

VOCATION, FAMILY, AND THE ACADEMY:
*SIGNA PERSCRUTANDI*¹

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1. Introduction

Vatican Council II bids us to search out the “signs of the times” (*Gaudium et Spes*, #4). Doing so has never been easy. Of old, the Pharisees sought a “sign,” only to hear Jesus say, “You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times” (Matthew 16.3). Even *Gaudium et Spes* prompts questions about how it reads the signs of its times. Joseph Ratzinger noted early on that the document has little to say about how grace makes freedom possible. In his words, freedom “does not consist in abstract selection between different possibilities of behavior, but by its very nature lives in the presence of God and can only be really understood in relation to this vis-à-vis.”² More recently, Tracey Rowland has argued that the document is ambiguous about the structural flaws of liberal culture.³ With such high stakes, John Paul II’s advice to “look truth in the eye and to call things by their proper name” remains our best guide in searching out the signs of our times (*Evangelium Vitae*, #58).

The Catholic thinker reads the signs of the times in the light of the sacraments, each of which is a “sign and instrument of grace.”⁴ Yet something like a conspiracy obscures the perspective that matrimony provides. We are thus impoverished because, as John Paul II points out,

¹ I thank Michael Berg, Anne Barbeau Gardiner, and Carroll Kearley for their help with this essay.

² *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II: Volume V. Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 139.

³ Tracey Rowland, *Culture and the Thomist Tradition: after Vatican II* (London: Routledge, 2003), 9-34.

⁴ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005), 99.

“The social role that belongs to every family pertains by a new and original right to the Christian family ... based on the sacrament of marriage (*Familiaris Consortio*, #73).” In this essay, I argue that academic life, even in the Catholic university, occludes this sacramental perspective. My analysis is critical in that it indicts two patterns that are obstacles to the vocation of matrimony and family life. Both patterns reflect a liberal theory of institutions. My analysis, however, is constructive in that it identifies a pair of resources helpful in confronting these obstacles. We need not witness the “dying of the light.”⁵ As *Gaudium et Spes* #52 insists, it is a duty of public authority “to recognize, protect and promote” the dignity of marriage and the family.

2. Secular “Bracketing”

The university’s first occlusive pattern is systemic. It is the “bracketing” of the sacramental vocation of spouse and parent. The university does so in how it constructs its policies and goals. To be sure, the university is made up of flesh and blood people, of husbands and wives and sons and daughters. But the vocation of spouse and parent plays no public role in the structure or governance of the university.

This bracketing is symptomatic of a deep *hubris*. We search in vain for signs that the academy recognizes its own limits or admits that anything but the State is more basic than it is. At the same time, this *hubris* is often coupled with bewilderment about what matters most. Such is the consequence of an academic skepticism that invites the triumph of procedure over substance. Harvard’s *Veritas* died the death of a thousand doubts. But no university would proclaim the *Humilitas* on which depends the truth about our very selves. Indeed, St. Augustine, once a restive and ambitious academic, sees humility as the key to the unity of the virtues. “Do you propose,” he asks, “to raise the great fabric of high virtue? Then attend first to the foundation of humility.”⁶ Everywhere today, we instead find the touting of excellence. But who promotes this mantra of excellence? It is

⁵ See James Tunstead Burtchaell, C.S.C., *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998).

⁶ Sermon LXIX, I. PL 38, 44.

institutions that do, and they largely seek excellence through the efficiency of "value-neutral" procedures and secular goals duly accredited by a liberal ethos.

There is a vast literature on the meaning and methods of secular liberalism. Here we could not do better than to focus on what the deeply influential John Rawls, a premier theorist of liberalism, writes about spouses and their families. (Indeed, even the recent and welcome study, *The Future of Family Law*, appeals [naïvely] to Rawls in its advocacy for the natural family.⁷) In his early *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls casually allows that "in a broader inquiry the institution of the family might be questioned, and other arrangements might indeed prove to be preferable."⁸ What he tells us in his posthumous *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* is twofold: first, the family belongs to the basic structure of society with which justice directly concerns itself; and, second, when we articulate the basic principles of justice, we must *bracket* our status as spouse, parent, and child.⁹ Our personal history must retreat behind a veil of ignorance. If we resist this bracketing, we unreasonably impose on our fellow citizens. We must keep in mind that they might not be spouses or parents. If they do not share our life circumstances, why should they share our particular social and economic interests?

