

# “The abandonment of Catholic education”

*What a small Dominican school in Berkeley plans to do about it*

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“Reading the Signs of the Times: Dominican Education and the Challenge of Contemporary Culture”

## **Western Civilization at a Crossroads**

I do not think that it is in any way an exaggeration to say that Western civilization is at a crossroads. Having forgotten, if not repudiated, the Christian and (let us insist, however politically incorrect) Catholic foundations of their history, Western states have emphasized more and more individual freedom, but at the expense of the institutions that have nurtured and supported it throughout history. Even marriage and the family -- the institutions that have been foundational to every human society -- are under attack.



**Fr. Michael Sweeney**

We can ask with Böckenförde, “To what extent can peoples united in states live exclusively on the basis of the guarantee of the freedom of the individual without a uniting bond that is antecedent to this freedom?” Even Jürgen Habermas, who possesses a confidence in democratic process to a degree that I consider naïve, insists that there is a “solidarity that the democratic state needs but cannot impose by law.” He sees as a real threat “...the transformation of the citizens of prosperous and peaceful liberal societies into isolated monads acting on the basis of their own self-interest, persons who use their subjective rights only as weapons against each other.”

Habermas’ fear is becoming more and more a reality and, amidst the social disintegration with which we are faced, the Church has an indispensable contribution to make to society. All of the ideas upon which our society has depended have their roots in the Christian Middle Ages – constitutional government, the university, the hospital, capitalist theory and the regulation of commerce, international law and the articulation of human rights – and find their justification in the Catholic understanding of the human person. Yet the voice of the Church has not been heard, even by Catholics.

The popes and bishops have not been silent on these questions but they have been dismissed because they are not understood. When they speak of the natural law, or of the common good, or of solidarity, or of subsidiarity they are using terms that are inaccessible and therefore largely meaningless to the majority of Catholics, let alone of other citizens. They are speaking, if at all, to an aging elite, to Catholics whose education in College was completed prior to 1970.

It was once the case that anyone educated in a Catholic university received a prescribed course of study in philosophy that was intended to unify the rest of the curriculum. It was not always well presented. Etienne Gilson, the great Thomistic philosopher, complained about what he termed a “decadent scholasticism” in which the insights of St. Thomas Aquinas were presented as conclusions

without sufficient attention to his arguments. Nonetheless, students were presented a Catholic view of the human person, grounding in the moral teaching, insight into the relationship of faith and reason along with a confidence in reason, and a sense of the common good and the necessity for responsible citizenship.

### **The Abandonment of Catholic Education**

All of this was deliberately discarded, and it is now the case that most Catholic universities are indistinguishable from any other. As a consequence, the positions of Catholic alumni on social questions, even on issues that directly reflect the Church's moral teaching, do not differ significantly from the rest of the population. When parents are surveyed concerning why they send their children to Catholic colleges, they respond that they are smaller and safer than state institutions, and tend to have active alumni who will promote the career of their graduates. The Catholicity of the university has ceased to be a first order consideration.

Why was Catholic education so thoroughly abandoned? In my judgment, the reason is to be found in a profound sense of inferiority that pertained on the part of Catholic educators in the 1950's and 1960's. This is seen in the participants of the Land-O-Lakes Conference held in Wisconsin in 1967 around the topic "What is the nature and role of the contemporary Catholic university?"

Fr. Theodore Hesburgh, President of Notre Dame, chaired the conference that included the presidents or academic deans of Boston College, Georgetown, Fordham, the Catholic University and other Catholic institutions. At the center of their deliberations was an assertion: "The Catholic university participates in the total university life of our time, has the same functions as all other true universities and, in general, offers the same services to society." Behind this assertion was an assumption: that the Catholic university had not been acknowledged to participate fully in the university life of our time, to perform the same functions as other true universities or to offer the same services to society. We should notice this, crucial fact: that the definition of a true university was assumed to be other than the Catholic institution and that to become truly a university, a Catholic university must look to the non-Catholic institution as its standard or model.



