10.17.08: The Intellectual Pillar and the Search for Wisdom

Whenever I teach Aristotle and Aquinas’s vision of happiness in my PL476 class (*Toxic Happiness*), I am often surprised at the difficulty that some people experience when faced with their respective positions. It is not that they are overwhelmed by the subtlety or the difficulty of their teachings — frankly, their positions are not that difficult to understand. Nor do they act like philistines (although just recently I did have a student who said to me, when faced with Aquinas’s position, “Oh, come on now! Give me a break.” His indignation was mildly amusing as it was fueled by the arrogance and ignorance of his youth, not to mention the sloth of his character. As he stood before me, hoping I would excuse him from doing the final paper (by reason of the “fact” that he consider the whole course to be so much nonsense, and that, consequently, he could not find the energy to do it), I could not help but think that even the pagans of Aristotle’s time were not this small, and if given half the chance would rise up with the men of Nineveh and the Queen of the South (Matthew 12:41-42) to condemn his pusillanimity. Needless to say, I spared him my thought, but not the paper). Instead, I refer to something far more mundane, namely a total lack of appreciation for what they have understood which usually has its genesis in their view that such positions are wholly outside the realm of the possible, even though arguments have been developed carefully over many months to support them, and that they have been shown beyond any shadow of a doubt that all modern contenders to the crown of happiness fail miserably when put to the test. It’s like the situation where having explained carefully and expertly what chocolate tastes like, and then having fed them with this most fine and rare of treats, they simply stand there and wonder what all the fuss was about, thinking all the while that their McDonald’s Happy Meal is far better than this European delicacy (even though the latter was bought at such great expense and shared so carefully and lovingly with them).

There is, admittedly, a certain elitism lurking among these words. However, it is not the kind that people typically condemn. In an important sense, people cannot be blamed for not appreciating fine chocolate, just as I cannot be blamed for not being able to appreciate a fine wine; I simply do not have the taste for such things, a taste that can only be developed through careful training under the tutelage of a master over a great period of time. I’ve got more important things to do (in short, I would rather think than drink). The problem, however, is that when we speak of happiness, we are not dealing simply with the esoteric, the refined, or those things with which only scholars are concerned. Nor are we dealing with something that is peripheral to our lives, as wine or chocolate may indeed be. We speak of that which constitutes the very meaning and purpose of human life, something which both the learned and the unlearned have a desperate concern not only to know but to realize in their lives. Thus, it is particularly tragic for some who take my *Toxic Happiness* course that even though in light of the whole of their education and the training that they have received (which ideally should have enabled them to understand and appreciate the things taught at the university level), they are nonetheless left with no desire to take up, at least, Aristotle’s (and thus the pagan’s) vision concerning what constitutes the happy life.

Now, this may appear harsh on my part. “The air that a scholar breathes is rare indeed” you might say. “The amount of time that you have breathed and have become acclimatized to its purity allows you to go sprightly upon the rocky heights, to live and work on this mountain far more easily than those who have only just
ventured into its foothills.” This appearance of harshness, however, disappears, I reply, when one considers that the nature and value of a university is not found in the job that it gives one after graduation, nor in a four-year extension of the party that began back in high school. Given the riches of our country and its culture, we tend to forget the special nature of the university and the utter privilege that comes with being allowed to study within its community. While education is a basic right that any decent culture must afford its members for the sake of the common good, not everyone needs to climb the heights of our intellectual tradition in order to take up the work that they are called to do, vocations that do not require a training in the humanities and the sciences beyond that which a good high school can afford. By definition, the university preserves, teaches, cultivates and defends the best that our western and Catholic intellectual traditions have to offer, and to instill in those who engage these traditions the knowledge, desire and the tools to aspire to the heights of human perfection and authenticity. The nature and purpose of a university is not found, then, in any utility or product, but simply as it is a community dedicated to understanding and communicating the depths and riches of reality. And so, when I, as a professor, experience the lack of appreciation, desire and gratitude on the part of some students to what I and others teach, I cannot help but feel the full force of a tragedy in the making.

