

# ‘The Pursuit of Wisdom, of Truth, and of Virtue’: The Core and the Catholic University

RICHARD J. DOUGHERTY

There has been a great deal of attention over the past years to the decline of core curricula at the college level in America.<sup>1</sup> Numerous studies have shown the marked demise of common course requirements, and even when colleges do claim to have maintained a core, that core is often composed simply of distribution requirements across a wide spectrum of disciplines.

The present essay is a consideration of the role of the core curriculum at a Catholic university. It takes as its starting point the relationship between the Core and the mission statement of the University of Dallas, but the reflections contained herein are perhaps applicable to other cores at other universities. There is an official defense of the Core, found in the University Bulletin; thus, what is found here can be seen as a modified or expanded account. Though the presentation here will be somewhat idiosyncratic, it is hoped that there might be found some sympathetic hearers. It should also be noted that this examination of the Core comes from the perspective of a Catholic, at a Catholic institution. And while many of our students are not Catholic, and we always must be cognizant of that fact, they are also cognizant of the fact that they have chosen to attend a Catholic institution, and they presumably think they can benefit from what we offer.

As a preface to our consideration, it is worth noting an exchange that took place in the late nineteenth century between the presidents of Harvard University and Boston College, as recounted in part by James Burtchaell in his monumental 1998 work, *The Dying of the Light*. In the early 1890s, Harvard Law School published a list of colleges whose

---

1 The present essay has its origins at a conference sponsored by the Lilly Fellows Program headquartered at Valparaiso University.

graduates were likely candidates for admission to its newly constructed three-year long course of studies. Interestingly, not a single Catholic college appeared on the list. Letters were sent to Harvard President Charles Eliot by representatives of American Catholic colleges, inquiring into the obvious snub. Eliot responded privately by denigrating especially the Jesuit approach to education, both for its content and for the fact that much of the instruction was done by priests.<sup>2</sup>

In 1899, Eliot, in an article written for the *Atlantic Monthly*, detailed the value of a wholly elective curriculum (having recently introduced it at Harvard) and argued for utilizing the same method at the secondary level. As he put it, though, some were still obstinately opposed to such a wholesale change:

There are those who say that there should be no election of studies in secondary schools—that the school committee, or the superintendent, or the neighboring college, or a consensus of university opinion, should lay down the right course of study for the secondary school, and that every child should be obliged to follow it. This is precisely the method followed in Moslem countries, where the Koran prescribes the perfect education, to be administered to all children alike ... almost the only mental power cultivated is the memory. Another instance of uniform prescribed education may be found in the curriculum of the Jesuit colleges, which has remained almost unchanged for four hundred years, disregarding some trifling concessions made to natural science. That these examples are both ecclesiastical is not without significance ... Direct revelation from on high would be the only satisfactory basis for a uniform, prescribed school curriculum.<sup>3</sup>

The point, of course, was that there had been no direct revelation from on high, and thus Harvard should be free to construct its curriculum as it wishes, or, rather, as its students wish. But note also what seems to be an important element of Eliot's argument: Since there has been no divine revelation of what the proper curriculum should be, there is no proper curriculum. In other words, we cannot deduce by the light of our intellect what the contours of a good curriculum might be.

One response to President Eliot's private and public critique came from Timothy Brosnahan, S.J., President of Boston College from 1894–1898. To the charge that Jesuits impose a fixed curriculum on their

2 O'Toole, "Class Warfare."

3 Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light*, 570.

students, Brosnahan pleads guilty as charged, because the alternative is irresponsible:

The young man applying for an education is told to look out on the whole realm of learning, to him unknown and untrodden, and to elect his path. To do thus with judgment and discrimination, he must know the end he wishes to reach; he must moreover know himself—his mental and moral characteristics, his aptitudes, his temperament, his tastes; and finally, he must know which of the numberless paths will lead him to the goal of his ambition ... He is [by Harvard] “strongly urged to choose his studies with the utmost caution and under the best advice.” But these provisions do not modify the character of the system.<sup>4</sup>

Instead, Brosnahan notes, the student is really being taught that his *alma mater* is no longer going to act in a manner providential to him. Each student is thus left to choose his own intellectual pabulum; if he chooses wisely, all the better; if not, well, the school “disclaims the responsibility.”<sup>5</sup>

The reason why Boston College rejected the policy adopted by Harvard is that the Jesuits had a particular view of education, as articulated in its 1894 *Catalogue*:

Education is understood by the Fathers of the Society, in its completest sense, as the full and harmonious development of all the faculties that are distinctive of man. It is not, therefore, mere instruction or the communication of knowledge. In fact, the acquisition of knowledge, though it necessarily accompanies any right system of education, is a secondary result of education. Learning is an instrument of education, not its end. The end is culture, and mental and moral development.