On the basis of this argument they might logically have concluded that there was no longer a purpose for a Catholic university as a separate institution. They determined, rather, to beat the non-Catholic institutions at their own game: the Catholic university could be equally a university with something added: the Catholic university was to be marked by an extra-curricular integration of studies and a greater attentiveness to students than was true of other universities.

Unfortunately, in the thinking of the participants to the conference, these distinctively Catholic marks of the university had no bearing upon the academic program itself, which would differ from other institutions only by its excellence. No thought was given to what had been the purpose of a Catholic university, which was not merely to put Catholics as an immigrant population on an equal footing with Protestant and secular populations, but to give Catholic students access to their own intellectual tradition and the European and Western culture that it had shaped.

In less than a decade, Catholic universities eliminated anything distinctively Catholic from their curriculum. They: embraced "academic freedom," removing themselves from any practical relationship to the bishops; divested the curriculum of the philosophy requirement, many substituting religious studies; followed hiring practices based solely upon academic competence, with the result that the faculty in many Catholic institutions are now a non-Catholic majority; relegated explicitly Catholic elements of the university to campus ministry and other student services. So little was left of anything distinctively Catholic in the curriculum of Catholic

universities that some have begun to initiate programs in something called “Catholic Studies” in an attempt, one presumes, to imitate the non-Catholic institutions that have instituted similar programs.

### **Consequences of the Abandonment of Catholic Education**

There have, I think, been two principal consequences of the general collapse of Catholic higher education. First, it has compromised our ability to entrust the whole of the Catholic tradition to the generations that have followed my own. Second, it has had the ironic effect of clericalizing the Church, of marginalizing the contribution to the Church that most properly belongs to the laity. Let us look briefly at each.

To transmit the Catholic faith requires a good deal more than to hand out bibles or to study a catechism.

A double fidelity is expected of us: we are called to be faithful to Christ as he reveals his Father to us through the revelation proper, but we are also sent into the world to do His work; we must be faithful to

Christ as he is present in the world. For this reason, the revelation requires the handmaid that is philosophy. The revelation does not directly address the social circumstances or political realities of our age; it does not speak directly of the place of the sciences and their relative merits, of economic theory or international law. The revelation must be applied to all of the circumstances of contemporary life, so that the faithful may redeem our world from within, as the Council insisted, as a leaven.

This task of evangelizing the culture and its institutions is pre-eminently a lay responsibility. While the pastoral care of souls may not require creativity in the secular spheres of human life, the application of the Gospel to the initiatives and institutions that make up our contemporary world requires that fundamental questions concerning man and woman and the world must be explored and answered.

Ironically, in their concern to accommodate Catholic education to the world, the Catholic institutions have rendered a real engagement with secular concerns far less likely. As a consequence, since Vatican Council II the Church has turned inward almost exclusively focused upon the care of the Catholic community, and a good part of the reason for this is that we have not formed our young people for the sake of the mission to secular society. The concern of the pastoral care of the community is that of Bishops, priests and deacons –of clerics – and in my lifetime the Church has become more clerical, not less.

### **The Response of the Dominican School**

What is a tiny Dominican graduate school of philosophy and theology to do about this situation? It is my conviction that we can accomplish a great deal. We have inherited, and remained faithful to, a tradition of study that was first articulated 750 years ago, with the only curriculum that was ever explicitly based upon the Church’s preaching mission; there is an almost inexhaustible depth of resource open to us. Neither does the size of our school much concern me; every institution begins small, and we have good historical precedent for small Dominican faculties making a very great difference. One such example is that of the theology faculty of the University of Salamanca in the early 16th century.

The last great cultural upheaval of the West began, arguably, about five centuries ago. Consider what is afoot in Europe in the year 1500: a new “humanism” focuses upon the individual; the first stirrings of the

Protestant reformation are already being felt; the nation states are beginning to take shape, first in France and then elsewhere in Europe; the discovery of the new world and its colonization begin, raising questions of international law and also of human rights (are the North American natives to be regarded as human?); the new-found wealth pouring into Europe causes an inflation of the currency not ever experienced before, and raises commercial and ethical questions concerning inflation, currency and interest.