Rawls observes, too, that disputed questions about either monogamous marriage or same-sex unions raise no special considerations concerning the principles of justice or how we might best apply them.¹⁰ Of course, what counts as parenthood and family membership becomes deeply problematic, given new reproductive technology. Though silent

⁷ *The Future of Family Law: Law and the Marriage Crisis in North America*. A Report from the Council on Family Law, 2005. Dan Cere, Principal Investigator, 12-13.

⁸ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1971), 463.

⁹ John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, ed. Erin Kelly (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2001), 162-67. At one point, intriguingly, Rawls had suggested that contractors behind the veil of ignorance might think of themselves as representatives of families and, as such, caring about members of the next generation; see *A Theory of Justice*, 128.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 163.

on this point, Rawls does emphasize that family law should prevent the care of children from undermining women's equality of opportunity.¹¹ Thus, he finds it unreasonable to restrict first-trimester abortion.¹² What he plainly rejects, in any case, is the differential treatment of rational contractors in virtue of marriage and family. To insist on a distinct role for contractors as spouse or parent, much less to do so in terms of vocation, imperils the liberal polity. The requisite civility for such an order sternly mandates something like an "abstraction of self from self."¹³

Let us imagine, as easily we might, that the secular academy aspires to the Rawlsian model. To be sure, Rawls notes that the bonds of justice apply indirectly to the university in a context of just background institutions. But such bonds still bind tightly. In his *Political Liberalism*, Rawls insists that parents prepare their children, even in their early education, for compliance with "the public culture."¹⁴ When one turns to the university, largely a creature of the State, these indirect bonds prove very strong.¹⁵ Insofar as the academy aspires to such a model, it brackets spousal and familial identity.

But does the *Catholic* university aspire to so compartmentalized a model? Not without qualification. "Campus Ministry" continues its orbit, and here and there it lights the paths of some. In practice, though, spousal and family identity plays a minimal role in the policies of the Catholic university, whether they bear on curriculum or on professorial recruitment, compensation, and moral leadership. There are, to be sure, the exceptions of medical insurance and family tuition remission. With regard to the former, ironically, the State can and does intervene to decide critical policy matters. California law, for example,

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹² John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University, 1996), 243.

¹³ For this condition, see Walker Percy's *Love in the Ruins: the Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time near the End of the World* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1971), esp. 30-34. Percy's hero, Dr. Tom More, describes his diagnostic tool, the Qualitative Quantitative Ontological Lapsometer and its measurement of how sufferers from this disease allow theories to supplant reality.

¹⁴ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 200.

¹⁵ Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, 10-11, 164.

purportedly requires that Catholic universities share insurance costs for homosexual domestic partners.¹⁶ With regard to the latter, the university—with economic parsimony—supplements its employee compensation plan.

But there is a deeper bracketing at work. In both Rawlsian theory and actual practice, the liberal polity eschews any sense of the sacred. The secular polity is constructivist; thus, in the context of our institutions, we fashion justice through our self-regulating political processes. Privately, one might affirm that human law participates in a natural law grounded in God's creative love. Nonetheless, private affirmation should play little or no role in public deliberation.

A corollary of this constructivism is that a sense of vocation becomes attenuated. In the secular university one has a *career* rather than a *calling*. Insofar as the Catholic university is constructivist, its self-understanding markedly changes. Success, in its public measure, is professional success. And how does one's profession measure success? It does so in terms of the visible and preferably quantifiable productivity that brings institutional prestige. What, then, becomes of fidelity to one's *vocation* as a professor? That is a personal matter. What becomes of one's sacramental vocation as spouse and parent? That is a *fortiori* personal and bracketed.

3. On Instrumentalizing an Intrinsic Good

The second of the university's occlusive patterns is *strategic*. It chooses, on occasion, to relax its own bracketing of marriage and family. When it suits its own institutional purposes, the university selectively acknowledges marriage and family. Yet, in doing so, it keeps them at a regulated distance from its academic identity and "on message" with its own agenda.

