

THE IDEA OF A CATHOLIC LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE

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Certainly the rhetorical high point of the New Testament comes in the Sermon on the Mount. When we think of the Sermon today, I suspect many of us are inclined to recall it in part: the Beatitudes come to mind, or the Lord's Prayer, or any one of several dozen moral passages that are so profound, so apt, so pertinent to some specific problem or aspect of human experience that it is much easier to recollect them singly and situationally than collectively and contextually. This propensity to atomize the Sermon tends to obscure the fact that, taken together, these passages constitute a single brilliant argument, an argument that is the basis of Christian humanism and the rationale for a Catholic Liberal Arts College such as Rivier.

The argument goes something like this: Christ has taken His followers up to the mountaintop, where they can look back metaphorically to that other mountaintop in Sinai where God gave Moses the tablets of the Law, for the Law is His main topic. "Do not think that I have come to destroy the Law," He cautions his audience, "rather, I have come to complete it." His premise is that the chief strength of the Law, its specificity and precision, is also its principal limitation: it describes the minimum level of behavior below which one has broken with both God and human society. Break the fifth commandment and you are a murderer; but keep it, and all you are is not a murderer, the negative formulation of the commandment carrying over into its fulfillment. And so it is with most of the commandments: break them and you are by turns a liar, a thief, an adulterer, etc., but keep them and all you have done is not transgress the particular proscription. So that it is possible in keeping most of the Commandments of the Law to avoid evil without actually accomplishing much positive good.

And so in the Sermon on the Mount Christ begins slowly and methodically to complete the Law, to fashion a positive ethos, based not on negative proscriptions against evil, but rather on an infinitely expanding and voluntary conception of good. He begins by formulating the Beatitudes, which must have sounded to His audience that day as strange as wearing shoes. "Blessed are the poor in spirit" He says to the tax collectors and money changers. "Blessed are the pure of heart" He says to Mary Magdalene. "Blessed are the peacemakers" He says to the Roman centurions. "Blessed are the meek" He says to His apostles, twelve tough fishermen picked up from the docks in Galilee. Each of these people is called to be something different, something more. The negative formulation of the Commandments is counterpoised by the concept of positive choice, and to the Law's premise of precise proscription Christ adds the benedictions that flow from voluntarily choosing virtue.

And then, in case we haven't gotten the point, He recurs to the Commandments and begins to turn them into positive injunctions. "You have heard it said, Thou shalt not kill. But I am saying, don't even be angry with one another, and if you are angry with anyone, go to that person and make it up with them before you come into the temple." And so on with the other commandments, such as those against adultery and revenge. And what is interesting is that He lets the words carry the argument entirely - there are no parables to illustrate what He is saying, no miracles to drive the point dramatically home, just this ongoing dialectic between the precise proscriptions of the Law and the new and expansive injunctions to goodness, until finally He brings the Sermon to its logical conclusion in the climactic passage, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Heavenly Father is perfect."

And how are we to understand this passage? How can we possibly live up to the expectation of perfection? There are two ways in which we can interpret it. The conventional sense of perfect is “flawless” but here we are back in the negative formulation of the Law: flaw-less, Thou shalt not have any flaws. Christ knew too many sinners personally to imagine that flawlessness was a reasonable expectation. But the other sense of perfect is “whole and complete,” and this, according to Father Daniel J. Harrington, is closer to the Hebrew original, *tam*, which refers to the wholeness of God. It also makes sense in the context of the Sermon, where Christ’s announced intention is to complete the Law. To the external compulsion of the Law, then, Christ adds an interior call to perfection, perfection in the sense of wholeness and completeness.

And so it is in this sense that the passage has come to be understood in modern times. When Matthew Arnold - poet, educator, and social critic - brought out his great critique of Victorian society, *Culture and Anarchy*, he chose as the epigraph of his essay Christ’s words: Be ye therefore perfect. Arnold rightly understood that Christ’s message, that one can legislate against evil but cannot compel people to choose good, applied in a very specific and pertinent way to modern society, which, as a result of industrialization and the passage of the Reform Bills, was moving out of the highly structured system of rules and obligations which characterized feudalism, and into a situation of greater freedom and rights centered on the individual.

For Arnold, this movement was fraught with dangers. The expansion of political and economic freedom had unleashed a variety of forces which, he felt, left to themselves, tended toward anarchy. As he looked at British society, Arnold saw the emergence of a class struggle, the rise of religious fanaticism, venal politicians, sensational and divisive journalists, violence in the streets, substance abuse, an increasingly harsh laissez-faire capitalism, a rampant and vulgar materialism, and a general devaluation of the importance of education and the benefits of culture. None of these things, with the exception of violence in the streets, was specifically proscribed by law. But each of them singly, and all of them taken together, certainly, in Arnold’s analysis, tended toward social anarchy.