In the midst of all this Francisco de Vitoria, O.P. assumed the chair of theology at the University of Salamanca where, with the assistance of his Dominican confreres, he began to apply the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas to the challenges of the day. Together they founded what history now knows as the “school of Salamanca.” This was not a school in the sense of a separate institution – they were

professors at the University of Salamanca. Rather, it was a school of thought: a common intellectual and scholarly enterprise to address the questions of their day, an initiative that lasted for at least a century, and whose impact is still felt.

They articulated the humanism that is integral to the tradition of St. Thomas; in economic theory they introduced the ideas of just price, supply and demand and the scarcity theory of value; they argued, successfully, for the rights of native peoples applying St. Thomas' discussion of the *ius gentium* and offered the world the first systematic articulation of human rights; they advanced the just war theory, and were the first in history to propound the idea of international law.

I hope that it will not be regarded as an utter lack in humility for me to assert that they accomplished all of this not merely as Dominicans, but because they were Dominicans; they applied their Dominican tradition to the challenges of their age and invented whole new areas of study. What is that tradition, especially with respect to applying the Gospel?

### The Hallmark of the Dominican Tradition

First, the tradition insists that there really is a revelation, and that it is intended for the whole of mankind. Second, many of the ideas enshrined in the West find their justification, and only adequate explanation, within the tradition that rests upon the Christian revelation. Following Augustine and Anselm, we do not understand in order to believe; we believe in order that we might understand. In other words, the revelation illumines what is human and enables us to understand more deeply than we could from reason unaided by the revelation. Third, the revelation is not directly concerned with human initiatives as such; rather there really is an order of reality that is properly secular. Secular pursuits have their own proper dignity and competence, and it is necessary to distinguish between the things that are ordered to God directly, and the secular things that are ordered to the human person, who is in the image and likeness of God. For this reason, the revelation requires philosophical application and insight: the revelation demands competence in secular affairs, and a study that unifies what reason, assisted by the revelation, can discern.



Let us dwell for a moment on this point. In the *Summa Theologiae* St. Thomas asks whether prudence or holiness is to be sought on the part of someone who governs. He answers that prudence, the virtue by which one acts decisively and well in practical matters is the virtue that is proper to the one who governs; holiness adds nothing to right action. I might add, parenthetically, that everyone's experience bears him out: we have all encountered people of great holiness who have not fully mastered a practical approach to life! This has many ramifications today. So, for example, Catholic politicians who recuse themselves in moral questions on the grounds that they cannot represent the tradition in a pluralist society should be held to account, not on the grounds that they are disobedient to the magisterium, but on the grounds that they are negligent of the common good.

The hallmark of the Dominican tradition is to integrate philosophical and theological study both for the sake of advancing the tradition itself and for the sake of applying it, with authority, to contemporary questions. In the Dominican tradition, this is what it means to preach: not merely to exhort the faithful to a holy life, but to put the tradition at their disposal so that they may apply it with authority to contemporary life and therefore to undertake the work of Christ, which is to redeem the world.

To this end, our faculty are undertaking an analysis of the elements of the Dominican plan of studies – the systematic presentation of the tradition that is at the center of the education of Dominicans who are studying for ordination in the Order – in order to identify concentrations in graduate study that can be offered to the Church for the preparation of men and women who will exercise leadership in the Church and in the academy. What we have, as a Church, utterly failed to achieve in the past forty years is to prepare the laity for the leadership in society that applies the insights into contemporary questions that

the revelation affords; the moment that philosophy was dropped from the Catholic curricula, Catholic universities ceased to be fully Catholic. We can and will address this by preparing teachers who have an academic and intellectual formation that integrates philosophy and theology.

