Reflections for our Discerners at the DeSales University’s Center for Discernment
by Dr. Stephen Loughlin

11.14.08: The Pastoral Pillar and the Catholic “And”

When we consider the pastoral pillar of discernment, we find ourselves on what appears to be familiar ground. We are quite comfortable with the fact that we are called not just to know the Word, but to effect It in our daily lives. The teaching in James 2:14-26 is well known, and resonates powerfully in any and every Christian community, being for many the litmus test, as it were, of the true Christian. We are aided in this, oddly enough, by the pragmatic nature of our culture, one which appreciates readily and values highly knowledge that is “useful,” and makes every effort to facilitate its application to our everyday lives.¹

It is this latter assistance that I worry about when it comes to the pastoral efforts to which we are called in the discernment of our vocation. Specifically, I am concerned that without a proper understanding of the essence of pastoral activity, we might be tempted to reduce it entirely to the doing of good works alone. Allow me to explain.

Each one of us is very familiar with the fact that one learns by doing. Thus, if I wanted to be a carpenter, I might seek out a master craftsman (maybe Norm Abrams on PBS, if he would have me) and take up an apprenticeship under him. I would then begin to build, first under his careful tutelage, and then increasingly on my own, arriving, God willing, at the point where I could operate well on my own, producing works of beauty, and finally being found worthy of the title “good carpenter.” It is only in working with the wood, that I would understand its character. It is only in wielding my tools that I would gain an intimate knowledge of their workings. All the theoretical knowledge concerning both the materials and tools of this trade are no substitute for the actual engagement with them in the making of the product. Thus, I could conceivably be learned in all the ways of carpentry without being a carpenter, just as I could know all there is to know about music, but not be called a musician. The knowing culminates in the doing, in the product that is fashioned, in the piece that is performed, and not in the knowing itself. Even with respect to the scholarly professions, it is a common experience that one’s theoretical understanding of a position deepens as one teaches it. There is something about the actual communication of knowledge in the forum of the classroom that generates a profound understanding of material that has been, in some instances, taught repeatedly over decades. Personally speaking, it is usually the case that I walk away from every class that I teach feeling somewhat selfish and guilty that I have gained so much from the teaching of it, far more than any of my students. The experiences of writing an article, engaging in debate, and answering unexpected questions all witness to the same point.

¹ A sign of this is found in the extraordinary efforts that every person in the liberal arts must make to justify the nature and importance of his discipline avoiding all the while the easy reduction of it to the utilitarian. In this spirit, the philosopher avoids the justification of his discipline by dwelling upon the fact that it increases one’s critical thinking abilities, just as the professor of English avoids the justification that a study of his discipline helps one to write more effectively. Such matters are peripheral to the true nature and value of philosophy and english, and if either discipline is reduced to such a utilitarian level, its very heart is ripped from it and it ceases to live.
The question, then, is this: should I regard the pastoral pillar as being the culmination of both the Christian life and doctrine? Is the litmus test of my Christianity to be found in the doing of the Word itself, and should everything, then, serve the purposes of the pastoral mission of the Church and of the very Faith itself? Is the Christian way akin to carpentry, teaching and musical performance insofar as the performance or the product of one’s doing is the basis upon which one is described as a “good” Christian and, by extension, true, authentic and beautiful? The juxtaposition of James 2:14-26 with chapters 3-5 of Romans does little to help. For the answer does not consist in one choice or the other, that is to say between either works or faith, just as our understanding of the human person does not consist in a choice between either soul or body. The answer does not consist in an “either-or” but rather in what Karl Barth called the Catholic “and.”