The Jesuit system of education, then, aims at developing, side by side, the moral and intellectual faculties of the student, and sending forth to the world men [the school was male-only] of sound judgment, of acute and rounded intellect, of upright and manly conscience. And since men are not made better citizens by mere accumulation of knowledge, without a guiding and controlling force, the principal faculties to be developed are the moral faculties. Moreover, morality is to be taught continuously; it must be the underlying base, the vital force supporting and animating the whole organic structure of education.<sup>6</sup>

---

4 Ibid., 571.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 568–569.

This debate is mentioned at some length here because I think it will serve us well in considering what follows concerning the question of a core curriculum. Bearing this disagreement in mind, it should illuminate the issue at hand.

### THE CONTENT OF THE CORE

The Core curriculum at the University of Dallas consists of 74 credit hours, which are for the most part fixed. All of the following are required of every student: at least three courses in English, at least three in History, at least three in Philosophy, two in Theology, one in Politics, and one in Economics. These courses are all specified and mandatory; three courses in the Literary Tradition sequence cover the classical and Christian epic, tragedy and comedy, and the novel; the History program includes two semesters of American Civilization (for most students) and two of Western civilization; in Philosophy students take Philosophy and the Ethical Life, Philosophy of the Human Person, and Philosophy of Being. Students must also complete the second year of a foreign language (classical or modern, their choice, up to 12 hours). In addition, students must take two lab sciences, one life science and one physical science. Finally, they must take one course each in Mathematics and the Fine Arts (which includes Art, Drama, and Music).

Following this regimen students then turn to their more focused programs in particular majors, allowing them to specialize their talents in a way most conducive to their future needs. But we don't take Charles Eliot's Harvard approach and say that we are going to offer no guidance to students in choosing their major field, for that is what the Core in part does—it exposes students to courses, authors, and approaches that they otherwise would never encounter. The typical 18-year old student is unlikely to choose philosophy or theology for a major discipline, not knowing what either might really entail; or, he may choose a major within the pre-med or pre-law arena, not truly knowing whether he is interested in devoting the number of years required of him beyond his undergraduate formation. In short, exposure to the Core, compelled as it may be, opens up a plethora of alternatives for students that they otherwise might never unearth on their own. It also reveals to the students an awareness on the part of the institution that we have a vision of what the cultured mind might look like and profit from, that we can and do make principled distinctions between and among various authoritative claims to possess *the* insight into human reality. As one colleague whose

teenager was examining potential colleges pointed out to me, at many schools not only do they not have a core, they don't even offer the courses that one would want to take if he were to cobble together his own coherent program of study.

Within the Core, one could certainly raise questions about which courses might be taught, or which books might be read with profit, or with the greatest profit. The mere mention of choosing some courses or books over others is troublesome to some, but that is what one must do, within reason, in any program. There is in fact a long historical and political tradition of engaging in such selection. A favorite passage on books to be avoided comes from the Canons of the Council of Trent, one of which reads as follows:

All books and writings dealing with geomancy, hydromancy, aeromancy, pyromancy, oneiromancy, chiromancy, necromancy, or with sortilege, mixing of poisons, augury, auspices, sorcery, magic arts, are absolutely repudiated ... Permitted, on the other hand, are the opinions and natural observations which have been written in the interest of navigation, agriculture or the medical art.<sup>7</sup>

One might quibble with such understandings, but properly understood a core curriculum doesn't really take its bearings from what ought not be read, but instead from what must be read. Given the limitations of time and courses, choices must always be made concerning whether this text or that will be more helpful in arriving at our stipulated end. While we might agree that Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare are and will likely always be part of any literary "canon," the Core is always open to some modification in this regard, though it ought to be done in a careful and measured way. We cannot simply rule out the possibility that some work not now in the Core will at a later day be in the Core; were we to do so, we would be left with the core adopted in the first schools of antiquity. Plato's students weren't assigned to read Plato, but that is not a sufficient reason for us to disregard the Platonic dialogues. A student once told me that we should read Stephen King in the Literary Tradition sequence; I was willing to hear him out, but he balked when it came time for him to select an author whom we would expunge in favor of King.

Even if we do have to make choices about which books to include, as we have to make more fundamental choices about which courses to include in the Core, the fact is that we hold some books and some courses

---

7 "Council of Trent: Rules on Prohibited Books," *Internet Modern History Sourcebook*.

to be essential elements of a proper education, and that alone makes our approach fairly distinctive in the contemporary academic world. The principle of the selection of texts is itself fairly simple: One looks for those that give the fullest and deepest insights into our focal points—God, man, and nature. The demands that are placed upon the students' powers of attention, analysis, and discernment are not an indulgence, but only through such an approach do we think the student can arrive at the fullest comprehension of the most important matters.

