

THE ROLE OF FAITH IN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

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I.

To obtain a university education is it necessary for a student to have faith? Faith? What kind of faith? Perhaps the Catholic faith for a Catholic education. But surely the Catholic faith is not required simply for a university education. The question sounds strange or at least ambiguous,

Admittedly, it is ambiguous. With reflection, however, it begins to make sense. What comes to mind is the question: what is university education for? University education itself makes no sense considered apart from the ends of education. It is possible to think of university education in terms of a profession, as preparation for a job or specific function in society. Society needs doctors, lawyers, engineers, and teachers. These are laudable ends. But only proximate ends. There are more ultimate ends. A condition for being a doctor or a lawyer or some other professional is first to be a human being, a human person. To perfect oneself as a human person is a more fundamental aim than becoming skilled in a particular profession. For this reason, the more basic university education is a humanistic or liberal arts education, which, for the good of society, is presupposed by the development of professional skills. Such skills can even be harmful when possessed by those who have not learned what it is to be human.

Besides teaching students how to become professionals in some particular skill, the more basic task of the universities then is to teach them how to achieve perfection precisely as human beings. Intellectually, human perfection is achieved through knowledge; more definitely, knowledge which goes beyond factual information to the grounding of such facts in their reasons of being and causes. This is the work of the

sciences, and on the highest level of human knowledge, the work of wisdom. The disciplining of mind provided by a well-ordered university curriculum, gives a student through the interrelationship of the human disciplines a more or less unified outlook on the manifold of created reality, including knowledge of human nature and the human person's final destiny. The capstone of university education is to bring the student to knowledge of God, the First Cause, in relation to whom are understood the absolute origin and ultimate end of the universe itself.

This clearly describes an intellectual effort. What does it have to do with faith? In response to this question, I am going to draw upon an article in St. Thomas Aquinas' book *On Truth* in which he treats of the need of faith (*De Veritate*, q. 14, a. 10). In developing his answer to the question of the human necessity of faith, St. Thomas compares the need of faith first toward a human teacher and secondly, the need of faith toward a divine teacher.

It is well understood that something is not brought from an imperfect to a perfect state except through the activity of something that is already in that perfect state, as for instance a thing is heated by something already hot. What is more, the influence of the perfect thing is not received perfectly and all at once in the beginning. At the start, it is received only imperfectly, then more perfectly in stages until full perfection is reached. This process can be verified in things of nature, which attain perfection or maturity in successive periods of time.

If you look at progress in human activities, especially in the case of the sciences, you will notice a comparative similarity. Initially, a human person is imperfect in his knowledge. To attain perfection in some science, he needs an instructor to lead him to

that perfection. This, of course, will not happen unless the instructor himself has a perfect grasp of the science he teaches, right down to the basic principles of that science. Still, when he begins to teach, the instructor will not immediately impart to the student all the subtle points of the science he is teaching, as if a student will attain an instant mastery of the science at the very start. Rather, the teacher will begin by imparting some truths of the science whose reasons the student may not grasp thoroughly at the start of instruction but will come to know when he finally has the science perfectly in hand.

At the beginning of instruction, then, and before he has learned a science, what must be the student's mental attitude toward the teacher? Clearly, he must be disposed provisionally to believe the teacher, take him at his word, trust that what the teacher says is true. In short, the student must have an attitude of faith. He must suppose that, even though he does not yet fully understand them, the things being taught him are true. Otherwise, he will hardly learn anything, much less progress by stages to possess a perfect knowledge of the science. I am not saying that the learning student is not exercising any judgment of his own about what is being taught, for he would not be disposed to trust the teacher if the doctrine were utterly absurd. Indeed, the student's mind must be actively engaged, since the student, not the teacher, is the learner. Nevertheless, in normal circumstances, the student must trust the teacher.

This condition applies to every course of instruction. Before having become proficient in the subject matter of the course, the student must begin with an attitude of faith and continue to trust as to things still beyond him in the knowledge of the teacher.

Thus there is needed at the commencement of the learning process a kind of human faith in the knowledge and truthfulness of the human teacher. This faith is

integral with the docility, the teachableness, required as a condition for learning on all levels of education, even on the university level.