Now, at this point you might be asking yourself, “What has this to do with discernment? Has Dr. Loughlin become cranky in his old age? Has he marked one too many midterms?” While these may be true, the point of my reflection today is not to vent, but rather to develop something that I had stressed in my Opening Address to the community back in September, namely the importance of the intellectual pillar in the life of discernment. I cannot begin to tell you to what extent my studies in both philosophy and theology have aided me in my Christian walk! I came to philosophy in my late 20’s quite providentially. Having been rendered unable (by an arthritic condition) to practice the long hours that a professional musician must if he is to progress in his field, I was counselled by my spiritual advisor to take some courses in philosophy at the local Catholic university. Although my response was less than enthusiastic (“Philosophy? What’s that?”), I nonetheless trusted Fr. Kennedy implicitly, and forthwith enrolled in both the philosophy major and the minor seminary formation program that was associated with it. I’ll never forget my very first class, the Philosophy of Nature. I was hooked after 30 minutes, amazed that there existed a language to describe the things about which I had wondered my entire life but which I had wrongly presumed escaped the printed and spoken word. The three years I spent at St. Jerome’s University were pivotal intellectually, spiritually and personally. Naturally, there were many and diverse factors that woke me from my slumber (Romans 13, especially 11-14). Nonetheless, I must state that at the center of my reclamation were (in order) the studies into which I had been thrown, the example and friendship of my three Catholic philosophy professors (two of whom have since passed on to their reward), and the community life at the minor seminary. Through these, but particularly through my studies, did the spirit of God speak most clearly to me. They molded my character, and opened my eyes and heart to the wonders of reality in a way in which I did not think possible.

So profound were my three years in the philosophy program at Jerome’s that I simply cannot find words that do justice. I sat in class after class of the most profound materials culled from the entirety of the Catholic intellectual tradition, taught by the best professors I have every come across (not only did they shape me in mind and heart according to three different schools of Thomism, but they also served as the models upon which I fashioned my teaching style — the definite logical rigor, the soaring rhetorical flights, and the subtle manipulation of my audience came from Gerard Campbell; the artistic flair which injects heart into what is
taught, the attention to the difficulties that every question poses, and one’s utter humility before Lady Wisdom came from Donald DeMarco; the groundedness, charity and humanity that is so often missing in philosophy, as well as all that is properly light-hearted and celebratory, came from Floyd Centore — how I so miss these men, my spiritual fathers). I can safely say that I would not have embraced my faith, my humanity, my wife, my duties, and my God in the way that I do now were it not for this time of my life. I honor all that has been gifted to me and those who were instrumental in the giving of these gifts, especially in all that I do now and in the future. It is the least I could do in light of so profound a reclamation and salvation of heart, mind and person. And were I to pour out the entirety of my life, I would not begin to come close to the collective sacrifices that were made on my behalf and on the behalf of all others who experienced what I did while at St. Jerome’s and Resurrection College (oddly enough, I am describing something that is not particular to me, but something that is as old as time, namely the effect that Lady Wisdom can have upon the mind and heart of a young man who, when all things are just right, enters into Her service and learns to woo Her lovingly, seeking the riches that She promises to those whom She finds worthy. Consider chapters 7 through 9 of the book of Wisdom and you will understand more clearly of what I speak).

What we learn, then, from our intellectual traditions, as loving preserved and promoted by the university, is holy. From our engagement in our theology and philosophy classes we receive most especially powerful and blessed means whereby we can effect our return to and union with God. In the knowledge that we gain from engaging these disciplines we travel a well-worn road: we lovingly anticipate the blessed vision of His face, we demonstrate to all the world the love that burns in our hearts, and we honor the image of God in which we have been made. Thus, our studies are absolutely vital both to our prayer and in our discernment of God’s call in our lives. At this point in time, we manifest our love of God most especially in our studies, conforming the entirety of our being, as members of the university and of the Center for Discernment, to His Logos, so that, having been informed by the Eternal Word, both revealed to and discerned naturally by human reason, we might behold God as He is, and become Christ for others, thus becoming most effective in our desire to fulfill the second part of the greatest commandment, namely to love one another. Make your studies, then, the focus of this time, and never consider them to be something that interferes with the pastoral doing of the Word, or in some way a manifestation of some sort of selfishness. We serve others best only insofar as we have been conformed to the heart and the mind of God. Thus, seek Him with all your strength, and this as has been made possible to you in the great and noble gift that the university is.

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