John Rawls offers a rationale for this instrumentalization of an intrinsic good. He notes the obvious: "Reproductive labor is socially necessary," and the family has been its established source.¹⁷ Hence, the

¹⁶ For one university's eager compliance with this law, see "A Clear Mixed Signal," by Christopher Zehnder, in *Los Angeles Lay Catholic Mission* (January, 2005), 1.

¹⁷ Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: a Restatement*, 162.

family is to arrange “in a reasonable and effective way” for the “raising and caring for children, ensuring their moral development and education into the wider culture.”¹⁸ Yet the political trumps the familial, even if subsidiarity is made forfeit. Justice, the celebrated and sovereign political virtue, must shape and restrict the familial virtue of piety. Rawls continues, “[T]he spheres of the political and the public, and of the not-public and the private, take their shape from the content and application of the conception of justice and its principles.”¹⁹ If the Catholic university follows the Rawlsian model, it too deploys the family in the service of its own goals. The family becomes a tool that has its appropriate place.

A pair of examples illustrates this reductionism. Consider, first, that the secular university professes to serve the State. Yet the State can be (notoriously) at odds with the needs of the family, as philosophers from Plato to our own day have remarked. Families strive to have their own homes; families need a sense of place. Both are requisite for establishing roots; both are critical for children. All of us, moreover, are children long before we are students or professors. Typically, however, the *prestigious* university exploits the local to serve the national and the international. In doing so, the university cheerfully uses the stable family as a strategic recruit-pool. The academic apparatus displaces students and professors, as well as their families. In time it can even overwhelm the places they call home.

Wendell Berry, a professor *and* a farmer, addresses this deracination. Writing of the “vandalism” of the elites, he cites the standard requirements for membership therein. The first is that the aspirant be a careerist; the second is a university education. Yet how often, he observes, “these professionals have been educated ... in colleges or universities that had originally a clear mandate to serve localities or regions—to receive daughters and sons of their regions, educate them, and send them home again to serve ... their communities. The outcome

¹⁸ Ibid., 163.

¹⁹ Ibid., 166.

shows, I think, that they have generally betrayed this mandate"²⁰ Family and community become resources for the university's own ends.

For the second example, we can point to often repeated university complaints about parent interference in student orientation.²¹ Some parents, no doubt, are too fretful. Nonetheless, the "pay and go away" strategy is insulting.²² Parents, moreover, wonder about comments like the one that a colleague of mine recently offered the local press. "Students can leave my class believing the same as they did when they came into the class, but I want them to understand exactly why they believe what they believe."²³ It is *hubris* for a teacher to think that student beliefs are somehow his or hers to allow; it is also naïveté to suppose that a student's beliefs could become transparent, even to the student, on demand. Secular academics have scant reason to assume that they know more about the moral, much less religious, growth of their students than do the parents of these students. Yet, Rawlsian liberalism fosters this *hubris*. While Rawls admits that "at some point society has to trust to the natural affection and goodwill of parents," many parents wish, too often in vain, that they could safely trust the secular State and its universities.²⁴ It can, moreover, often be presumptuous for academics to assume that they know more about what is intellectually critical for students than do the parents of their students. Here Christopher Lasch is bracing. He applauds Orestes Brownson's claim that the real work of educating the young takes place

²⁰ Wendell Berry, "Higher Education and Home Defense," in *Home Economics* (Berkeley: North Point, 1987), 51-55.

²¹ For campus orientation tensions, see Sue Shellenbargar, "Colleges Ward Off Overinvolved Parents," in *The Wall Street Journal Online* (July 29, 2005).

²² More worrisome is the message "Pay and Stay." One Jesuit university's introduction to its new web portal, under the rubric "General Challenges to Overcome," lists "Creating an online community from 'cradle to endowment.' The portal is 'forever.'"

²³ L. Arik Greenberg, as cited by Meredith Grenier, "Dawn Unity Group offers 2 religion classes," *Daily Breeze*, Section B, 1 (August 23, 2005).

