

The Role of a Catholic University in the
Modern World

Within the limited space assigned, I shall endeavor 1) to set forth a somewhat incomplete but, at least, concrete and dynamic notion of the good and 2) to place within that frame-work both the human situation, named the modern world, and the Catholic University.

1. As human knowing rises on three levels, so also the good that men pursue contains a threefold aspect.

There is to our knowing an experiential component constituted by the data of sense and of consciousness. Secondly, there is an intellectual component constituted by insights and consequent definitions, postulates, systems. Thirdly, there is a reflective component constituted by the weighing of evidence and the rational utterance of judgment.

But as we experience data, so also we experience the tendencies, the drives, the unrest of our spontaneities. Empirically, then, the good is the object of desire.

Again, as we understand the unities that are things and the systematic correlations that explain their operations, so also men grasp and formulate technological devices, economic arrangements, political structures. These too are instances of the good, but they stand as higher syntheses that harmonize and maximize the satisfactions of individual desires. Intellectually, the good is the good of order.

Finally, as speculative theorizing is cut short by judgment of fact, so also practical deliberation upon courses of action reaches its term in judgments of value and in choices. Thus judgments of value set the good of order above private advantage, subordinate technology to economics, refer economics to social

welfare and, generally, mete out to every² finite good both appreciation and criticism. As appreciation is a spring of action, so criticism is a source of restraint; and as only the Infinite Good is beyond all criticism, radically man is free.

2. Men are many. Their lives are not isolated but solidary. In the pursuit of the good they communicate, and so three levels of community follow from the three components of knowing and of the good.

Corresponding to experience and desire, there is inter-subjective community. Its basis is spontaneous tendency. Its manifestation is an elemental feeling of belonging together. Its nucleus is the family. Its expansion is the clan, the tribe, the nation.

Corresponding to intellectual insights and the good of order, there is civil community. It is a complex product embracing and harmonizing material techniques, economic arrangements, and political structures. The measure of its development distinguishes primitive societies from civilizations.

Corresponding to judgments of value, there is cultural community. It transcends the frontiers of states and the epochs of history. It is Cosmopolis, not as an unrealized political ideal, but as a long-standing, non-political, cultural fact. It is the field of communication and influence of artists, scientists, and philosophers. It is the bar of enlightened public opinion to which naked power can be driven to submit. It is the tribunal of history that may expose successful charlatans and may restore to honor the prophets stoned by their contemporaries.

3. Intellectually and morally, individually and socially, men are subject to ambiguous change, to development-and-decline.

As the question quid sit directs us from data to their intelligible form, so also practical intelligence moves from particular objects of desire to the

schemes, structures, systems of civil community. As intellectualists and positivists dispute whether the real is the intelligible form or the merely given, so also there is an ambiguity of the good. For men to be truly practical is for them to favor the common good of order at the expense of private advantage; but in fact to be practical is taken to mean that one is cool and calculating and, when necessary, moderately unscrupulous in getting what one wants. Finally, as mastery of the science is a cumulative product of many insights, so also civil communities are the cumulative products of many acts of practical intelligence; and as there is a test of the sciences in experimental verification, so also the validity of civil communities stands revealed in their histories. Genesis and development, improvement and achievement, parties and factions, privileged and depressed classes, political realism and revolution, dissolution and decay, all have a common origin in the commonly undecipherable ambiguities of human practicality.

As the question an sit directs us from theory to fact, from possibility to actuality, so the ambiguity of civil community releases the publicly expressed reflection, appreciation, criticism, constitutive of cultural community. But as human intellect can wander through the philosophic labyrinth, so also cultural community has its proper ambiguity. Video meliora proboque . . . The pronouncements of rational reflection are splendid, but they lack efficacy. In another universe things could be different, but in the existing universe man suffers from moral impotence. This fact leads men to question the hegemony of reason, to relegate its precepts to some isolated, academic or ecclesiastical sphere, to develop "realist" views in which theory is adjusted to practice and practice means whatever happens to be done. It follows that besides the succession of higher syntheses characteristic of intellectual advance, there is also a succession of lower syntheses characteristic of socio-cultural decline. Protestantism rejected the Church but kept revealed religion. Rationalism rejected revealed religion but

acknowledged the supremacy of reason. Liberalism despaired of rational agreement but respected the individual conscience. Totalitarianism ridicules the bourgeois conscience to conquer and organize mankind on an artificial inter-subjective level.

4. This rough outline suffices for an adumbration of our basic terms, namely, the modern world and the university.

The modern world is the present human situation. It is the cumulative product of centuries of ambiguous change. It is the threatening precipitate of civil and cultural development-and-decline, solidified in assumptions, mentalities, interpretations, philosophies, tastes, habits, hopes, fears. Precisely in the measure in which man's incomprehension of his situation makes appropriate action impossible, the modern world is involved in a major crisis. Inversely, in the measure in which man can be brought to comprehend what he has not understood, to criticize what he has valued blindly, to do what he has neglected to do, what otherwise would be a major crisis is transformed into a task commensurate with available power and resources.

