

The Call to Community

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One of the first readings we encountered in this summer's seminar was by Josef Pieper, an article about "intellectuals" and their relationship to the Church. Now Pieper defines "intellectual" as he hears that word used in Europe; not everyone of intellectual talent or erudition counts as an "intellectual." Pieper uses the term to denote a specific class of thinkers, who 1) are in some sense "outsiders" to the institution upon which they comment, 2) maintain an air of critical detachment and nonconformity to the institution, and 3) try to effect some sort of change in the institution.

For Pieper, however, such people are not the best ones to try to effect change in the Church. "Critical detachment" might well disqualify one for the task if the issue is, for instance, the Incarnation or the sacraments. Such "detachment" may well mean that one misses the point about things which require unreserved participation to be properly understood. The Church is like this. The truly successful innovators in the Church, Pieper points out, are not the outsiders, but the saints, "human beings in whom the passionate critique of existing conditions was combined with a totally selfless integration into the institutional hierarchy of the Church."¹

The issue before us, I think, is whether we as faculty members are called to be "intellectuals" (in Pieper's sense of the term, as opposed to scholars) within our own community. It all depends, of course, on what kind of community a Catholic university is, or ought to be.

II. In my ethics classes, my students read works by some of the great philosophical minds of all time: Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, Aquinas, Hobbes, Mill, Kant, Ross, Ayer. By the time they have finished sorting through the various ins and outs of these ethical theories, they recognize that there are, at bottom, essentially two kinds of ethical theory, resting on two fundamentally different accounts about the nature of happiness, which in turn find their foundation in various concepts of the nature (or lack thereof) of the human person.

One view of how we formulate ethical rules—i.e., how we live in community—goes something like this. That which really counts in any description of how we formulate these rules is not the same for everyone. Happiness does not have a particular formulation, because all of us find happiness in different ways. This is due to the fact that what really counts is getting what we want, and we all want different things, and there is really not much that can be done about this. As Woody Allen put it in reference to his adoptive daughter/lover, "The heart wants what it wants."

There are various reasons to come to this conclusion. One is that there is nothing more to us than our bodies, and so the only thing that can possibly matter is pleasure and pain. Another account says that human beings are incapable of knowing any such beast as

Universal Truth, and there are most certainly no ethical absolutes. Either way, getting what we want is the only way to talk about good and bad, right and wrong. And in such a scenario, all human beings are ultimately enemies, as we battle with each other for the prize of slaking our various desires, or form uneasy treaties and alliances to do the same more effectively.

If one finds Mr. Allen's "reasoning" problematic, as many do, then one must have a better explanation of human nature and ethics. Those who oppose this first position argue that there is access to the truth, that what counts in ethics is what is the same for all human beings, and that happiness consists in the fulfillment of human nature. Some actions are fulfilling for human beings, others are incompatible with that nature. The trick, then, is to find out which actions are good for us, and which are not, and then form a community in which we assist each other in achieving that goal. In such a community, human beings are ultimately friends or helpmates (though we sometimes do not live up to that billing).

III. What kind of a community must evolve from the former understanding of human nature and ethics? It is one I will call the "political" model. It is a model in which, because there can be no commonly acknowledged truth, there is, and can be, no common goal—except, perhaps, a common interest in pursuing our own interests, which must then be in some way institutionally enshrined so that each member is protected from every other member. Even here, however, the balance is delicate, and often collapses under the weight of raw power. If there is an acknowledged authority, that authority only comes to it from without: it is granted, as are all liberties in such a community, by those in power, either the many or the few. It is a community marked by skepticism and power.

Pieper's "intellectual" would have a place in such a community. Here, he or she could comment on, react to, and in various ways try to convert different power groups to a different way of thought and action.

There is another model of community, one which has various names, but which I will deem the "marriage" model. (I have chosen this term deliberately, though not without some risk of disanalogy.) A marriage is characterized by commitment to a common goal outside the participants, something beyond their own particular desires. The couple who are interested mostly or exclusively in their own desires will find themselves soon drifting apart, their drift marked by mutual suspicion, and finally the attempt to exercise power over the other—in other words, it won't last, except perhaps as a hollow contract. The marriage has to remain dedicated to a goal beyond those who are married, and this requires an acknowledgement of the correctness of that goal. There is assumed in such an arrangement that there is a truth that can be known. It requires acceptance of the other, and faith in the other for its survival.

If one accepts the latter notion of human person, happiness, and ethics, then the larger community works according to the "marriage" model. Such a community involves people working together toward an acknowledged and proper human goal. Because there is access to truth, there is the possibility of authority due, not to political power, but to

contact with that truth, to knowledge and vision. It is a community marked by acceptance and faith.

One would be hard-pressed to see Pieper's "intellectual" in a marriage. One must necessarily give up detachment and skepticism in order for the relationship to succeed. A person who cannot be convinced that the goal of marriage can be known or achieved, or who cannot trust his or her spouse, or who believes that standing "outside" the relationship offering critical commentary is constructive, will not find a willing mate.

IV. Which of these models is appropriate to the Catholic university? It seems clear that the "political" model is not, as it is not proper to any sort of Catholic community. The "political" model relies on concepts of truth, the human person, and ethics which are completely at odds with the Catholic faith which that community espouses.² It is, then, quite inappropriate to the Catholic university.