But this kind of human faith alone will never lead to a completely rounded out education. A complete education embraces some knowledge which university professors, no matter how learned in the human sciences, are not equipped to teach to their students just from human resources alone. For this reason, a university which restricts its teaching to the knowledge available from human resources only, is unable to provide a complete education for human beings, because human knowledge by itself is incapable of pointing out the ultimate destiny of the human person and the proportionate means necessary for attaining it. This knowledge comes from divine, not human, instruction and is gained through an act of divine or infused faith.

If we grant that the ultimate perfection to which human persons are ordered consists in the perfect knowledge of God, it is not hard to recognize that only God himself, who knows Himself perfectly, and no mere human teacher, can instruct one in this perfect knowledge. Not all at once, however, since human beings are not capable of handling this perfect knowledge immediately and at the first acquaintance. Accordingly, human beings must start by believing certain divine truths through which they may be led ultimately to a perfect knowledge of God. These truths are such that we cannot have a perfect knowledge of them in this present life, since they totally exceed the power of human reason. Such truths in this present life are for us divine mysteries. As long as we are on our way to knowing God, as we are in this life, we must believe these truths, which we shall come to know perfectly only in the next life. In this life, we must adhere to them by an act of Christian faith.

Some universities confine themselves in their curricula to teaching only truths that may be investigated by human reason alone. Their students in the process of learning only exercise a human faith in their human teachers. It is possible to acquire an excellent education in the natural and human sciences in such universities if they have learned teachers and ample teaching facilities. But their students are necessarily short-changed in the dimensions of education which bear upon the ultimate things of human life, namely, a knowledge of the final destiny of the human person and the religious resources available which serve as indispensable means to that end. This is a body of knowledge which God Himself has taught us especially through Christ and which is received by an act of Christian faith. Some universities incorporate this revealed knowledge within their curricula to provide a more complete education for the human being. This is the principal and important difference between a Catholic and a secular university.

Students in a Catholic university thus bring to the learning process a twofold faith: one, a human faith by which they initially at least put their trust in the competence of their human teachers, and secondly, a religious faith in the revealed Word of God which raises their horizons to a transcendent perspective and enables them to direct their lives to the beatifying Truth and Goodness of God which according to Christian teaching will fulfill in the end all their striving and bring their knowledge to its peak of perfection. This culmination of human life is none other than the “joy in the Truth” – *gaudium de Veritate* – proclaimed by St. Augustine and promised by Christ to those who believe in His teaching.

II.

What are the consequences of this union of reason and faith in the concept of a Catholic university? I believe the consequences go pretty far.

In the **first place**, it widens the scope of study in the university to embrace both the whole world of nature and the whole world of Divine Revelation. Rather than narrowing the field of study to a denominational or sectarian outlook, as is commonly held; to the contrary, on the admission that divine revelation opens up a new area of reality beyond the reach of human reason left to its own natural resources, the combination of the world of revealed knowledge with the world of rational knowledge gives the Catholic University a much more challenging horizon of study.

To confront and progress in one's knowledge of this broader field and to bring it into harmony and unity imposes by necessity a continual dialogue between reason and faith in all the departments of study where the two have a bearing on one another.

The Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II, *Fides Et Ratio*, is emphatic that the whole truth embodies the unity and mutual relationship of these two sources of knowledge, pointing out that reason assists in the understanding and expression of faith while faith strengthens reason in its efforts to know truth and invites it to reach out and be open to higher truths.

In the **second place**, this broader scope of study radically affects the end and purpose of education, which consists in the bringing to full human growth the man and

woman to be educated. This growth entails the development of the humanizing habits and virtues which are proper to the fully cultured man and woman.

In this respect, to great Christian thinkers over the centuries, an authentic education is one which not only humanizes but also Christianizes; indeed, which humanizes because it Christianizes. A true and genuine humanism in their eyes is an *integral* humanism modeled on the Incarnation in which Christ appears as both human and divine.