### **The Unique Nature of the Dominican School**

What is unique to our School is that we are the only seminary on the continent at which someone can, in three years, receive the Master of Arts degree in both philosophy and theology. This is of enormous benefit for someone who plans, for example, to pursue a doctorate in philosophy or theology, in that he or she will have real academic credential in the other field. It also affords the possibility of a concentration of study that requires the integration of both disciplines.

Our faculty is considering a concentration of studies in three areas. I would like, briefly, to examine each.

First, because of the great influence of the media and of the arts in contemporary culture, they are introducing concomitant study in aesthetics (a philosophical discipline) and in theology and the arts. This will permit them to offer classes that will be unique on the continent, on, for example, the morality of artistic endeavors, that a concentration in either discipline alone would not afford.

Second, they are proposing what is for us a rather obvious concentration in Thomistic studies, so that the student who chooses it will be fully introduced to the systematic philosophy and theology of St. Thomas and the Thomistic tradition, in the light of the whole tradition of philosophy and theology in the West. This program will be especially helpful to a student who wishes to engage contemporary questions and debates at the doctorate level at a secular institution; the student will come to that study with the advantage of a synthesis in the philosophical and theological tradition of the West that is otherwise unavailable.

Third, the faculty is investigating a degree concentration in the social teaching of the Church, because to apply the Catholic tradition to political and economic concerns requires sophistication in both philosophy and theology. We are already a resource for the Catholic Conference for the State of California, and we are working with the Catholic Conference to ensure that the practical work of discerning the political and economic spheres is not overlooked.

To assist us in these endeavors we are reaching beyond our academic community. One of the great lacunae in the preparation of seminarians and lay leaders in the Church has been the fact that there have been no institutional means of consulting the laity on issues pertaining to the Church's mission to the world, the very work to which the laity have been called by the Vatican Council II. With this in mind, I have instituted the College of Fellows of DSPT, men and women who are sober Catholics and have achieved prominence in their fields, who will meet together to discuss issues concerning faith and culture, and the practical challenges of applying the faith in contemporary society. In turn, the conversations that we have together can influence the manner in which we approach the theological and philosophical work of the School. The Fellows meet twice per year in the presence of His Eminence, James Francis, Cardinal Stafford, who is their Dean.

### **The Dominican School and the Western Province**

What, if anything, has this initiative to offer you? Because we have remained faithful to our Dominican tradition, we have never ceased to attract vocations to the Order. You are served by Dominican friars, each of whom is an alumnus of the Dominican School. The Dominicans who serve you here are young, intelligent, with an education that is the best that the Church offers.

But there is another way in which we wish to be of service directly to the communities of the Western Province: we seek a primary role in the formation of leaders – lay and ordained – in the local communities. If we are to raise up real Catholic leadership for the sake of our mission to society, it is

you, the Catholic community, who must identify young people who have intellectual and leadership gifts and call them to take their place in the Church and in society. I wish to organize a formal consultation with those who will collaborate with us in this work: to identify the issues that are being confronted here, even those that may be particular to this community, and to identify those who should study with us.

There are practical challenges to the work that we have determined to undertake. Apart from a small subsidy from the Western Dominican Province, we have no means of support for the School other than the tuition that our students pay and the direct contributions of our benefactors. But this affords us, I am convinced, an extremely significant strategic advantage to what we are proposing: we are not dependent upon government or industry for our support, and therefore we can be fully objective in our study, and we can apply the Catholic tradition in its integrity, without apology or compromise. We are directly accountable to God and to the Catholic community.

We are also directly, therefore, dependent upon God and upon the Catholic community. This, too, affords us both a strategic advantage and a measure: the strategic advantage that we must pay close attention to what is happening in our Church and world and be of use in addressing them; a measure in the fact that if God wants this to proceed, and you want this to proceed, then we will accomplish it. If God does not want this initiative, and you do not want this initiative, then it will be necessary for us to adjust and to do something else. The only unacceptable thing is for us to stand by as our society collapses in upon itself and to do nothing.

For more information on the Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology, [Click Here](#).