Arnold knew that in an emergent liberal democracy the response to this anarchy could not be, as in Imperial Germany or Tsarist Russia, the imposition of order from the top down, nor could it be, as in their successor fascist and communist states, the organization of society along totalitarian lines, nor could the response be, as in some societies we know, simply the building of more prisons, the appropriation of money for more police, and the expansion of the list of capital crimes. In each of these cases, anarchy is avoided, but at the cost of personal freedom. The central question for a liberal democracy is always, How can we achieve the maximum degree of individual moral freedom while maintaining the requirements of social order and communal well-being?

Arnold’s answer is the perfection which Christ enjoins, a sense of wholeness and completeness in the individual which voluntarily tends toward the good, the perfection which, left free, will choose to go beyond the minimum requirements of the law. To this end, the moral perfection sought by the Middle Class, and the aesthetic and intellectual perfection sought by the aristocracy, were, in themselves, entirely insufficient. Arnold sought a concept of perfection which transcended class, and which truly achieved Christ’s ideal of individual wholeness and completeness, combining moral and intellectual development, integrating action and thought, and which, in effecting the transformation of the individual, will in turn bring about the transformation of society. “Culture,” he writes, “which is the study of perfection, leads us to conceive of true human perfection as a harmonious perfection, developing all sides of our humanity; and as a general perfection, developing all parts of our society. For if one member suffer, the other members must suffer with it.”

This ideal of perfection and nothing less is the scope of our task at a liberal arts college, and specifically at a Catholic liberal arts college in America at the advent of the twenty-first century. When Arnold looked at Victorian society and saw a wide range of forces tending toward anarchy, he was looking at our own society, which is also faced with class struggle, religious fanaticism, venal politicians, sensational and divisive media, violence, substance abuse, economic struggle, materialism, and a devaluation of education, magnified and exacerbated by a much larger population and all the advantages of modern technology, with racism, ethnic tension, and the ready availability of handguns thrown in for good measure. And that Arnold's dilemma should recur is not at all surprising, as the balance of individual freedom and domestic harmony in a liberal democracy is not something achieved once and forever, but rather requires constant adjustment and attention; indeed it must constitute our main ongoing task as a nation. The response of the liberal arts college to this task is, as it has always been, to focus on personal perfection as a means of transforming society, not perfection in the delusory sense of producing a race of flawless human beings, but rather in the sense of each person achieving for themselves wholeness and completeness, the full development of all their powers.

The Liberal Arts college is particularly well-suited, indeed it is designed to achieve this goal. In *Education Without Impact: How Our Universities Fail the Young*, George Douglas asserts that, "A long time ago we made a great mistake with the American university when we constructed it on the Germanic rather than the British model." Douglas argues that while the focus in the German universities is on the specialized departments of graduate study, the British institutions have traditionally emphasized the undergraduate experience, where students are grouped not by department or school but rather in smaller colleges within the university. According to Douglas, the American version of the German university provides a "trickle-down" style of undergraduate education, "a dreary and pale shadow of the specialized disciplines," while what is really required at the undergraduate level is an active and humanistic community of scholars such as we find at Magdalene or All Souls colleges at Oxford, or King's College or St. John's at Cambridge.

Douglas' analysis, however, does not apply to all American institutions of higher learning. For even after Charles W. Eliot reorganized Harvard in the late nineteenth century along the lines of the German research universities (thereby setting the model for many American schools), the British ideal of the community of scholars persisted in the nation's liberal arts colleges. Small in an era of bigness, generalist in a period of specialization, emphasizing teaching at a time when money and prestige were lavished on research, these colleges seemed mere anachronisms in the Industrial Age which produced the research university, but, as we move out of that period, we find that not only are liberal arts colleges flourishing, but they are likely to become the most effective and characteristic educational medium of the Information Age in which we find ourselves.