Such a complete education is obviously not a work of nature alone but also of grace. It does not stop with science but raises knowledge to the level of philosophical and theological wisdom. It is not only intellectual but also moral. It is not just for life but is also a preparation for eternity. In the Prologue of his *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*, St. Thomas summed up a whole philosophy of education in one sentence by saying that all the arts and sciences are ordered to the one end of man's perfection in which consists his happiness. *Omnes autem scientiae et artes ordinantur in unum, scilicet ad hominis perfectionem, quae est ejus beatitudo.* The methods and means of education are not unimportant but they are hardly meaningful unless related to the end of a fully achieved personality. Education is the process by which man becomes truly humanized and by which he in turn humanizes the world around him by building a culture and civilization as the proper environment for more easily achieving man's ultimate destiny consisting in union with God.

In the **third place**, the end product of such a Catholic education was well stated years ago by Pope Pius XI in his *Encyclical on Christian Education*.² Such a product is

the “man who thinks, judges and acts constantly and consistently in accordance with right reason illuminated by the supernatural light of the example and teaching of Christ.”

Fourthly, another consequence of joining reason and faith bears upon the structure of the curriculum of a Catholic university. The curriculum of secular universities has suffered from an internal democratization such that all courses rest on the same level and are accorded equal status with one another. In a truly Catholic university there is a certain hierarchy of importance accorded to the courses listed in the curriculum based upon an ascending level of specifying objects.

All education worthy of its name is basically a pursuit of truth. Truth is like a light for the mind. From time immemorial, ignorance has been associated with darkness. Intelligence, intelligibility, and truth have been compared to light. The human mind by the bent of its very nature wants to know, wants to be filled with truth, which is its completion and its proper good. Historically, the growth of civilization has in the main consisted of the effort of mankind to push back the boundaries of darkness and to extend the areas of light. A concrete example of this effort is evident in the present-day probing and exploration of outer space by modern science and technology. We are aware of some of the amazing discoveries of science not only in space exploration but also in the fields of biology, chemistry, and physics. There is no end of new frontiers in science. The only limit to science seems to be science itself. That is to say, there are areas of knowledge which science does not and cannot reach for the very reason that it is science. In other words, science is a way of knowing which is limited by its own empirical method.

Empirical science takes it for granted that the universe is intelligible and that it exists. But this cannot be taken for granted by philosophy. It is the function itself of

philosophy to probe the ultimate reasons for the intelligibility and the existence of the universe. That is why education needs to be carried beyond science to the study of philosophy. Philosophy in turn endeavors to explore the reality of the intelligent First Cause of being, which we identify with God. But what more can philosophy say about God except that He is the First Cause and the Ultimate End of existence and that He has some known Attributes? This is as far as our reason can go. Philosophy thus carries education to the limits of human reason. What lies beyond is only darkness for the human mind. Mankind could never know the intimate nature of God unless God revealed Himself to man.

Fifthly. Here precisely is the role of Christ in the education of mankind. St. Thomas says that Christ is the first and chief teacher of spiritual doctrine and faith – *Spiritualis autem doctrinae et fidei primus et principalis doctor est Christus* (ST. III. 7.7) In ages past when faith was strong and vigorous, university professors were fond of the phrase in St. Matthew’s Gospel: “*unus est magister vester, Christus*” - “Your one teacher is Christ.” What Christ came to teach the world is truths that are not contrary to reason but simply transcend reason’s grasp. Faith is our acceptance of these revealed truths. Far from restricting human reason, faith liberates reason from its own limitations. By faith we scale the walls that confine reason and see the world in an entirely new light. It is like stepping out of the Platonic cave into the real world.

An education that does not join reason to faith is therefore incomplete. It does not guide man to the end of the road of human life. A purely secular education is a truncated education. It does not take man the whole way. A Catholic education, on the other hand, tries to go the whole distance. It studies everything just as thoroughly, just as

meticulously, as does secular education but it does this in the light that is shed on human life and the universe by the Christian faith. This is why it is different. And it is Christ who makes the difference.

There is a certain underlying dynamism in such a Catholic curriculum, a certain urge to confront course with course, a certain reaching out from truth to higher truth, as knowledge strives to ascend from the sciences and the humanities through philosophy to theological wisdom, the integrating principle of the whole range of studies illuminated by the light of faith in the teaching of Christ.