

Maritain: Philosophy, The Catholic University and Truth

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It is no accident that in recent years several important books have appeared exploring and examining the university. I think immediately of George M. Marsden's *The Soul of the American University*,¹ David J. O'Brien's *From the Heart of the American Church*,² Jaroslav Pelikan's *The Idea of the University*,³ Douglas Sloan's *Faith and Knowledge*,⁴ and Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*.⁵ Because of his distinguished career in Catholic higher education sections of the autobiography of Father Theodore M. Hesburgh, *God, Country, Notre Dame*⁶ can also be added to the list. There is a crisis in education. The contemporary world has problems to spare and it is difficult to make some kind of hierarchy or list in order of their importance. But if we look to the needs of the present and toward what must happen if the future is to be better than university education has to be near the top of the list. The amount of discussion that

¹ George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 462.

² David J. O'Brien, *From the Heart of the American Church: Catholic Higher Education and American Culture* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994), p. 212.

³ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Idea of the University: A Re-examination* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 238.

⁴ Douglas Sloan, *Faith and Knowledge: Mainline Protestantism and American Higher Education* (Westminster: John Knox, 1994), p. 336.

⁵ Allan J. Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), p. 392.

⁶ Theodore M. Hesburgh with Jerry Ready, *God, Country, Notre Dame: The Autobiography of Theodore M. Hesburgh* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), p. 331.

Bloom's book caused less than ten years ago suggests something of the urgency that many educators sense in relation to contemporary education's failures. With great accuracy Bloom articulated the relativism that pervades the horizon of the contemporary student.

There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative. If this belief is put to the test, one can count on the students' reaction: they will be uncomprehending. That anyone should regard the proposition as not self-evident astonishes them, as though he were calling into question $2+2=4$. Those are things you don't think about . . . The danger they have been taught to fear from absolutism is not error but intolerance . . . The study of history and of culture teaches that all the world was mad in the past, men always thought they were right, and that led to wars, persecutions, slavery, xenophobia, racism and chauvinism. The point is not to correct the mistake and really be right, rather it is not to think you are right at all.⁷

In my own reading of Bloom I was impressed by his perception that something was wrong but disappointed with his suggestions of how to combat it. Though I share Bloom's enthusiasm for Plato, I think that more is needed than a re-reading and reflection on some of antiquity's insights. What is needed is a philosophy of person that states forcefully essential truths about personal existence and can make clear the crucial role that university education can play in the life of a person and indeed in the life of a society in which it exists. The philosophy of Jacques Maritain is such a philosophy.

In his marvelous book, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, Pope John Paul II succinctly characterizes the positivist mentality:

Positivism has not only been a philosophy or a methodology, it has been one of those *schools of suspicion* that the modern era has seen grow and prosper. Is man truly capable of knowing something beyond what he sees with his eyes or hears with his ears? Does some kind of knowledge other than the strictly empirical exist? Is the human capacity for reason completely subject to the senses and internally directed by the laws of mathematics, which have been shown to be particularly useful in the rational ordering of phenomena and for guiding technical progress?

If we put ourselves in the positivist perspective, concepts such as *God or the soul* simply lose meaning. In terms of sensory experience, in fact, nothing corresponds to God or the soul.⁸

⁷ Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, pp. 25–26.

⁸ Pope John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), p. 244.

Unfortunately the positivist mentality still pervades our students' visions. Perhaps threatening circumstances shed new light on old realities or at least help us to appreciate more deeply what we have that is of value. At this moment the role of the Catholic university never seemed more important. Yet it is in crisis. In terms of crisis it is, to borrow Maritain's phrase, "at the crossroads."⁹ In this essay, using Maritain's philosophy of person, truth, and education, I want to highlight three aspects of Catholic university life that are especially important today: 1) the Catholic university's commitment to the liberal arts; 2) its commitment to philosophy; and 3), its commitment to specifically Catholic studies.

In reflecting on the unique contribution that a Catholic university can make to a student I re-read a description of a contemporary person that highlights what a Catholic university does *not* want to produce. The description underlines what can happen in our secular humanistic, consumer culture which discourages serious reflection, especially serious reflection on self and what it means to be a person. The description, taken from Walker Percy's novel *The Moviegoer*, is the self-description of the main character, Binx Bolling. Catholic Thomistic-existentialist Percy touches all the bases and gives us a humorous but frightening image of a person who has not transcended the errors that bombard him every day:

I am a model tenant and a model citizen and take pleasure in doing all that is expected of me. My wallet is full of identity cards, library cards, credit cards. Last year I purchased a flat olive-drab strongbox, very smooth and heavily built with double walls for fire protection, in which I placed my birth certificate, college diploma, honorable discharge, G.I. insurance, a few stock certificates, and my inheritance. . . . It is a pleasure to carry out the duties of a citizen and to receive in return a receipt or a neat styrene card with one's name on it certifying, so to speak, one's right to exist. What satisfaction I take in appearing the first day to get my auto tag and brake sticker! I subscribe to *Consumer Reports* and as a consequence I own a first-class television set, an all but silent air conditioner and a very long lasting deodorant. My armpits never stink. I pay attention to all spot announcements on the radio about mental health, the seven signs of cancer, and safe driving. . . .