### I. HOW ONE FOSTERS INTELLECTUAL AND MORAL VIRTUE

As we turn to examine the claims that are made about the Core proper, it will be good to recall the exchange between Charles Eliot and Timothy Brosnahan. In what way is that debate related to what we are engaged in at the University of Dallas? In the official University Bulletin's presentation of UD's Mission, the assertion is made that the University "seeks to educate its students so they may develop the intellectual and moral virtues, prepare themselves for life and work in a problematic and changing world, and become leaders able to act responsibly for their own good and for the good of their family, community, country, and church." An imposing claim, to say the least. So how does the University do that, or how does it attempt to do that?

The pursuit of intellectual virtue is, or certainly was, commonly understood to be the end of a university education. Perhaps one need not say much about that, except to emphasize that we see the pursuit of intellectual virtue in a particular way. We begin with the animating principle that truth in fact does exist, and that we are called to pursue that truth. That is, there is something we identify as intellectual virtue, and it is a quality of mind that we ask all students to assimilate into their own make-up.

That we pursue that virtue within the strictures of a defined core curriculum indicates that the habit of mind we hope to encourage is an expansive one, focused on developing the highest of the human faculties. Through the Core we seek to hone the understanding of the first principles of human thought and action, incorporating as they do principles both philosophical and theological, fully aware that the development of that understanding is only enhanced by the student's exposure to the other fields of study, be they math, science, literature, or history. By mentioning the acquisition of philosophical and theological principles, we mean no slight to other fields within the Core; rather, it is precisely the opposite—these other fields are understood to be important and essential contributors

to that common mission. Math and science, for instance, ought not to be seen simply as add-ons to the humanities program, and neither are the humanities seen as expendable extras for, say, pre-med students; the integration of knowledge is seen, as it always has been, as requiring the exposure to all of these approaches to grasping the truth about the nature of things.

As an example of what I mean by this, I had a conversation once with an undergraduate who told me that a course in Euclidean and Non-Euclidean Geometry was the best preparation he had received for his philosophy and theology courses, that the demands of logically and rigorously thinking through theorems and axioms were instrumental in developing his analytical powers. One can say the same about all of the elements of the Core: They serve the function of developing the capacity of the mind to understand created reality in its various manifestations.

We might take as an example here the following passage, from a Core text, which is a fine encapsulation of important theoretical principles:

In disquisitions of every kind there are certain primary truths, or first principles, upon which all subsequent reasonings must depend ... Of this nature are the maxims in geometry that the whole is greater than its parts, that things equal to the same are equal to one another; that two straight lines cannot enclose a space; and that all right angles are equal to each other. Of the same nature are these other maxims in ethics and politics, that there cannot be an effect without a cause; that the means ought to be proportioned to the end; that every power ought to be commensurate with its object; that there ought to be no limitation of a power destined to effect a purpose which is itself incapable of limitation.<sup>8</sup>

It does not come as a shock to students in our Principles of American Politics class that they might learn such first principles from Publius, writing in the *Federalist Papers*. One could of course readily multiply such examples.

This facet of the Core—that it should be composed of a variety of studies across a broad range of disciplines—has a long pedigree, as it is to some extent a continuation, though a modification, of one classical understanding of the proper educational arrangement. One formulation of that arrangement is to be found, of course, in the combination of the Seven Liberal Arts, the Trivium (Grammar, Dialectic, and Rhetoric) and the Quadrivium (Geometry, Arithmetic, Astronomy, and Music), an

---

8 *The Federalist Papers*, Federalist #31, 161.

arrangement presented most famously in allegorical fashion in Martianus Capella's *The Wedding of Philology and Mercury*, but transformed by subsequent Christian authors in subtle but important ways (most especially by adding Philosophy; but because they wanted to retain the number seven it compelled them to combine some of the others).<sup>9</sup>

A separate, though related, approach to the educational arrangement is found in perhaps its clearest exposition in the work of St. Bonaventure, *The Reduction of the Arts to Theology*, in which the hierarchy of knowledge reflects the hierarchy of being. One sees here the variety of "disciplines" that are open to human investigation, but that there is also a hierarchy of studies, all preparatory studies ultimately leading to the "saving truth" (the *veritas salutaris*) found in Sacred Scripture. This understanding of knowledge is perhaps best known through the famous description, commonly attributed to the medieval mind, that theology is the queen of the sciences, or that philosophy is the handmaid of theology. St. Thomas Aquinas articulates the principle of that hierarchy, in his Commentary on Boethius's *De Trinitate*, in the context of defending the claim that it is permissible to use philosophical reasoning and authorities in what he calls the "Science of Faith, Whose Object is God." In reply to the objection that the sciences proceed incorrectly if one takes the principles of another, he responds:

Interrelated sciences are such that one can use the principles of another. Sciences that come later employ the principles of prior sciences, whether the later be higher or lower in dignity. Thus metaphysics, which is the highest of the sciences, makes use of the conclusions established in the lower sciences. Similarly theology, to which all the other sciences are so to speak ancillary and propaedeutic in its coming into being, though they are of lesser dignity, can use the principles of all the other sciences.<sup>10</sup>