²⁴ Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: a Restatement*, 165.

not in schools but rather in their families and communities and, indeed, through nature itself and the very passions of the young.²⁵

The university's efforts to serve *in loco parentis* have more than one source, and as a result they are apt to be uneven and erratic. Courts play a decisive role, and sometimes the university abdicates its responsibility for students in order to avoid lawsuits. When the legal climate shifts, the university might revisit its responsibility for students, and often for the same reason. Coupled with legal concerns, there is an effort to instill "progressive thinking" about select social issues.²⁶ However alert the university is to shifting legal and social dictates, it is the family itself that ought chiefly to define, and delegate, the service of *in loco parentis*. To do so with any authority, there must be effective family councils with the capacity to intervene. When the court and the university override the family, as they often do, the family is diminished and, in turn, less able to challenge its increasing usurpation by these public institutions.

The Catholic university involves a further dimension. A religious and even intellectual *cura personalis* often persists in the Catholic university, although a recent Higher Education Research Institute study suggests that Catholic universities are not much different from secular schools in how they affect student belief and conduct.²⁷ But the authority for such a role has its basis in the teaching authority of the Church. To the extent that the Catholic university separates itself from the teaching Church, parents must all the more insist that, because of the sacramental character of their vocation, they are the first teachers of their sons and daughters. Vatican Council II speaks to the point: "Graced with the dignity and office of fatherhood and motherhood, parents will energetically acquit themselves of a duty which devolves primarily on them, namely education and especially religious education

²⁵ Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995), 157.

²⁶ See David Weigel's "Welcome to Fun-Free University," *reasononline*, October 2004.

²⁷ Patrick Reilly, "Are Catholic Colleges Leading Students Astray?," *The Catholic World Report* (March 2003), 38-46. Most welcome is the inaugural issue of *The Bulletin of Catholic Higher Education*, vol. 1, no. 1, (October 2008).

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(*Gaudium et Spes*, #48).” This parental duty is in service of the salvation of their sons and daughters. How, then, can education in a Catholic university fail in its responsibility to serve the family?

4. A First Resource for Renewal

My negative thesis, as I have developed it, is that insofar as the Catholic university follows the model of the secular academy, especially in the context of Rawlsian liberalism, it brackets the sacramental vocation of parents. When, in secondary matters and for its own strategic ends, the university relaxes this bracketing, it often instrumentalizes the family. It is time now to turn to my constructive thesis and to identify two resources that can help us challenge the *status quo*.

The sacramental character of marriage and family transforms their natural dimension; in doing so, this character exemplifies how grace transforms nature. This transformation advances the common good. To be sure, clarity about the common good is pivotal. With this clarity, we can better engage the established *disorder*. Let us understand by “common good” the whole range of material and cultural conditions that enables us to pursue the basic personal and shared goods, together with their realization. Vatican II presents the common good as “the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment (*Gaudium et Spes*, #26).” We realize our integral fulfillment in freely participating in the common good, which itself includes the goods of specific institutions. The family is one such institution; the university is another.

The family, however, is the primordial community. As Jacques Maritain notes, one “is constituted a part of the family society before [one] is constituted part of the political society.”²⁸ But the liberal polity, as distinct from the political order itself, is a social product. The secular university, in turn, is an artifact of the liberal polity. The common good of the family embraces the unitive good of marriage and the nurturing of children, as well as the conditions that enable the family to realize

²⁸ Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, trans. John J. Fitzgerald (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 1966), 75.

these goods. The common good of the university includes the good of knowledge and the conditions that support it. Often the material and cultural conditions that advance both the ends of the family and the university are interwoven. Beyond this, since the family and the university are both dimensions of the common good, to diminish either diminishes both. Thus, for the university to bracket the family undermines the common good.

How, then, might we best promote the dynamic of the common good as it integrates both the goods of the family and of the university? We should enter the Public Square to develop this integration and to show how the bracketing of the family undercuts the university's integrity and authority. With respect to its *integrity*, when the university equates same-sex unions with the family, it violates justice. Rather, the University should affirm that the family is the matrix for life; from this it follows that every other right demands the recognition and protection of the family. With respect to *authority*, we should highlight its erosion by confronting the university's own growing obeisance to the economic sphere. Without the strength of families that would welcome its service, the university hires itself out to those who will pay its way. Expanding all the while, and hustling rather than slouching, the military-athletic-corporate complex is already within the gates of the university.