In the evenings I usually watch television or go to the movies. Our neighborhood theater in Gentilly has permanent lettering on the front of the marquee reading: Where Happiness Costs So Little. The fact is I am quite happy in a movie, even a bad movie. Other people, so I have

⁹ Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1943), p. 120.

read, treasure memorable moments in their lives: . . . What I remember is the time John Wayne killed three men with a carbine as he was falling to the dusty street in *Stagecoach*, and the time the kitten found Orson Welles in the doorway in *The Third Man*.¹⁰

How not to produce Binx Bolling? The study of liberal arts has a special role. In discussing with contemporary students and educators the unique role of the liberal arts in education I stress that such study enables people to think, to reflect on what it means to be human. I believe that deeply and I might add statements such as "The study of the liberal arts humanizes us" or "The study of the liberal arts personalizes us." I believe that too but Robert Hutchins when he was the President of the University of Chicago put forth the case for the liberal arts more profoundly. His articulation of the value of the liberal arts includes implicitly the philosophical vision of person that Maritain had. Hutchins wrote:

The object of education is the production of virtue; for virtue is that which makes a man good and his work good, too. As virtue makes a man and his work good, so also it makes him happy, for happiness is activity in accordance with virtue. As virtue makes a man good and makes him happy, so also it makes him a good citizen, and this is the aim of general or liberal education. The four cardinal virtues are justice, prudence, temperance and fortitude, and one description of them is that they are social virtues, the virtues that good living in society requires.¹¹

Reading this today, and perhaps being startled by it, may reveal just how much the theory of value-free education has subtly influenced us. Hutchins goes on to stress that because a virtue is a habit it is acquired and strengthened by particular acts. A person becomes just by performing just acts, becomes temperate by being temperate. A person cannot acquire a virtue merely by listening to lectures in ethics. An individual can have a doctorate in ethics but not be a virtuous person. A person has all sorts of habits, good and bad, before he or she attends a university. However, Hutchins reminds us that virtues may be lost or weakened and, of course, may also be strengthened. A Catholic university will want to help students strengthen their virtues and diminish their vices. If good habits learned at a young age are to be strengthened, they need to be supported by reason. Stressing that this is where the connection between the moral and intellectual virtues is Hutchins wrote:

¹⁰ Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer*, (New York: Avon, 1960), p. 191.

¹¹ Robert M. Hutchins "The University and Character," *Commonweal* 27 (22 April 1938): p. 710.

The great and specific contribution that a college or university can make to the development of virtue is in supplying the rational basis for it, that is, in developing the intellectual virtues. Wisdom, science and understanding, the three speculative virtues, and prudence, the good habit of the practical intellect, must be the focus of a university's educational endeavor. They are the criterion of teaching and research. The test of a good course is not whether it is amusing or informational or seems to contribute to financial success, any more than the test of a good research project is whether it is expensive and elaborate and produces large literary poundage. The real test of instruction or research is whether it has high intellectual content and demands intellectual effort. Otherwise it has no place in a university, for it cannot assist in forming those habits which a university is designed to foster.¹²

Hutchins went on to say that the special way that a university serves a democracy is in helping its students to think. He pointed out that economic and social injustice of his time were not due to the lack of resources or the failure of technology but to the weakness and absence of moral and intellectual virtues. The main issue of the day was a moral and intellectual one. I am tempted to note that the more things change the more they remain the same. In discussing education Maritain wrote:

Education must remove the rift between the social claim and the individual claim within man himself. It must therefore develop both the sense of freedom and the sense of responsibility, human rights and human obligations, the courage to take risks and exert authority for the general welfare and the respect for the humanity of each individual person.¹³

Concerning the Catholic university's commitment to philosophy I would like to mix Maritain's philosophy of person with insights from the Roman Catholic existentialist, Gabriel Marcel. In reflecting on the role of a Catholic university I find Marcel's distinction between a problem and a mystery quite helpful. Many people on many days are preoccupied with problems; philosophy and the Catholic university call people to reflect on mystery.