Or, as he puts it in the first question of the *Summa Theologiae*, "Sacred Doctrine ... does not depend upon other sciences as upon the highest, but makes use of them as of the lesser, and as handmaidens."<sup>11</sup> So, while theology is the queen, there is a clear and distinct role for the other sciences, or "arts," all of which contribute in their own manner to the cultivation of

---

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed account of the seven liberal arts and how they were transformed, see, *inter alia*, Stahl, *Martianus Capella and the Seven Liberal Arts*, and Pedersen, *The First Universities*.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Faith, Reason, and Theology*, 2.3 ad 7.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I 1.5 ad 2.



the soul toward the apprehension of the truth.<sup>12</sup> It is for good reason then that the University's Mission statement says that it seeks to "maintain the dialogue of faith and reason in its curriculum and programs without violating the proper autonomy of each of the arts and sciences."

Many might be familiar with that defense of theology and philosophy within the curriculum. What I would like to add, though, is this: While the other sciences are ancillary or propaedeutic to theology, they are indeed necessary. They are necessary not only because of the preparatory principles they establish, upon which theology builds, but also because they provide something of a check upon the potentially excessive eccentricities that might make inroads into the teaching of the theologians. Moses Maimonides, for example, in his *Guide of the Perplexed* describes the teaching of certain theologians who, wary of natural science and philosophy, were compelled to supply their own account of the natural world, and how this led them to adopt theories of atomism, of the existence of vacuums, and of motion that conflict with observable reality. We can see here, then, why Aquinas is so insistent on the internal development of the other sciences, prior to theology.

The end result of our endeavors through the Core, then, is the establishment of a community of learners whose shared background elevates their awareness of the complexity of the human condition and of our place in the structure of being.

Still, one might respond, that's all well and good concerning *intellectual* virtue, but what concern might a university have with the cultivation of *moral* virtue? On what grounds, or for what purpose, does the University purport to foster moral excellence? It is often said that a university is not a seminary, and so why should one be concerned with developing moral character? Perhaps the reason is that there is an intimate connection between the pursuit of intellectual virtue and the pursuit and acquisition of moral virtue.

We might begin our analysis here by considering the Aristotelian approach to the study of ethics, which is a central part of the Core courses. We don't study ethics simply to master the various ethical teachings and systems that have been propounded over the last 2500 years, or to prepare our students (and ourselves) to give an erudite conference paper on the impropriety of insider trading, but we study ethics in order to know how to live well. Students are brought face to face with historical and fictional figures who find themselves in positions of moral uncertainty, and by

---

12 See the discussion in Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et Ratio* on the role of philosophy, §§75–79.

being exposed to such circumstances students are obliged to consider for themselves how they would understand the choices made, and thus how they might act in analogous circumstances (though students are unlikely, one suspects, to ever find themselves in precisely the same position as, say, Oedipus). This process ought to provide the student with a storehouse of moral acuity. Indeed, as one of the first books the students are required to read, Plato's *Republic* is a dialogue on the meaning of justice; the more seriously the student engages in the text the more serious will likely be his reflections on the highest of the moral virtues.

It is important to bear in mind, too, that moral virtue in this sense is an expansive term; it doesn't simply mean what we might call today private virtue or morality, but also includes gaining a sense of responsibility for one's family, one's community (including the university), one's nation, and one's church. Thus, an awareness of one's political and historical circumstances is essential to the proper formation of moral virtue.

One reason for the confusion on the part of many educators on this issue is illuminated in the account St. Augustine gives of the Stoic philosophical teaching, in which the Stoics describe the height of human excellence as found in the cultivation of the condition of *apatheia*, an overcoming or mastery of the human passions. Augustine criticizes this view, for it represents a significant misunderstanding of the human character, and thus of the human good; Christians, he says, do not desire to purge such human passions, but to turn them to righteous use. Citizens of the City of God, he notes, both fear and desire, and grieve and rejoice, but they do so for the right reasons and in the right manner; they fear eternal punishment, desire perseverance, grieve for sin, and rejoice in good works.<sup>13</sup> If, then, these passions are part of the human make-up, then it would be irresponsible on the part of educators to treat students as if these were matters of no interest, or as if they were of no importance in crafting a course of study.

A good example of what I'm speaking of here is found in Cardinal Newman's *The Idea of a University*, where he speaks of the character of Julian the Apostate (in whom, he says, "every Catholic sees the shadow of the future Anti-Christ"). His praise of Julian is nothing if not fulsome:

His simplicity of manners, his frugality, his austerity of life, his singular disdain of sensual pleasure, his military heroism, his application to business, his literary diligence, his modesty, his clemency, his accomplishments, as I view them, go to make him one of the most

13 See, for example, Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, 14.7–9.

eminent specimens of pagan virtue which the world has ever seen.<sup>14</sup>

This description sounds like an account of a model student, or better still, a model colleague. And yet, here is no exemplar for humanity. Here, instead, Newman says, is the “final exhibition of the Religion of Reason: in the insensibility of conscience, in the ignorance of the very idea of sin, in the contemplation of his own moral consistency, in the simple absence of fear, in the cloudless self-confidence, in the serene self-possession, in the cold self-satisfaction, we recognize the mere Philosopher.”<sup>15</sup> The mere Philosopher, in Newman’s account, misses the mark, because he has no principle to guide him, no grounding that prevents him from straying from the path of virtue. Attachment to the theoretical enterprise, in other words, becomes a dry and potentially dangerous undertaking, when that pursuit becomes unmoored. The university is not a monastery or a seminary, true, but neither can it leave the cultivation of virtue to the haphazard influences of contemporary culture.

