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| Turning the Soul: |
| The Catholic Intellectual Tradition and the Liberal Arts |
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Aristotle wrote that everyone’s ultimate goal – “that for the sake of which everything else is done” - is happiness (*Nich. Ethics* 1097a-18). If you ask a typical first-year college student why she wants a college education, most often the answer will be, to get a good job; she would like to be financially independent, start a family, buy a house, save for her own children’s college education. Push further, and as Aristotle points out, the final goal will always be happiness.

However, Aristotle’s definition of happiness, “an activity of the soul in accord with virtue” (*Nich. Ethics* 1098a-15), will probably not satisfy many undergraduates, or for that matter their parents. They want something more tangible for their money.

Nevertheless, this paper will argue that the goal of a Catholic liberal arts education is happiness, that happiness involves redirecting desires “in accord with virtue,” and that the most fulfilling and virtuous activity for a human being is the search for truth.

Of course, Catholic colleges and universities foster critical thinking and effective communication skills. Students learn math and biology and history and literature and social sciences, and many graduates enter careers as teachers or computer scientists or physical therapists or accountants, just as they and their parents hoped for when they took out those college loans.

But in the best of outcomes, not measurable on any quantitative scale, students are reoriented. Call it a conversion. Students glimpse the mystery and wonder of the created world, and begin to question the meaning and purpose of their lives.

Education, Plato argued, is not merely filling the mind with knowledge, but rather turning the soul toward the good. To understand how the Catholic intellectual tradition furthers this goal, this paper will examine three representative texts within that tradition: Plato’s *Republic*, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, and John Henry Newman’s *The Idea of a University*.

All three authors were committed to the search for truth, and believed that reason can point us to the ultimate good. Although each describe that good somewhat differently, they share a common understanding that we are happiest when we move towards something greater than ourselves. Each would agree that we are more than our constituent atoms, and what it means to be human is something more profound than a job description, and the universe is more mysterious than the human mind will ever comprehend. That is a good start to anyone’s education.

1. The Catholic Intellectual Tradition

It would be helpful to define what is meant by the Catholic intellectual tradition (CIT). Two of the foremost chroniclers of this tradition, Monika Hellwig and Mark Roche, have identified some key characteristics. The first is a belief in “the continuity of faith and reason” (Hellwig 7). Both work together in the search for truth. Roche calls it “faith seeking understanding” (6).

The second is “a respect for the cumulative wisdom of the past” (Hellwig 7). Aquinas read Maimonides’ and Averroes’ commentaries on Aristotle, and John Henry Newman called Aristotle “the oracle of nature and of truth” (17). This leads to the third characteristic: a belief in the universality of salvation. Divine truths are being revealed to all peoples at all times. Other cultures and other religions contain wisdom from which Christians can learn.

A fourth characteristic is the CIT’s emphasis on community: There is a strong ethical dimension to human action. Knowledge is not for its own sake, but for the common good. The fifth characteristic speaks directly to the liberal arts tradition: “the concern to integrate knowledge as a basis for true wisdom in living one’s life” (Hellwig 9). All intellectual disciplines contribute to a greater understanding of God’s world. This view also assumes that education has a moral dimension. Roche writes that in a Catholic university, “morality is not one sphere separate from the others but . . . it infuses all spheres” (34).

The final characteristic, the sacramental principle, affirms that the created universe, including human life and culture, is a reflection of the divine, and therefore a path to God. This sense of divine immanence sanctifies the natural world and affirms the worth and dignity of every human being, and recognizes the pursuit of justice as a fundamental human right.

It should be apparent that this worldview contradicts contemporary culture’s materialist understanding of reality, its relativist approach to values, and its elevation of the marketplace as the ultimate authority. It follows that the Catholic university’s task must be counter-cultural. It must educate young people not just for a rewarding career, but for a meaningful life. To do this, it must help them discover the transformative power of ideas.

1. Plato’s Allegory of the Cave

The best way to understand the power of ideas to transform lives is to enter into dialogue, a dialogue with the text, with one another, and with oneself. No thinker understood this better than Plato. He preferred the restless search for truth to certainty. Therefore in place of treatises he wrote dramatic dialogues featuring his teacher Socrates, who said that if he was wise, it was because he knew that he did not know.

Plato’s masterpiece, the *Republic,* begins with a debate over the meaning of justice. The plot can be read as Socrates’ attempt to redirect the souls of his young protégés, Glaucon and Adeimantus, who are in danger of coming under the sway of the sophist Thrasymachus. In Book I, Thrasymachus argues that justice is “nothing other than the advantage of the stronger” (1.338c).

After a rigorous cross- examination, Socrates unravels Thrasymachus’s argument, forcing him to concede that “a just soul and a just man will live well,” and “one who lives well is blessed and happy” (1.353e-354a).