Marcel claimed that there were four differences between a problem and a mystery.¹⁴ A problem is always external to the self. It is out there. A question in physics or chemistry or mathematics does not involve direct reflection on the self. A problem deals with what is other than the self. A mystery

¹² Ibid., 14–15.

¹³ Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, p. 89.

¹⁴ Kenneth Gallagher, *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1962), p. 30–40.

is internal and always involves the self. I can not reflect on the mystery of freedom without reflecting on my freedom; I cannot reflect on the mystery of death without reflecting on my death; I cannot reflect on the mystery of God without reflecting on my relationship with God. The second difference is that the mood in dealing with a problem is curiosity while the mood in dealing with a mystery is awe or wonder. Third, there is an answer to a problem; there is no answer or final solution to a mystery. With a problem I may not know the answer, you may not know the answer, but in principle there is an answer. With a mystery a person can go deeper and deeper and gain richer and richer insight but there is no final answer. Finally, a problem can be worked on by anyone. For example, I may work on a science problem for two hours and then hand over my research to someone else to work on for a few hours and that person in turn may hand his or her research over to someone else. Only I can think about mystery in my life. Only *I* can think about *my* death, only *I* can think about *my* freedom, only *I* can think about *my* relationship with God. Mystery is eminently personal.

Problems plague many people. A Catholic university with a strong philosophy requirement can call its students to deep reflection on mystery. In assessing his education from grammar school through university philosopher Sam Kean wrote:

Although it was nowhere explicitly stated, I found the motto of education to be: *Dubito Ergo Sum* (I doubt therefore I am). And for years I sat with cramped muscles in hardwood chairs (with initials carved in them) and listened to lectures on the necessity for dialogue (no one laughed) and on the incarnate and engaged character of human existence.

Scarcely ever in my quarter of a century of schooling was I invited to consider the intimate, personal questions which were compelling my attention outside the classroom.¹⁵

Philosophy can call people to reflect on the meaning of personal existence from a most profound and radical perspective that is uniquely philosophy's. In discussing philosophy's role in education Maritain wrote that:

the highest aim of liberal education which is to make youth possess the foundations of wisdom. At this point I need not dwell on the vindication of philosophy. It is enough to repeat a remark often made indeed, namely that nobody can do without philosophy, and that, after all, the only way of avoiding the damage wrought by an unconscious belief in

¹⁵ Sam Kean, *To A Dancing God* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1970), p. 39.

a formless and prejudicial philosophy is to develop a philosophy consciously. Furthermore metaphysics is the only human knowledge which actually claims to be wisdom, and to have such penetration and universality that it can actually bring the reader of the sciences into unity, cooperation and accord, and if anybody honestly wishes to dispute the validity of this claim, he must perforce begin by knowing the metaphysics that he challenges. In fine, education deals ultimately with the great achievements of the human mind; and without knowing philosophy and the achievements of the great thinkers it is utterly impossible for us to understand anything of the development of mankind, civilization, culture and science.¹⁶

The mystery of self, the mystery of neighbor, and the mystery of God are philosophy's preoccupations. Actually, philosophy can glory in the truth that it does not reach final and finished truths about person, neighbor and God. There is too much in an unlimited God for a finite mind ever to master a final truth about God and the Divine has shared too much of itself with human reality for a limited mind ever to penetrate totally its own mystery. In a fast-paced world, our technological society—one which may at times slip into a technocracy—the wonder and awe that should accompany all philosophical reflection are a special counter-cultural benefit that philosophy can provide. That no one can reflect on a mystery for someone else reminds us of a profound truth about a university: there is a sense in which no one educates anyone else. The great teacher invites us, calls us, shares his or her excitement with us. But all truth involves a commitment and no one can make the commitment for anyone else. Philosophy calls students to mystery, perhaps even tries to seduce to mystery, but education will not happen without the student's self gift.

Those aspects of mystery which may at first seem repugnant to the student—that there are no final solutions, that the mood is awe and that reflection about self must be done by the self—are actually what makes philosophy such an indispensable blessing for the student in a Catholic university. Philosophy calls the student to a new level of existence, a more reflective, integrated and self-possessed way of existing.

Of course, liberal arts and philosophy can happen in universities other than Catholic universities. Any program that incorporates them should be applauded. But in the Catholic university, with its commitment to God's Self-Revelation and the teaching of the Catholic Church, the liberal arts and

¹⁶ Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, pp. 71–72.

philosophy should have a home that nourishes and nurtures them, indeed that sheds special light in their insights.