I argued in last year's essay that the word "Catholic" modifies the word "university," and that the essential element of a university is its faculty. A Catholic university is, in essence, a faculty which embraces as its common project, not only the transmission of the truth of the Catholic faith (a project most proper to theologians), but of a Catholic habit of mind, a bringing to bear of the methods proper to the other disciplines on Catholicism, and of Catholicism on the discoveries of the various disciplines. In other words, it is the acceptance of a project beyond the desires of the individual members. Inherent in such a project is the acceptance by the community (and at least refraining from public rejection of the project by all its individual members) of the truth of the Catholic faith as that faith is authentically interpreted by the bishops. In other words, engaging in such a project requires—in action, at least—an embracing of Catholicism and all that it stands for, an entering into the Sacred Tradition handed down from Peter to the present Pope, an acceptance (or at least toleration) of authority based on that Sacred Tradition. Rejection of these things entails a rejection of the very project in which the community claims to be engaged.

Herein lies the difficulty for the community: how to be a good community, an agapic community based on the "marriage" model, and allow for both the freedom necessary to engage in the work proper to the community as university, yet protect the integrity of the community and the project which makes it a community. (Here, I stray briefly into the area set aside for next summer's seminar.) Everyone is, of course, fully aware of the term "academic freedom," but fewer are aware of its place within the Catholic university project. Far from being antithetical to the Catholic university, as some suggest, it is a vital, intrinsic element of the Catholic university precisely because it is a university. Using our marriage model, spouses cannot make the marriage project work in an air which stifles their personalities completely, in an atmosphere of suspicion and power struggles—in other words, in a relationship which is destructive of their freedom to be spouses. In like manner, a university can only search for truth in an atmosphere which allows its faculty members to do their jobs in accordance with the methods of their respective disciplines.

In the Catholic tradition, however, freedom is not freedom from all restriction. Rather, it is freedom to be what we are supposed to be. Freedom is self-mastery, a recognition of proper limits. Academic freedom, therefore, can only be properly understood in terms of its place within the project of the community. Its complement, its counterweight, is academic responsibility, by which the faculty holds itself accountable for the advancement, not of their own individual desires, their own particular goals and professional reputations, but of the mission of the university. Such a vision is clearly at odds with the baldly "political" model to be found at secular and secularized universities, wherein there is no recognition of the possibility of universal truth, or no common project beyond personal academic goals, and where "academic freedom" is at best a semi-legal shield offering minimal protection from power struggles between competing interest groups, at worst an illusion.

V. *Ex corde ecclesiae*, the Apostolic Constitution by Pope John Paul II outlining the philosophy and procedural norms of a Catholic university, is an open invitation to all to join in precisely this project, the "marriage" which characterizes the Catholic university faculty. Such a faculty has a *gaudium de veritate*, "that joy of searching for, discovering and communicating truth in every field of knowledge."³ It is characterized by "its free search for the whole truth about nature, man and God," in a "disinterested service" for the protection of freedom, justice and human dignity.⁴ Convinced of the connection of all truth to the Truth itself, the Catholic university faculty pursues all aspects of the truth "without fear, but rather with enthusiasm."⁵ Because of this dedication to something beyond itself, the Catholic university "is made more capable of conducting an impartial search for the truth, a search that is neither subordinated to nor conditioned by particular interests of any kind."⁶

The "marriage" model of community is clearly spelled out by John Paul II in the opening paragraph concerning "The University Community."

A Catholic university pursues its objectives through its formation of an authentic community animated by the spirit of Christ. The source of its unity springs from a common dedication to the truth, a common vision of the dignity of the human person and ultimately the person and message of Christ, which gives the institution its distinctive character. As a result of this inspiration, the community is animated by a spirit of freedom and charity; it is characterized by mutual respect, sincere dialogue and protection of the rights of individuals. It assists each of its members to achieve wholeness as human persons; in turn, everyone in the community helps in promoting unity, and each one, according to his or her role and capacity, contributes toward decisions which affect the community and also toward maintaining and strengthening the distinctive Catholic character of the institution.⁷

This paragraph is an invitation to be part of a project willingly entered into by mature people, in which all involved are called to be responsibly free. Its message, in terms particularly applicable to university faculty, is more succinctly phrased by Pope John Paul: the Catholic university must recognize "the academic freedom of scholars in each

discipline in accordance with its own principles and proper methods, and within the confines of truth and the common good."⁸

Michael Himes, in another essay for this summer's seminar, noted that all of Catholic spiritual, intellectual and ethical life aims to produce "sacramental beholders, people who see what is there in its full depth."⁹ Last year, I described the *gaudium de veritate* of our profession by the utterance, "You gotta come see this!" I think Himes has captured the idea better. Teaching in any field or discipline is, he says, "a holy activity."

"All teaching can produce sacramental beholders, even when the teachers do not know that this is what they are doing. And I suggest to you that sacramental beholders are what Catholic universities and colleges are supposed to be producing."¹⁰

This is a community which can do great things. It is our task from here on to live up to this call, to make this a community wherein people feel safe to pursue the truth, to talk about topics which cannot be addressed in other environments without fear of reprisal, to be a community united in a common project: to be, and produce, not "intellectuals," but sacramental beholders.

References

1. Pieper, Josef, "The 'Intellectual' and the Church," in *Josef Pieper: An Anthology* (1989), pp. 131-2.
2. Indeed, one might argue that such a model is inappropriate to any university, if a university is defined in terms of a common project of seeking the truth about the world.
3. *Ex corde ecclesiae*, 1.
4. *Ex corde ecclesiae*, 4.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ex corde ecclesiae*, 7.
7. *Ex corde ecclesiae*, 21.
8. *Ex corde ecclesiae*, 29.
9. Himes, Michael, "Living Conversation: Higher Education in a Catholic Context" in *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*, #8, Fall 1995, p. 24.
10. *Ibid.*