Here, again, one might pursue many other related questions that are beyond the scope of this effort; these might include, especially, two critical elements in the potential success of a core curriculum—finding faculty who are prepared to teach it, and finding students who are willing to enter into it and are themselves prepared for the rigors of the program.

## II. FOSTERING A MATURE CATHOLIC FAITH

An additional claim of the University’s Mission statement is that it “seeks to provide an academic and collegial community which will help students acquire a mature understanding of their faith.” Here I would like to suggest that this aim is intimately related to the first concern, the cultivation of intellectual and moral virtue. The groundwork for this maturation is of course laid in the theology courses the students are required to take in the Bible and in the Western Theological Tradition. Students are led through a careful exposure to the essential teaching of God’s Revelation to man, and how that Revelation has been understood and interpreted over the last two millennia. By attending to the important lessons of the Old and New Testament, and by studying the great controversies within and without the Catholic Church, students are given a heightened awareness of the complexity of the canons, doctrines, dogmas, and structures that have formed the institutional Church and that have helped define their own

---

14 Newman, *The Idea of A University*, 147–148.

15 *Ibid.*, 149. One might profitably contrast this account with the one Newman gives of St. Philip Neri, 178–181.

experience of the faith, whether consciously or unconsciously. Students should be acutely aware of the importance of the subject matter, as many of them have come here precisely because of our self-affirmation as a Catholic university.

But there is more to the story, for in the same way that we don't rely simply on the coursework in philosophy alone to carry the weight of exposing students to the fundamental principles of rigorous philosophic thought, so we do not see theology as the solitary contributor to the development of the student's mature understanding of the Catholic faith.

How might the study of other disciplines contribute to this development, though? One way to approach the question is to ask what might be different about teaching in such a program, for, say, a course in political science, or, as we prefer, politics? What difference does it make that one teaches such a Core at a Christian, or specifically a Catholic institution? I will offer here some reflections from my own experience teaching in such a curriculum, and how it differs from, say, my experience at a state-funded institution.

Teaching in a curriculum like ours has decided advantages for the instructor, not just for the student, as the demands of the institution also place further salutary burdens upon us. For example, the wealth of material that I can count on my students being familiar with as a result of their grounding in the Core is of immense benefit in my own courses, and not just my courses in the Core. For instance, when I teach Medieval Political Philosophy, I often have graduate students sitting in on my undergraduate course; my experience has been that because of their background the undergraduates are generally much better prepared for the course than graduate students who have arrived from other institutions. (I don't mean that as a criticism of UD's graduate students; I can only say that I was in a similar situation when I arrived here for graduate school. Graduate students are on the whole brighter and more focused, so they tend to catch up in the course at some point—but it is a catching up.)

But teaching in such a curriculum can be a bit daunting at times, as well, precisely because of the wide range of material that students are compelled to master. It occasionally happens that students are reading in their other courses books that the instructor hasn't read, or hasn't read as carefully as he could; the result is that we should be compelled to make an effort to master these texts, so as to be able to converse with students about these common matters. The regular and continual education of the professor is, then, an additional salubrious effect of a Core arrangement. Indeed, the movement away from a set curriculum at the college level was

motivated in part by instructors who wanted to be simply experts in their field.

Teaching in a Catholic setting should perhaps also lead us in our other courses to attempt to consider Church teaching, or at least the questions raised by such teaching, into the different disciplines. In my own discipline, political science, or political philosophy, for instance, I would consider my introductory course in American Politics (the Core course) to be deficient if I didn't spend some amount of time and energy on the role of Catholics in America, the history of Catholic political concerns in American life, and the various questions raised by Catholic teaching in light of the American experiment. This would include the favorable and the unfavorable; it includes an account of the Catholic role in the pro-life movement, and how Roger Taney, a Catholic, could author the infamous *Dred Scott* decision in 1857. Similarly, I would think it amiss if a class I taught in American Political Thought or Constitutional Law didn't address the contributions of Catholic teaching to the development of a coherent (or perhaps incoherent) understanding of American principles, or the principled concerns for justice, law, and morality that are part and parcel of the mature Catholic's concerns; again, this is done not simply as an intrusion into an otherwise unrelated field, but as an essential part of understanding the Catholic experience in the modern world, and in America in particular. This may, in some circumstances, require overcoming hostility toward Catholicism; many studies in political theory, assessing the broad spectrum of the history of political philosophy, tend to jump from treating Plato and Aristotle to Machiavelli, a distance of almost two thousand years. Academic honesty would seem to compel one to accord some attention to the interim, even if one wished to dismiss it, in the end, for being too grounded in matters of faith.

