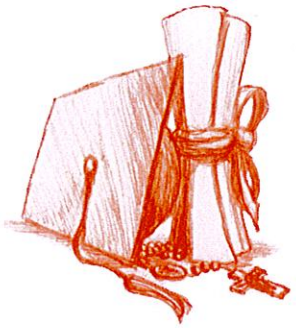

Faith, Reason and *Communitas* in the Modern Academy:

Recovering the Dream of Concord

By Dominic A. Aquila

From the fourteenth-century in Europe on, the word *college* had referred to "a community or corporation of secular clergy living together on a foundation for religious service." As used in the history of education, college meant generally, "a society of scholars formed for the purposes of study or instruction." This latter meaning emerged during the Italian Renaissance and was part of a strategy developed by such humanist scholars as Francesco Petrarch and Pico della Mirondola to address the deleterious consequences flowing from the dismemberment of European society. Their quest for intellectual unity and coherence—the "dream of concord", as Monsignor Luigi Giussani refers to it—was an attempt to reestablish the great thirteenth-century Thomistic synthesis of faith and reason and the unity of all knowledge on the basis of friendship, in effect, a community of scholars. The work of these humanist schools was not alone to benefit the life of the mind, but also to create a convivial civic life, and most of all to repair the damage done to the human personality following the unraveling and fragmentation of European society. "All Petrarch's verses", writes Father Giussani in his book, *Why the Church?*, "document a 'soul wounded by discordant life.'"

Contrast these powerfully communal associations connected to the word, *college*, with a description of college life at the turn of the twenty-first century offered by the distinguished historian Donald Kagan. "Students follow different paths, read different books, ask different questions. They have no common intellectual ground . . . Serious talk on serious subjects based on knowledge shared in common is difficult, since the knowledge that comes from learning is scattered and specialized and thus unavailable to serve as the substance of important discussions." In another context, the Marxist cultural critic, Stanley Aronowitz, characterized the student who has gone through four years of undergraduate education under this intellectually balkanized regime as a "techno-idiot". Recalling the Greek origins of the word, "idiot", Aronowitz says that it "signifies a person with only specialized knowledge, someone who, in all other respects, is ignorant." Without denying the importance of getting command of a specialized body of technical knowledge, Kagan and Aronowitz doubt seriously whether or not such narrowly educated graduates are well prepared for life and for contributing meaningfully to the common good.

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It is fair to say that Kagan's and Aronowitz's description of this state of affairs in the modern academy is largely true for public, private, and religious colleges. One would think that at Catholic colleges and universities it would be otherwise, on the assumption that such colleges would want to reclaim as part of their patrimony some sense of the authentic community that characterized the first Catholic universities and colleges in Europe. With the upsurge in writing on the history of American Catholic colleges and universities, on the one hand, and on communitarian social theory, on the other, one expects to find authors who would make the connection between the idea of community and the intensely communal origin of college and universities in the European high middle ages. What interest in this convergence we find is among writers typically associated with the political left: Aronowitz, whom I have already mentioned, Paul Goodman, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese (before her conversion to Roman Catholicism), and Christopher Lasch. Among these only Paul Goodman's book from 1962, *The Community of Scholars*, provided anything like a systematic discussion and analysis of the centrality of the ideal of community to the college and the university.

Faith, Reason, and the Community of Scholars

Christopher Dawson wrote in *The Crisis of Western Education* that the Catholic college has the spiritual and intellectual resources to provide the unifying vision of mind that is a necessary foundation for genuine community. To be sure, students can find some sense

of community in the social, cultural and religious life of today's colleges and universities. Indeed, such extracurricular experiences of life lived in common have great potential for students' moral and spiritual formation, especially if they correct the self-absorption that pervades the wider culture.

The efforts to organize student life on campus to promote personal sanctity at such Catholic colleges as Franciscan University and Christendom College are important steps toward realizing the desire for personal wholeness that underlies Father Giussani's "dream of concord". But an experience of community, no matter how socially and spiritually rich, divorced and unrelated to the curriculum, to ideas and to study is incomplete and lacking in foundation, and may do nothing more than to produce civil, even perhaps holy, compassionate, philanthropic "techno-idiots".