One of the main thrusts of my reflections has been the importance of the intellectual pillar both to our discernment of God’s call in our lives, and to the way by which we comport ourselves with respect to Him in all that we think, do and feel. This is not something that is peculiar to the Christian tradition but is found, in different garb naturally, in any civilized culture, be it religious or not. Most pertinent to the philosopher is the example of Socrates, that most famous of Greek philosophers who, in his Apology, gave voice to that most beautiful of ideas, taken up in full force by both Plato and Aristotle in their respective works, namely that the human person acts out of the fullness, the nobility and the beauty of his humanity only to the degree that he has conformed his mind to the highest of things, to the wisdom of which he is capable of grasping. In this, he brings order to his life, a right use of all that is good, and an authenticity to his being. The culmination of this work, however, is not found in the ivory tower of the scholar, is not found in revelling in the light of wisdom as a cat would bask in the heat of the sun on a cold winter’s day. Rather, the beholding of wisdom brings with it the full activation of the philosopher in both mind and in activity. In beholding the highest of things, wisdom herself, he is impelled to go forth from the heights of the tower of his contemplation and to descend into the public square so as to take up the responsibilities that arise consequent upon his courtship of lady wisdom and in the consummation that he has enjoyed. He becomes the conscience of a society, he returns to the cave from which he was delivered, so as to bring the light that he has enjoyed to his fellow citizens who are still afflicted by the darkness of their ignorance. He becomes, in Plato’s vision, the philosopher king, that most reluctant yet most effective of rulers and counsellors, one who, having been conformed in heart, mind and soul to the highest of realities, now acts out of this conformation in a powerful, beautiful and virtuous fashion, bringing to his people all that is best, most true and good, and this to the organization and governance of the culture itself, so that they might share in the fruits of his efforts and thus live a beautiful, good, authentic, that is to say, a happy life.

The Christian, in a like manner, is called to the very same thing. He bursts forth into authentic pastoral work only to the degree that he has been not only formed by the wisdom contained in the Faith, but to the degree to which he has taken on the person of Christ in his life. In courting wisdom, in seeking out the Logos Himself, the Christian, in seeing the world with the eyes of Christ, in taking on the mind of our Savior, cannot help but to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, heal the sick, visit the imprisoned, provide drink for those who thirst, welcome the stranger, and protect the widow and orphan. The only way that we can do these good works authentically, the only way that we can become the hands of our Savior, the only way that we can complete whatever is lacking in Christ’s sufferings (Colossians 1:24), is to be sure that we seek ever to have the

2 Such seeming dichotomies are legion and afflict us on a daily basis. The more common of these (nature or grace, reason or faith, science or philosophy, man or God) trouble deeply both the religious and the secular thinker.
mind of Christ, the wisdom of the Father, and the peace of the Holy Spirit, that peace which transcends all understanding, that peace that Augustine so well defined as that tranquillity of order that descends upon us in the presence of and the union with the wisdom of God Himself which only then transforms the entirety of our lives. In taking on the mind of God, through our studies and especially through our theology and daily prayer, we have a powerful opportunity to become not only temples fit for the Holy Spirit, but vessels through which the grace and love of God pour forth into the lives of all that we meet. In this, the work or the product of our doing rightly takes on its goodness, its beauty and its effectiveness, and this not by reason of our doing, or by the nature of what is done, but rather that our work is the bubbling over of the presence of the Trinity in our minds and our hearts, a presence which cannot be contained but must break forth into song, dance, celebration, and most especially in the pastoral work that we rush to do, inflamed and impelled by the Holy Spirit. In authentic pastoral work, one finds both the incarnation of wisdom, and the purification of our witness — the Logos becomes man yet once again in all that we do, and the rectification of all that we do is effected and made effectual in our courting of wisdom. Thus it is that faith must burst forth into works (see Isaiah 42:10-16, pp. 1114-1115 of volume IV of the Liturgy of the Hours), and works must be rectified, ordered, made beautiful and effective through faith. A faith that does not issue forth in works is a sacrilegious fraud, and works without faith are no more than the actions of that most dangerous of men, the well-intentioned fool, one who fumbles about in the world blind to the fact that he acts accidentally, thinking that it is enough to act well and with good intention, blind all the while to the fact that he cannot see (mistaking his good intentions and activity for seeing).

© Stephen Loughlin
email: Stephen.Loughlin@desales.edu