Exposure to the great works of the tradition can also serve as an encouragement to our students, and graduates, to take the spiritual life seriously. Some years ago a Boston College graduate announced a \$5 million gift, to be used not for a building in his honor, but for students to go on retreats and participate in volunteer programs. One could guess that he himself had an experience on a retreat that profoundly influenced his life. Fostering the development of programs that give students the opportunity to participate in such activities is something that we are called upon to do.

And while we ought to encourage volunteerism as well, it ought to be volunteerism with a difference. Church-related institutions have something unique to offer here, following Christ's admonition to perform

such acts out of compassion for those in need, the compassion Augustine speaks of as one of those worthy Christian virtues, qualities abandoned by the Stoics; but it is a particular type of compassion that is fostered. Flannery O'Connor commented on the modern concept of compassion in 1961:

One of the tendencies of our age is to use the suffering of children to discredit the goodness of God, and once you have discredited His goodness, you are done with Him. The Aylmers whom Hawthorne saw as a menace have multiplied. Busy cutting down human imperfection, they are making headway also on the raw material of good. Ivan Karamazov cannot believe, as long as one child is in torment; Camus's hero cannot accept the divinity of Christ, because of the massacre of the innocents. In this popular pity, we mark our gain in sensibility and our loss in vision. If other ages felt less, they saw more, even though they saw with the blind, prophetic, unsentimental eye of acceptance, which is to say, of faith. In the absence of this faith now, we govern by tenderness. It is a tenderness which, long since cut off from the person of Christ, is wrapped in theory. When tenderness is detached from the source of tenderness, its logical outcome is terror. It ends in forced labor camps and in the fumes of the gas chamber.<sup>16</sup>

In other words, we want students to ground their moral virtue, their compassion, in the most fundamental experience of Christianity, the Cross.

This is one place, again, where the moral virtue of the students might benefit from a mingling with their studies. An awareness of the seven corporal works of mercy, for example, though likely absent from many incoming student's repositories of knowledge, can be gleaned from a close reading of the Bible. The student may have developed already an affinity for compassionate action, but without knowing what content to attach to it they may not orient that compassion properly.

### III. A CONCERN FOR CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

Now we turn to a third claim the University makes, that it aims at encouraging students to "act responsibly for their own good and the good of their family, community, country, and church." How is this end accomplished, and what role might the Core play in that undertaking?

One might object, of course, that the very fact that the students are in a sectarian school sets them apart from their fellow citizens, and thus

---

16 O'Connor, Introduction to *A Memoir of Mary Ann*, 18-19.

we are not preparing them for an engagement with contemporary society. Indeed, I recently heard a policy-maker suggest that in a democracy everyone should have a public education, because that's what binds us together. Here I will call upon the words of Pope Pius XI, from his encyclical letter, *On the Christian Education of Youth*, where he articulates the rationale for religious schools (and though he is talking about Catholic primary and secondary schools, I think the principle applies to higher education). He argues as follows:

Let it be loudly proclaimed and well understood and recognized by all, that Catholics, no matter what their nationality, in agitating for Catholic schools for their children, are not mixing in party politics, but are engaged in a religious enterprise demanded by conscience. They do not intend to separate their children either from the body of the nation or its spirit, but to educate them in a perfect manner, most conducive to the prosperity of the nation. Indeed a good Catholic, precisely because of his Catholic principles, makes the better citizen, attached to his country, and loyally submissive to constituted civil authority in every legitimate form of government.<sup>17</sup>

In answering the question of civic responsibility more fully, though, it might be worth examining our self-conscious focus on the Western tradition and America in particular. One might, quite properly, ask why we see this as being so important.

First of all, we are citizens of Western culture, and, as such, it behooves us to know in detail what the roots of that culture are. In order to understand ourselves, our fellow citizens, and our country, it is incumbent upon us to become familiar with the political, religious, social, and intellectual phenomena that have served as the basis for the formation of the American character. We are compelled to examine, then, not only those distinctively American events, from the Revolution to the Civil War to the post-World War II social "revolutions," not only the literature that has formed the American landscape and been decisively shaped by it, but we are also called back to examine those works or events which were of fundamental significance in the composition of that civilization, defined by these elements or by the reaction against them, from the Bible to Greek and Roman influences, from the medieval heritage to the Reformation, and from modern strains of philosophy from Machiavelli to Descartes and Marx to Heidegger and important developments in modern science and

---

17 Pius XI, *On the Christian Education of Youth*, 45–46.

technology.

