

In the Beginning Was the Word

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Early in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, Pope John Paul II clearly states what he perceives as one of the most urgent obligations and challenges for Catholic universities in our time. The pope writes,

In the world today, characterized by such rapid developments in science and technology, the tasks of a Catholic university assume an ever greater importance and urgency. Scientific and technological discoveries create an enormous economic and industrial growth, but they also inescapably require the correspondingly necessary search for meaning in order to guarantee that the new discoveries be used for the authentic good of individuals and of human society as a whole. (#7)

In essence, the pope perceives in the contemporary scene an urgent need for meaning to counterbalance the dangers of run-away, inhumane technology, and he looks to Catholic universities to assist the Church in discovering and imparting that meaning. As a result, the pope sees "integration of knowledge" as a necessary foundation for all research and teaching in an authentically Catholic university (#15-20). As the pope observes, "it is necessary to work toward a higher synthesis of knowledge, in which alone lies the possibility of satisfying that thirst for truth which is profoundly inscribed on the heart of the human person" (#16). This "higher synthesis" gives meaning to all specialized knowledge and is the basis for understanding and implementing technology in ways that are morally and anthropologically sound. The Catholic university, by applying itself to the work of such synthesis, renders invaluable service to the Church and the world, since the "present age is in urgent need of this kind of disinterested service, namely of proclaiming the meaning of truth" (#4).

In perceiving an urgent need for contemporary universities to emphasize truth over technology and meaning over information, the pope is not alone. In *The Closing of the American Mind*, Allan Bloom sees our society and our students as growing progressively "flatter" because of the decline of "real learning" and the rise of narrowly defined, narrowly executed "technical education" (59-60). In the current academic climate, Bloom writes, a "highly trained computer specialist need not have had any more learning about morals, politics or religion than the most ignorant of persons" (59). In reaction to this state of affairs, Neil Postman argues in *Technopoly* that "perhaps the most important contribution schools can make to the education of our youth is to give them a sense of coherence in their studies, a sense of purpose, meaning, and interconnectedness in what they learn" (185-186). The lack of such coherence and meaning, Bloom argues, "simply results in students seeking for enlightenment wherever it is readily available, without being able to distinguish between the sublime and trash, insight and propaganda" (64).

Clearly, then, the pope is not alone in seeing our age as one in urgent need of meaning and integration, especially in the realm of education. But in this time of apparent crisis,

what specifically should Catholic universities do to fulfill the mission of "proclaiming the meaning of truth" that the pope envisions for them? How can they overcome the many difficulties and obstacles in the work of integrating and imparting knowledge in our fragmented, "post-modern" age? How can they keep their curricula from oversimplifying competing claims to knowledge or from rationalizing away the potentially reactionary implications of privileging integration of knowledge over relativism? Most importantly for me personally, how can I, as a professor of English at a Catholic university, encourage my students' experience of coherence and meaning in their studies when my discipline itself has in recent years come to assert the instability and impossibility of meaning? After all, as Postman writes, "we must not overestimate the capability of schools to provide coherence in the face of a culture in which almost all coherence seems to have disappeared" (186).

As a way of attempting to answer these very difficult questions, I would like to focus on a particular need that I have perceived among my students — a fundamental need that deprives students of much meaning (and of much potential integration) in their lives and education. As a professor of English, I have observed that most of my students do not really seem to believe or understand that words have meaning. When they read the works of literature I teach, they read for large, sweeping patterns and generalizations — the plot, theme, or "big picture." They consistently resist looking at the concrete, constituent elements of a piece of writing. They glide right over the long, descriptive passages in novels, for example, without working to piece together a cohesive meaning out of the resonant images and emblematic tableaux that those passages are carefully crafted to develop. Such images and tableaux are "just words" to them — meaningless, insignificant, bothersome. What's more, the professor who tries to draw out motifs and symbols in a novel's descriptions is simply "reading too much into it." The words of the novel cannot contain or embody their own meaning. The professor necessarily imposes an arbitrary meaning on them.

The problem is not only one of reading. In their writing, too, students tend to manifest a marked lack of faith in the meaningfulness of words; indeed, they frequently glide right over the literal meaning of the very words they are using, producing tantalizing "bloopers" (e.g., "His expectations for papers were at a higher multitude compared to my other professor's") and meaningless filler (e.g., "The theme of relationships that occurs between the characters plays an important role in the two texts"). In fact, students primarily seem to write by stringing together commonplaces and clichés without paying attention to the shape or meaning of the actual words they employ. As George Orwell has observed,

modern writing at its worst does not consist in picking out words for the sake of their meaning and inventing images in order to make the meaning clearer. It consists in gumming together long strips of words which have already been set in order by someone else, and making the results presentable by sheer humbug. (134)

According to Orwell, "prose consists less and less of words chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more of phrases tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house" (130).