5. A Second Resource for Renewal

My constructive analysis, then, looks first to the family, a natural institution which grace transforms, and then to the university, a developing social product. If we understand both family and university in terms of the common good, we can and should insist on their right ordering.

The next step is to show how the common good calls for an integrated pursuit of the virtues that enable us to achieve our ends. Specifically, we cannot pursue knowledge, the basic good of the academy, apart from the virtues of piety and fidelity that have their start in the family. In turn, piety and fidelity thrive in the light of the knowledge, both theoretical and practical, which the academy fosters.

Consider some links in this interplay of virtues. Piety is a potential part of justice; it has the character of justice but falls short of full

justice.²⁹ Why is this so? Keep in mind that while justice seeks what is due to others, in some cases we cannot fully render others what is in fact their due. This is manifestly so with respect to a connatural principle of our being: that is, with respect to God, our political order as such, and our parents. Piety is in order, too, with respect to our intellectual inheritance; once again, we cannot fully render those who have given us that inheritance what is their due. The university, moreover, plays a key role in how we share in and develop this inheritance. Thus piety, as an expression of justice, has a place in serving the good of the university. Fidelity, too, has a place in honoring the integrity of our intellectual inheritance and sustaining our participation in it.

How is it, though, that we come to acquire piety and fidelity? The family is where they are first and best taught. The bracketing of marriage and the family weakens the academy itself. If we recognize how this occurs, we can better identify its bitter fruit in university life: the tyranny of the calculative and the commercial over the contemplative and the humane. Exposing its etiology, we can better confront the academy's increasingly established *disorder*.

To be sure, the family needs the university insofar as it advances the good of knowledge. The family faces grave economic and political crises and the challenge to build a true "politics of the family" is daunting.³⁰ But only if the university honors its own heritage can it encourage the piety and fidelity that sustain the family. Justice in the structuring of the university is incompatible with the "bracketing" of the vocation, much less its sacramental source, which gives birth to familial piety and fidelity.

How might we best act on the basis of the unity of the virtues to pursue the common good? A modest proposal comes to mind. We should encourage public debate to understand the virtues and, in doing so, to integrate each virtue with its allied virtues—as we note in the interplay of piety, fidelity and justice. We must also press home a sobering truth. It is a standing temptation of the university to give way

²⁹ Aquinas follows Cicero in locating piety as a potential part of justice. See *ST II-II*, 101.3.

³⁰ On "family politics," see John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, #44.

to elitist economic forces. When the university does so, it divorces knowledge from wisdom. Without wisdom, the university becomes a blind guide and, worst of all, is the corruption of the best.

6. Envoi

Jacques Maritain indicts the denizens of the academy who detach themselves from so much of what animates the search for truth. “[T]he condition of the professor who is nothing more than a professor, retired from existence ... is precisely opposed to the genuine condition of the metaphysician.”³¹ He warns that “[t]he scholarly pedagogue ... must perpetually triumph over his own intimate adversary, the Professor.”³²

In this battle, Raïssa Maritain often rescued her spouse, and he often spoke of his debt to her for doing so. They shared a vocation to marriage and wisdom, and their reading of the signs of the times set their course. Together they found the Sorbonne hostile to their search for truth; so together, they initiated Thomist study circles centered on truth. In both peace and war, they bore witness to this truth. As both patriots and cosmopolitans, they practiced civic friendship.

And what of today? How might the Maritains fare at our secular universities and the Catholic universities which so often imitate them? This we cannot know, at least not in any detail. There is one truth, however, that we can know: they would surely weep were we not to read, wisely and with a view to action, the signs of our own times.

³¹ For this citation, translated from Maritain’s *Sept leçons sur l’être et les premiers principes de la raison speculative*, see Francesca Aran Murphy, *Art and Intellect in the Philosophy of Étienne Gilson* (Columbia, Missouri/London: University of Missouri, 2004), 168.

³² *Ibid.*