If we are going to be truly useful to our society, we need to understand the root causes of its successes and its failures, and that can only be done by a sustained analysis of the first principles of the society, followed by a thoroughgoing study of the way in which those principles have been implemented, altered, or abandoned. One can see that this is a tall order, and it simply will not do for us to rest comfortably with a curriculum that only dabbles in such fundamental matters, or that considers it only a matter of taste whether students are brought face to face with the sources of their own society's afflictions. Intellectual honesty would require us, for instance, in trying to come to comprehend the modern turn in political philosophy, including Machiavelli, Hobbes, Spinoza, Bacon, and Locke, to become familiar with the medieval world they all are responding to; not doing so would leave one with at best a truncated understanding of the essential rejection of the principles that informed a unique chapter in the story of Western civilization. We and our students would thus be deprived not only of our inheritance, but also of the knowledge of what, in one form or another, has been rejected.

Does this focus on the Western tradition mean that we are uninterested in other cultures? No, not at all. One could devote an additional essay to this question, but suffice it to say for now that to the extent other cultures can offer us assistance in coming to know the truth about God, man, and nature, of course we welcome it. But that encounter, for most people, will always be limited, while some will be free to pursue this path. And that path is not itself an altogether easy one; if an awareness of our own culture requires all of the elements I outlined above, we can see the difficulty in mastering the content and context of other cultures. That's not to say it shouldn't be done, only that it cannot be done by offering a survey course to undergraduates where we expect them to understand the constituent elements of cultures other than their own. If we are to take this concern seriously, they would need to master at the very least the history and language of the cultures they are interested in investigating. In the same way a classicist would not think of studying the Greeks or Romans without learning Greek or Latin, so it will not do to study Hispanic culture without learning Spanish, or Chinese culture without learning Chinese. The true multicultural approach, in other words, entails an intense exercise of the intellect and will, something most undergraduates, struggling to master their own complex situation, are not readily prepared to do. But again, it is possible and desirable for those prepared to do so to engage in such activity, bearing in mind the universality of human nature, but also



ensuring, as Pope John Paul II reminds us in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, that “in engaging great cultures ... the Church cannot abandon what she has gained from her inculturation in the world of Greco-Latin thought. To reject this heritage would be to deny the providential plan of God who guides his Church down the paths of time and history.”<sup>18</sup> Christianity makes a universal claim, and so does not discriminate, as Augustine tells us, in terms of dress or manners, as long as one lives “in conformity with the commandments of God.”<sup>19</sup> It calls people of every language and nation, he says, not scrupling about diversities in the manners, laws, and institutions found therein.

I will add here one more element into the analysis that ought to be an integral part of a Catholic university education: Students should be shown in a more concrete fashion that there is a connection between their book learning, their spiritual life, and the outside world, the community broader than the campus. This is the way Pope John Paul II, in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, has described this activity of the university:

A Catholic university, as any university, is immersed in human society; as an extension of its service to the Church and always within its proper competence, it is called on to become an ever more effective instrument of cultural progress for individuals as well as for society. Included among its research activities, therefore, will be a study of *serious contemporary problems* in areas such as the dignity of human life, the promotion of justice for all, the quality of personal and family life, the protection of nature, the search for peace and political stability, a more just sharing in the world’s resources, and a new economic and political order that will better serve the human community at a national and international level. University research will seek to discover the roots and causes of the serious problems of our time, paying special attention to their ethical and religious dimensions.<sup>20</sup>

This is precisely the type of activity that we try to foster through entities like the Center for Christianity and the Common Good here at the University of Dallas. Bringing the teachings of the Catholic intellectual and moral tradition to bear on contemporary issues, which is the mission of the Center, invites students to see the broad application of the principles they have come to understand only in theory; here they are forced to see

---

18 John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, §72.

19 Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, 19.19.

20 John Paul II, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, §32.

the complications of life, and the way in which prudential decisions must be made.

### CONCLUSION

We who are privileged to toil in Catholic higher education need to be continually reminded that we are paying off a debt to those who came before us in the Faith and in the institutions we serve. We are called to be faithful to the mission of St. Paul in 1 Corinthians: "For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you" (11:23). Indeed, as Pope Benedict XVI noted in his 2008 address to U.S. Catholic educators, every aspect of our institutions must be infused with the reflection of its true Teacher:

This requires that public witness to the way of Christ, as found in the Gospel and upheld by the Church's Magisterium, shapes all aspects of an institution's life, both inside and outside the classroom. Divergence from this vision weakens Catholic identity and, far from advancing freedom, inevitably leads to confusion, whether moral, intellectual or spiritual.<sup>21</sup>

We fulfill our calling in part by standing in defense of our heritage and Tradition, against the tide of the challenges of modern culture. But, we do so not merely by trying to stem the tide; we are also called to reflect on the nature of our culture, and provide some way out of the difficulties and challenges we find therein. This is not a short-term task, but a long term one. Only serious reflection on *the* event of history, the Incarnation, and on the most significant works of the human mind will provide us with the wherewithal to respond properly and sufficiently to the needs of the day, and to the long-term interests of humanity.<sup>22</sup>