What specifically characterizes the Liberal Arts college and distinguishes it from other forms of higher education? As we have noted, in the research university the emphasis is on graduate study and research: the production, testing, and refinement of new knowledge. The primary focus is on the subject matter within the context of one of the specialized disciplines. Building a new lab, writing a grant, publishing a book, finding a cure, winning a Nobel Prize—these are the central activities and achievements of the research university, and in this regard American universities are without parallel. The particular talent and genius of the community college, on the other hand, is to be responsive to the needs of the local community, its particular constituency. If a dozen or fifteen people need a course in a particular computer or business skill, or a population needs to retrain to adapt to the closing or building of a particular company or industry, the community college is right there, and is especially well-suited to adapt to these needs. The Liberal Arts college charts a course between these two approaches. It is

concerned with the disciplines, but primarily from the point of view of teaching rather than research; and it is responsive to the needs of the community, but one student at a time. In other words, the principal work of the Liberal Arts college is the transformation of the individual, and its chief product and measure of success is the quality of the individual graduate. Towards this end, a Liberal education is moral, unitive, lifelong, and useful.

A liberal education is moral because its traditional end is the development of a free person able to make independent choices as an adult, and to participate effectively in public decisions that affect both the individual and society. In his philosophical work *The Acting Person*, Pope John Paul II asserts that we are most fully and characteristically human in the act of making moral choices, that what distinguishes us most definitively from other species is not so much intelligence, where we differ in degree, but in the possession of a moral sense, where we differ in kind. Therefore, the acquisition of knowledge and the development of the intellect at a liberal arts college are not ends in themselves, but rather means towards the end of becoming more fully human in the act of making choices. In practice, this means not only exposing students to a consideration of values in the humanities, the natural sciences, and the social sciences, but also in developing and refining their critical thinking and decision making capabilities. And after this, the greatest power the liberal arts college can develop in its students is the habit of posing moral questions, which is particularly needful in a society which often ignores them, and which often assumes that the power to do something constitutes a right to do it.

A liberal education is unitive because it rests on the belief that both its subject matter—human knowledge—and its object—the student—are unified, integrated wholes. The liberal arts curriculum requires courses in a broad range of subjects because of its belief that study in one area divorced from the other branches of knowledge is incomplete and distorted by a lack of context. The ability to see a subject in context, and from a variety of points of view, expands, enhances, and refines our understanding of that subject. The true goal of liberal study is not merely breadth but integration, the ability to see what Mark van Doren called “the connectedness of things,” and this brings us back again to the Liberal Arts focus on the individual. The prevailing sense of alienation we find in our society—people unable to make connections between work and family life, between politics and religious experience, between entertainment and leisure activities and the interior life, between private pursuits and the public good, between the local community and the world - is in fact a failure or inability to integrate, and the consequences of this failure are as predictable as they are disastrous: crime, violence, drug addiction, the fruitless search for happiness in the acquisition of material things, a loss of emotional affect and an increasing sense of isolation. A liberal education seeks to counterbalance this trend by making integration of knowledge—the ability to see ideas in relation and to make meaning out of experience—its principal and characteristic method of thought. And even here, intellectual development by itself is insufficient for achieving real integration. A truly liberal education aims at the development of all aspects of the individual: moral, spiritual, emotional and physical as well as intellectual.

Again, the Liberal Arts focus on the individual dictates that the type of education we aim at be lifelong. We are living in an age characterized by an information explosion, and in which new professions and careers are constantly arising and older ones passing away. It is estimated that college graduates today will have four to six careers, not jobs but *careers*, in the course of a lifetime. In such a situation, an education based on transferring a finite body of knowledge, or on preparing students for one specific entry-level job may yield short-term results, but is not likely to be of much help in the long run. Instead, the liberal arts college, by focusing on the development in the individual of such lifelong learning skills as research, analysis, synthesis, contemplation, evaluation, and communication, seeks to

produce graduates who can adapt to this situation of permanent change, and who will be ready to take up jobs and careers that we cannot even imagine at the present.

And this brings us to the fourth characteristic of a Liberal Education, that it is useful, and this is the area of greatest misunderstanding about the Liberal Arts. People often make the mistake of assuming that a liberal education ought not to be related to work and career, that, after stressing integration in practically every other aspect of life—integration of mind and body, integration of knowledge and faith, integrity of thought and action—we would somehow fail to integrate education and work, the very arena in which most people will make their greatest contribution to society and have their greatest impact on the world. I would like to suggest that we should more consciously address this question of the integration of education and work, and that we should more strongly make the case for Liberal Education as the education of choice for the Information Age into which we are moving. The specialized education which characterizes universities grew up in response to the requirements of the Industrial Age, which was an age of specialization. The single greatest innovation of the Industrial Age was the development of the assembly line, which did so much to increase productivity. But we can take the assembly line as a metaphor for that age, for gradually the entire economy was organized like an assembly line, with each person performing a single, specialized task. Now, while we are still all specialists, it is increasingly clear that specialization is no longer enough. The metaphor of the Information Age in which we find ourselves is not the assembly line but rather the computer terminal, at which the individual worker encodes and sends complex messages and information, and in turn receives and decodes complex messages and information. What are the skills that will be required of such workers? Precisely those intellectual skills of research and analysis, synthesis and integration which the Liberal Arts college teaches so well. Communication, a sense of audience, an understanding of other cultures, a sense of context and connection - these are the habits of mind that the individual will need to work in the developing global economy.