We are all guilty of this kind of writing from time to time. As Orwell points out, "it is easy. It is easier — even quicker, once you have the habit — to say In my opinion it is a not-unjustifiable assumption that than to say I think" (134); indeed, some of the most prominent, recent theorists in the fields of linguistic and literary study argue that the process of writing inevitably works this way — that is, by piecing together stock phrases that, by themselves, convey little, if any, meaning. According to Roland Barthes, for example, every text is the product of "a ready-formed dictionary" of cultural and linguistic clichés. A writer "no longer bears within him passions, humors, feelings, impressions, but rather this immense dictionary from which he draws a writing that can know no halt." Barthes asserts,

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture.

For this reason, Barthes proclaims, the author is, for all intents and purposes, dead (little more than an insignificant compiler of commonplaces at the mercy of his or her own language and culture), and by the same reasoning, meaning — "the 'message' of the Author-God" — is also dead. Instead of being the locus of a "single 'theological' meaning," texts are meaningless jumbles of contradictory, competing commonplaces (Barthes 142-148).

Some scholars and critics (among them, M.H. Abrams and E.D. Hirsch) have attempted to counter such attacks on "the stable determinacy of meaning" (Hirsch 1), but for my purposes, the best defense of meaningfulness comes from a scholar who characterizes himself as one "who preach[es] the instability of the text and the unavailability of determinate meanings" (Fish 305). Stanley Fish argues quite forcefully that "unintelligibility, in the strict or pure sense, is an impossibility" (Fish 307). Every utterance, every text, every word has meaning to the person who hears or reads it. We all immediately and inevitably create meaning out of the words that surround us. As Fish argues, "words that are uttered are immediately heard within a set of assumptions about the direction from which they could possibly be coming" (316). As a result, they are ascribed a meaning — regardless of whether that meaning is what the speaker or writer of the words intended. Although my students may think that long descriptive passages in novels are meaningless, such passages are not in fact meaningless even to them but rather have very specific meanings and purposes — as part of the deadwood that makes the novel long and, therefore, a novel rather than a short story, for example, or as the trivial details that, taken together, produce the "atmosphere" of the book.

But the perception among students that such passages are meaningless — that words are meaningless — persists, and such a perception is dangerous. If we are unaware or

careless of the meanings that we ascribe to the words and objects around us, we make possible the abuse of those words and objects — as Orwell has pointed out so well and so often in his fiction. In *Animal Farm*, all things are created equal but some things are more equal than others, and in 1984, Ministries of Disinformation become Ministries of Information through the abuse of language and meaning. This same type of abuse also potentially occurs in the realm of technology and is precisely what the pope fears when he writes of the dangers associated with the "rapid developments in science and technology" in our day, the developments for which the "search for meaning" is so important (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae* #7). Consequently, if such abuse is to be avoided in the political and technological spheres, we must counter habits of mind that assume meaninglessness or stifle reflection on meaning in our classrooms every day.

For this reason, as a professor of English, I generally attempt to design my classroom curriculum to emphasize meaningfulness as opposed to meaninglessness. I make every effort to encourage students to become conscious of how they ascribe meaning to the texts they read for my class and also of how others might ascribe meaning in an entirely different way — because we all possess different skills, different values, and different beliefs as part of our context for interpretation. In addition, I insist upon precision in their use of language in their own writing, requiring that they go beyond clichés and commonplaces, beyond dead, meaningless phrases, beyond the vague and general. In this way, I hope to contribute meaningfully to the university's "search for meaning" — by laying the groundwork for faith in and reflection on the very process of making meaning itself.

Specifically, this semester, I am having my freshmen reflect on their literacy — on their amazing ability to make meaning out of written language, which we all take for granted. I asked guest speakers from the Minnesota Literacy Council to come into my classroom to talk about functional illiteracy and its effects on the lives of individuals and the community. For one of the papers in the course, students have the option of volunteering in a literacy program and of writing about how their experience of teaching someone else to read has changed their perception of their own reading skills and responsibilities. In this way, I hope to make clear to the students just how meaningful their lives are and, even more importantly, how essential words and books are to the enrichment — and the creation — of meaning in all our lives. From there, we will spend the rest of the course exploring more and more specifically how literary scholars make very specialized meaning out of the literature they study — through literary analysis, explication, and evaluation.

This approach attempts to respond to the pope's challenging vision for Catholic universities by assisting students in their own personal search for meaning in their lives and education — offering them a chance to explore their assumptions and values through service learning. It provides a broader context for their literary studies as freshmen at the University of St. Thomas by relating those studies to the community at large (and to the issue of literacy in America). Perhaps most importantly, it challenges habits of mind that allow meaning to lapse into meaninglessness — fostering habits of mind that potentially have application everywhere in the students' lives. My wish is for my students to be

endlessly amazed at their own ability to understand what words mean and for them to become ever more curious about what everything around them — both in books and in the world — means. By encouraging curiosity and reflection about words and meaning, I hope to give them the impetus — and the necessary skills — for their own work in the "search for meaning" and the "integration of knowledge" within a Catholic university (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae* #7, #15).

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