In his work *Democracy in America* (incidentally, a Core text), Alexis de Tocqueville has the following to say by way of advocating the study of the great works of antiquity, upon which our Core draws heavily:

[N]othing in their works seems done in haste or haphazardly; everything there is written for connoisseurs, and the search for ideal beauty constantly shows itself. Thus there exists no literature that puts the qualities naturally lacking in the writers of democracies more in relief than that of the ancients. Thus there exists no literature better suited

21 Benedict XVI, "Meeting with Catholic Educators."

22 As John Paul II put it in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, "If need be, a Catholic university must have the courage to speak uncomfortable truths which do not please public opinion, but which are necessary to safeguard the authentic good of society" (§32).

for study in democratic centuries. That study is the most fitting of all to combat the literary defects inherent in these centuries ...

But Tocqueville also cautions against an excessive devotion to such literature:

If one persisted in teaching only *belles-lettres* in a society where each one was habitually led to make violent efforts to increase his fortune or to maintain it, one would have very polite but very dangerous citizens; for every day the social and political states would give them needs that they would never satisfy by education, and they would trouble the state in the name of the Greeks and Romans instead of making it fruitful by their industry.

Education for most people in a democracy, says Tocqueville, “should be scientific, commercial, and industrial rather than literary.” Yet, in what might be adopted as the defense of the University of Dallas, and like-minded institutions, Tocqueville argues that there should be places where the classics are taught, and taught well:

[I]t is important that those whose nature or whose fortune destines them to cultivate letters or predisposes them to that taste find schools in which one can be made a perfect master of ancient literature and wholly steeped in its spirit. To attain this result, a few excellent universities would be worth more than a multitude of bad colleges where superfluous studies that are done badly prevent necessary studies from being done well.<sup>23</sup>

Our goal, through the Core, is, we say, to foster the students’ pursuit of wisdom so that they “may develop the intellectual and moral virtues which will prepare them for life and work in a changing and problematic world, achieve a mature understanding of their faith, and become men and women who act responsibly for their own good and the good of their family, community, country, and church.” We try to do that, and when we do succeed, it is an accomplishment we can all be proud of, the faculty, the administration, the student body at large, their parents, the nation, and the Church. To paraphrase Robert Bolt’s Thomas More, that’s not a bad audience.<sup>24</sup>

---

23 Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 451–52.

24 See Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons*.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Augustine. *City of God Against the Pagans*. Edited and translated by R.W. Dyson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Benedict XVI. "Meeting with Catholic Educators: Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI, Conference Hall of the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., April 17, 2008." Accessed May 22, 2013. [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2008/april/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20080417\\_cath-univ-washington\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2008/april/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080417_cath-univ-washington_en.html).
- Bolt, Robert. *A Man for All Seasons: A Play in Two Acts*. New York: Vintage, 1990.
- Burtchaell, James. *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from their Christian Churches*. Grand Rapids: Erdmans Publishing Co., 1998.
- "Council of Trent: Rules on Prohibited Books," *Internet Modern History Sourcebook*. Accessed May 22, 2013. <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/trent-booksrules.asp>.
- John Paul II. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae: Apostolic Constitution of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II on Catholic Universities*. Accessed May 22, 2013. [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_constitutions/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apc\\_15081990\\_ex-corde-ecclesiae\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_15081990_ex-corde-ecclesiae_en.html).
- . *Fides et Ratio*. Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1998.
- Newman, John Henry. *The Idea of A University: Defined and Illustrated in Nine Discourses*. Edited by Martin J. Svaglic. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982.
- O'Connor, Flannery. Introduction to *A Memoir of Mary Ann, by the Dominican Nuns Who Took Care of Her*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1961.
- O'Toole, James. "Class Warfare." *Boston College Magazine* (Winter 2012). Accessed March 26, 2013. [http://bcm.bc.edu/issues/winter\\_2012/features/class-warfare.html](http://bcm.bc.edu/issues/winter_2012/features/class-warfare.html).
- Pedersen, Olaf. *The First Universities: 'Studium generale' and the Origins of University Education in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Pius XI. *On the Christian Education of Youth*. Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1929.
- Stahl, William H. *Martianus Capella and the Seven Liberal Arts*. Vol. 1. New York: Columbia University Press, 1971.
- The Federalist Papers*, Federalist #31. Edited by Clinton Rossiter. Introduction and notes by Charles R. Kesler. New York: New American Library, 1999.

Thomas Aquinas. *Faith, Reason, and Theology, Questions I-V of the Commentary on Boethius' De Trinitate*. Translated by Armand Maurer. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1987.

———. *Summa Theologiae*. Edited and translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Notre Dame, Ind.: Christian Classics, 1981.

de Tocqueville, Alexis. *Democracy in America*. Translated by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.