Although Thrasymachus has been refuted, Glaucon argues that Socrates has not successfully defined the essence of justice, and begs him to continue. Socrates proposes that they examine justice on a large scale, in an ideal city. Socrates populates his ideal city with producers who seek money and guardians who seek honor, and to harmonize the city he devises an education system to create a philosopher-king who seeks wisdom.

In Book VII, Plato illustrates how education can redirect human desires. In the allegory of the cave, Socrates describes a community chained in darkness. They see only the shadows cast on the wall of a cave, and believe that to be the only reality. When one of the community escapes his chains and ascends to the surface, his eyes need to adjust to the light, but eventually he is able to see the sun, Plato’s metaphor for the ultimate reality. He must then descend into the cave to free those still bound in ignorance. This analogy, says Socrates, represents “the upward journey of the soul to the intelligible realm” (189).

The goal of education, Plato states, is not to fill people’s heads with knowledge, but rather to turn the soul “from darkness to light,” to redirect desires from the impermanent and illusory to the eternal and unchangeable. “It isn’t the craft of putting sight into the soul,” he has Socrates say. “Education takes for granted that sight is there but that it isn’t turned the right way or looking where it ought to look, and it tries to redirect it appropriately” (190).

1. Dante’s Journey from Darkness to Light

In his epic poem *The Divine Comedy,* Dante Alighieri is also concerned with using reason to redirect desires. It is his own soul that is at risk. He does not say how he came to be lost in darkness, just that “Midway in our life’s journey, I went astray/ from the straight road and woke to find myself / alone in a dark wood” (*Infern.* 1. 1-3). It is our life’s journey as well, he implies. We too will someday awake to find that we are in danger of losing our soul.

We will need guidance. Dante the author chooses a pagan Roman poet, Virgil, to lead Dante the pilgrim back to the path of virtue. Because Dante’s poem is an allegory, we come to understand that Virgil personifies reason in the classical Greek and Roman tradition.

Dante learned from Aquinas that reason is the handmaiden of faith. It points the way to the truth. Reason in the person of Virgil guides, instructs, and protects the pilgrim Dante on a journey down the nine circles of hell so that he may understand the nature of sin and human suffering. Dante learns that reason is a gift from God that can control passions and desires and direct him to the good.

In his farewell to Dante amidst the earthly garden atop Mt. Purgatory, Virgil gives his benediction: Dante is now free to follow his desires, because his will is “upright, free, and whole/ and you would be in error not to heed/ whatever your own impulse prompts you to:/ lord of yourself I crown and mitre you” (*Purg.* 27.140-43).

Dante can trust his desires because reason has taught him to seek the good as the only true source of happiness. After ascending the nine heavenly spheres and experiencing a direct vision of the divine, Dante then descends to live out his earthly life, and to commemorate his spiritual journey in an epic poem that teaches us the way to happiness.

1. Newman’s Ideal University

When he was appointed rector of the newly founded Catholic University of Dublin in 1854, John Henry Newman delivered a series of nine lectures later published as *The Idea of the University.* It is a foundational text on Catholic liberal arts education. Today, on first reading, Newman appears outdated. He describes liberal education as knowledge for its own sake, “an end in itself” (26). However, Newman does not mean to suggest that a liberal education is useless. He makes a distinction between instruction, which imparts a skill, and education, which forms a character and instills habits of mind (21).

Newman states that the goal of a university education is “intellectual excellence” (27). An educated person is one “who has learned to think and to reason and to compare and to discriminate and to analyze” (66).

Furthermore, a liberal education, says Newman, forms a person’s character and develops a habit of mind, “the attributes of which are freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom,” which Newman calls “a philosophical habit” (10).

A liberal education fosters something more, “something commonly spoken of in connection with religion and virtue” (21). Newman is clear that a liberal education does not make a Catholic or a Christian, but by educating the intellect to seek truth “to its full extent and its true limit,” says Newman, “you are led . . . to the Eternal and Infinite” (6), to the ultimate good.

The journey from darkness to light cannot be completed in four years, or even forty. A liberal education cannot assure virtue, or wisdom, or happiness, but it can point the way. The pioneering Dante scholar Charles Singleton described Dante’s *Divine Comedy* as “the journey of the unquiet heart” (6). He was paraphrasing Augustine’s famous opening in *Confessions*: “You made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” If our students graduate from college with a restless heart, that is a good thing. It means that they are ready to embark on a journey of discovery. Perhaps in the process they will discover themselves. Plato, Dante and Newman understood that it is an arduous climb and we will stumble along the way. But it is a climb worth making. As Augustine reminds us, we were made for it.

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