John Henry Newman was correct in placing theology as the queen of the sciences at the center of a University. Newman summarized his argument as follows:

I have argued . . . first, from the consideration that, whereas it is the very profession of a University to teach all sciences, on this account it cannot exclude Theology without being untrue to its profession. Next, I have said that all sciences being connected together, and having bearings on one another, it is impossible to teach them all thoroughly unless they are all taken into account, and Theology among them. Moreover, I have insisted on the important influence which Theology as a matter of fact does and must exercise over a great variety of sciences, completing and perfecting them; so that, granting it be a real science occupied upon truth, it cannot be omitted without great prejudice to the teaching of the rest. And lastly, I have urged that, supposing Theology is not taught, its province will not simply be neglected, but will be actually usurped by other sciences, which will teach, without warrant, conclusions of their own in a subject-matter which needs its own proper principles for its due formation and disposition.¹⁷

Without theology we cannot have a Catholic university—yet the Catholic dimension should color everything. While leaving each discipline its own necessary independence the Catholic vision should permeate all studies. Years ago, not really facetiously, German theologian Romano Guardini said that a Christian climbs a tree differently than anyone else. I suggest that a Catholic university presents all academic disciplines differently because of the Catholic commitment which colors the Catholic university's identity.

However, I would like to echo the sentiments of other Catholic educators and suggest that at a Catholic university there should be much reflection on the Catholic imaginative tradition. Here I rely on David Tracy's insights into the analogical imagination.¹⁸ Simplifying and summarizing Tracy's insights, Andrew Greeley has argued provocatively and persuasively that the Catholic imagination should be studied at a Catholic university.¹⁹ There is a

¹⁷ John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), p. 74.

¹⁸ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), pp. 405; 456.

¹⁹ Andrew Greeley, "The Catholic Imagination and the Catholic University," *America* (16 March 1991): pp. 285–288.

significant difference between the Catholic imagination and the Protestant imagination. The former tends to emphasize the immanence of God; the latter tends to emphasize the transcendence of God. The Catholic imagination is analogical; the Protestant dialectical. Greeley wrote:

The analogical or Catholic imagination, to summarize and simplify David Tracy, emphasizes the presence of God in the world. It perceives the world and its creatures and relationships and social structures as metaphors, sacraments of God, hints of what God is like. I often illustrate the theory by noting that Catholics have angels and saints and souls in purgatory and statues and stained glass windows and holy water, and an institutional church that itself is thought to be a sacrament. Protestant denominations, on the other hand, either do not have this imagery or do not put much emphasis on it. The Catholic imagination is defined by the practice of devotion to Mary the Mother of Jesus. To fall back on the mother tongue, *ubi est Maria, ibi est ecclesia catholica* ("where Mary is, there is the Catholic Church").²⁰

It should be remembered that in naming the imaginations it is not being claimed that they are mutually exclusive or that either one exists completely, in a pure state, in any individual. The two imaginations represent emphases and tendencies but the differences in those tendencies and emphases are real and important. It would be a tragedy if faculty and students at a Catholic university were not widely exposed to the analogical Catholic imagination. There should be no fear that exposure to the Catholic imagination smacks of parochialism or narrowness. Nothing need be lost, weakened or trivialized in an academically strong curriculum by studying in depth what the Catholic imagination has produced. Andrew Greeley suggests five areas of study: 1) research and courses about the high culture of the Catholic imaginative tradition such as courses on Catholic poets, novelists, artists and film makers; 2) reflection on Mary and the saints; 3) reflection on traditional Catholic social teaching; 4) study of the unique American Catholic experience of immigration in the neighborhood parish and of the parochial school; 5) the establishment of artists, poets and writers from the tradition in residence on campus. Though a modest proposal, I think it is one good response to the secular atmosphere in which the Catholic university lives and breathes. I can attest to great enjoyment and apparent success in teaching a course entitled "Meaning, Mystery and Metaphysics in the Catholic Novel" which I created for St. John's philosophy department. I created the course after meeting an English major from a Catholic college

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 286.

who not only had never read Graham Greene or Evelyn Waugh, but never even heard of them!

It is impossible to stress too strongly the contribution that a Catholic university can make in the contemporary world. Years ago, addressing youth concerning education, Maritain wrote what I will make my final word:

the world, which hungers not only for bread but for the freeing word of truth, the world needs you, it asks you to be as courageous in the field of intellect and reason as in the battles of land and sea and air. What your intellect and reason have to win is something which is not to be measured or manipulated by scientific tools but grasped by the strength of rational insight arising from what your eyes see and your hands touch; a universe of realities which make your thought true by virtue of their very being, and not merely as a result of successful action. This is the universe of intelligible being and of the sacred character of truth as such. You will then be able to show the world how human action may be reconciled with and permeated by an ideal which is more real than reality. . . .²¹

²¹ Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, p. 117.