A university is a reproductive organ of cultural community. Its constitutive endowment lies not in buildings or equipment, civil status or revenues, but in the intellectual life of its professors. Its central function is the communication of intellectual development. Nor is the significance of that function obscure. For it is the intus legere of intelligence in act that alone grasps many truths in comprehensive synthesis, that holds ranges of concepts in the unity of their intelligible relations, that moves back and forth freely between the abstract and the concrete, the universal and the particular, the speculative and the practical. Without developed understanding, explanations are of hypnotic drugs by their virtus dormitiva, truths become uncomprehended formulas, moral precepts narrow down to lists of prohibitions, and human living settles into a helpless routine without a capacity for vital adaptation and without the power of knowledge

that inspires and directs the movement from real possibility to concrete achievement.

5. Catholic and secular universities exercise the same function, but they do so under different conditions and with different problems. Common to both is the task of communicating intellectual development, nor can anyone suppose that a second-rate Catholic university is any more acceptable to God in the New Law than was in the Old Law the sacrifice of maimed or diseased beasts. Still this identity of essential function is overlaid with profound difference. The secular university is caught in the ambiguities of civil and cultural development-and-decline; it may lag in consenting to aberrations but in the long run it has to yield, for it recruits its students and their professors from the socio-cultural situation that exists. No doubt the same situation constrains the Catholic university and the Catholic community. But the latter is armed against the world. The supernatural virtues of faith, hope and charity are named theological because they orientate man to God as He is in Himself. None the less they possess a profound social significance. Against the perpetuation of explosive tensions that would result from the strict application of retributive justice, there is the power of charity to wipe out old grievances and make a fresh start possible. Against the economic determinism that would result were egoistic practicality given free rein, there is the liberating power of hope that seeks first the Kingdom of God. Against the dialectic, discernible in the history of philosophy and in the development-and-decline of civil and cultural communities, there is the liberation of human reason through divine faith; for men of faith are not shifted about with every wind of doctrine.

But if the Catholic university, because it is Catholic, enjoys liberation from the ambiguity of practicality and from the ambiguity of human culture, still, as a university, it is involved in an ambiguity of its own. From the

schools of Alexandria and Antioch, through the medieval universities, to Pascendi and Humani generis, Catholic intellectuals have been discounted as doubtful blessings. Praise is given St. Thomas because of his merits; it is concentrated upon him because one finds it a little difficult to be outright in praising so many others. Indeed, the misadventures of Catholic intellectuals could be taken as a counsel to wrap one's talent in a napkin and bury it safely in the ground, were not that conclusion clean contrary to the gospel which demands, beyond capitalist expectations, one hundred percent profit. Such then is this third ambiguity: Catholic intelligence is to be used to the limit; yet so complex, so arduous, so excellent is the task confronting it that failure is both easy and disastrous.

6. If our age is full of deep foreboding, still "only with the fall of twilight does Minerva's owl take wing." As real principles exerting real influence are not enunciations in books but intelligences in act, so also it is not pure logic, exercised unerringly by an electronic calculator, but concrete events and palpable consequences that bring light and conviction to rational animals. The vast anxieties and insecurities of the modern world both make it rich in lessons for mankind and, no less, tend to make men ready to learn them.

Though a Catholic university does not dispense the grace of God, though it is not entrusted with Christ's mission to teach, though it must see to the conservation and transmission of acquired knowledge before it can turn to its extension and development, still it is the normal center in which both the need for intellectual integration is felt and the way towards that integration is prepared. But upon this large and intricate question we must be content with three brief remarks. First, then, integration presupposes a purification, for human change is ambiguously good; it is development-and-decline; the aberrations of man's practical and speculative intelligence neither invalidate nor admit

integration with his real achievements. Secondly, the purifier must be pure, for purification itself is a human change and so is subject to ambiguity; one cannot remove the mote in another's eye when there is a beam in one's own; the true intellectual has to be humble, serene, detached, without personal or corporate or national complacency, without appeals to contemporary, let alone archaist, bias or passion or fads. Thirdly, there exists for the modern Catholic thinker a new and distinct problem of integration that owes its existence to the development of the empirical sciences of man. Not pure nature envisaged by philosophy but man as he exists is the object of empirical anthropology and psychology, of economics and sociology, of the existentialisms, of explanatory histories of civilizations and cultures, of religion and dogma. But man as he has existed and exists is man as subject to moral impotence; it is man as the cooperative or uncooperative recipient of divine grace. Hence the integration of sciences that deal with man concretely has to be sought not in philosophy but in theology. The old maxim that theology is the queen of the sciences has been given a new relevance and Newman's Idea of a University a fresh significance.

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