore in its practical teaching must also inquire into the proper subject matter for attaining both imperfect and perfect beatitude. It should inquire into the question, in what does happiness consist, and should examine the most significant and influential answers in Western intellectual tradition, observing lines of agreement and disagreement between those answers and Christian doctrine.

On a final point I am ambivalent. In his *Idea of a University*, John Henry Newman raises the objection that philosophers in every age who have submitted themselves to this liberal pursuit have gone on to profess by the use of liberal knowledge to make people virtuous; but in this pursuit they have failed miserably. In effect, a philosophical habit of mind has not produced virtue in men; what good was it to Cicero against the riled crowd or Brutus against the treacherous hand of his comrade? Newman responds saying that virtue is not part of the scope of a liberal education. Knowledge is the end: "knowledge is one thing, virtue is another; good sense is not conscience, refinement is not humility, nor is largeness and justness of view faith. (Liberal Knowledge) however enlightened, however profound, gives no command over the passions, no influential motives, no vivifying principles. Liberal Education makes not the Christian, not the Catholic, but the gentleman." Newman's view is that a liberal education involves the cultivation of the intellect; its end is no more and no less than intellectual excellence.

It seems to me if wisdom based on faith is most suited to satisfy a student's natural appetite for truth, and faith as a theological virtue is the proximate means of union with the Lord, then a student whose intellectual life is most animated by those principles is also going to be one whose life is being sanctified. And that while a Catholic liberal education cannot promise either wisdom or sanctity, if its end is being realized, it will as a result form good Christians as well as gentlemen. Indeed, it is interesting to see how Aristotle and Aquinas analyze the intellectual and moral virtues, and how Aquinas sees charity as the form of all the virtues, both intellectual and moral. Love of wisdom may well call for heroic moral excellence in the philosopher, and a graced holiness in the theologian.

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