Finally, the important thing, as ever, is not the job, which can come and go, change or become obsolete, but rather the individual who can grow and change with new developments, and can shape and give direction to these developments as well. John Henry Cardinal Newman, in his great defense of the utility of liberal education, compared it to bodily health, which, he notes, does not do anything useful in itself: “it does not in itself make money, or pay the rent, or put food on the table, or build factories, or write books or produce great art, and yet we seek it out and regard it as a good in itself. Why? because while health is not specifically useful in itself, its benefits are so obvious, and it allows us to do so many things that we cannot do when we are sick, that we invariably regard it as useful as well as good.” The analogy of physical health to the intellectual development which occurs at a Liberal Arts college is, for Newman, exact:

Just as health ought to precede the labor of the body, and as a man in health can do what an unhealthy man cannot do, and as of this health the properties are strength, energy, agility, graceful carriage and action, manual dexterity, and endurance of fatigue, so in like manner the general development of the intellect is the best aid to professional and scientific study, and educated men can do what illiterate cannot; and the man who has learned to reason and to compare and to discriminate and to analyze, who has refined his taste, and formed his judgment, and sharpened his mental vision, will not indeed at once be a lawyer, or an orator, or a statesman, or a physician, or a good landlord, or a man of business, or a soldier, or an engineer, or a chemist, or a geologist, but he will be placed in that state of intellect in which he can take up any one

of these sciences or callings, or any other for which he has a taste or a special talent, with an ease, a grace, a versatility, and a success to which another is a stranger.

This, then, is the Liberal Arts ideal: an education that is moral, unitive, lifelong, and useful, that aims at the perfection of the individual and society by cultivating wholeness and completeness. And the question for us at Rivier is, how well are we achieving this ideal?

It is important to remember that Matthew Arnold felt the benefits of culture should be available to all members of society, not just the elite at Oxford and Cambridge. Christ does not say, after all, that all physically fit, middle class white people ought to strive for perfection, because you're almost there anyway. No, He makes his call to anyone within earshot on the mountaintop, to anyone who hears or reads the Gospel. Are we doing enough here at Rivier to make the benefits of a liberal education available to a wide and diverse student population, without any limitations by age, class, race, or ethnic background?

Are we doing enough to develop the moral sense of our students, and to cultivate in them the habit of framing and asking moral questions? Are we giving them, as James Joyce said of his Jesuit education, "the ability to arrange things in an order so that they may be grasped and judged"? Are we doing this consciously and explicitly in all our disciplines and courses? Professor Leo Sandy of the Education Department, in writing of the problem of violence in America, outlines some of the "people-making" skills and values which "emphasize the inner person: creativity, conflict resolution, intrinsic motivation, reflectiveness, aesthetic appreciation, critical thinking, postponement of gratification, spirituality, participatory democracy, problem-solving, cooperation, and volunteerism." All of these should have a place, indeed a prominent place in our curriculum.

Have we done enough to emphasize the unitive nature of Liberal Education? Do we offer enough opportunities for interdisciplinary study? Do we consciously foster the skills of synthesis and integration in our students? Is their moral, spiritual, emotional and physical development keeping pace with their intellectual development?

Are we educating for life? Are we regularly and consistently looking at that future in which our students must live and work to see that we are giving them the skills they will need to grow and adapt to life in the twenty-first century?

And are we doing enough to help students integrate their Liberal Arts education with preparation for a career and a life of meaningful work?

These are the sort of questions we should be asking ourselves regularly as the College grows and evolves. One thing I am confident of is the clear focus in our mission on the education of the whole person, on developing in our students the sense of wholeness and completeness which is the goal of a liberal arts college and the basis of Christian humanism, the belief that salvation lies not in a rejection of the world and human nature, but rather in their harmonious perfection. In this regard we are strongly in the tradition of Catholic liberal education, which we may trace back to Cardinal Newman's great articulation of principles in the nineteenth century, back to the founding of the Catholic universities at Oxford and Cambridge, Paris and Padua in the Middle Ages, back to those convents and monasteries which preserved much of Western Civilization amid the chaos and ruin of the fall of the Roman Empire, back finally to those words left us by our Lord and Savior while He lived, and was personally present here on earth: "Be ye therefore perfect." ■

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