Foundational to any rehabilitation of the ideal of the community of scholars in church-based colleges and universities must be a profound commitment to the unity and integration of all knowledge and the disciplined thinking (*cogitatio*) that is necessary to appreciate and grasp this unity and integration. But there is another step, another unity that is also indispensable, and that is the proper reintegration of faith and reason. For Christians the reintegration of learning and faith animates the traditional belief in the unity of all truths that goes back to the schools of third-century Alexandria and to the teachings there of Clement and Origen. As Arthur F. Holmes has pointed out in *The Christian Academy in the Twentieth Century*, the unity of all truths has been a perennial feature of Christian education from the beginning. "The unity of truth in the mind of an all-knowing creator", writes Holmes, "underlies the reintegration of Christian beliefs with the foundations, content, and the practice of academic disciplines. Christian beliefs provide the theological foundations for knowledge and art, they introduce truths that would otherwise be ignored, and they give coherence to a worldview."

But there is a deeper more fundamental reason for the integration of faith and reason in the Christian academy, one that goes to the very structure of how reason developed historically in the West. Because we moderns are so accustomed to revere the autonomy of reason and especially scientific reason, we often forget that reason, as we know it today, developed in relation to faith until the fifteenth century when it began to self-consciously separate itself. In the words of the social theorist, Hans Freyer: "In its European manifestations the kingdom of reason had had its beginnings in the midst of the Kingdom of God, and though it was something distinct from it, it was a construction within it, a framework of thought incorporated in belief." The divergence between reason and faith five centuries ago had implications beyond the academy.

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Freyer and other secular historians along with such Catholic figures as Jacques Maritain and Emmanuel Mounier trace the great upheaval in European crisis during the twentieth century to the rupture between faith and reason. Monsignor Giussani has been equally emphatic about *the danger to faith* posed by the degraded relation between faith and reason. "The first problem which we encounter in regard to modern culture," writes Monsignor Giussani, "is that we are beggars before the concept of reason. It is as if no one any longer possesses the concept of reason. Yet we understand, to the contrary, that faith requires that the human person use reason in order that he might recognize the gracious event of God among us."

It would seem then that given its particular vocation to the intellectual life, the main work of a Catholic college during our time is the rehabilitation of reason in relation to faith, and the cultivation of the intellectual virtues, for such virtues are the precondition for a true community of scholars to flourish. A Catholic liberal arts college or university cultivates in its students and faculty a passion for the pursuit of truth and knowledge, subtlety and acuity of thought, the ability to communicate clearly and effectively in writing and in conversation, the ability to make comparisons and draw meaningful conclusions, to conceptualize difficult facts; the capacity to understand the historical and cultural formation of others to whom one might be entirely unsympathetic, and an appreciation for paradox and irony and the invulnerability these impart to a person. Typically, in the Catholic liberal arts tradition these habits of mind had been imparted through the study of theology, philosophy, literature, classics—the study of Latin and Greek, history, the fine arts, political science, economics, mathematics, chemistry, physics, and biology. Catholics had until recently distinguished themselves in these studies. One trained in the Catholic liberal arts tradition was above all mindful of the necessary unity, wholeness, and interrelation of knowledge; accordingly they were on guard against the attempt from any one discipline to set it itself up as the lens through which all the world should be viewed.

The Community of Scholars and Society

In fulfilling its mission, the authentic Catholic liberal arts college, as a community of scholars, faces a paradox: it must at one and the same time be insulated from the wider community and yet passionately in love with it and engaged with it. This paradox is analogous to the one faced by each individual Christian—to be in the world but not of the world. John Henry Cardinal Newman, whose magisterial lectures of the 1870s collected as *The Idea of a University*

established the principles for a modern university, put it this way: "Confine learning and teaching within a sacred precinct, shut it off from the world, so that it can move by its own inner force towards knowledge that is knowledge for its own sake and you will produce the whole and healthy mind, the mind able to adapt, to focus and comprehend, in all the changing circumstances of the world outside the university. But let that outside world dictate what goes on in the classroom for the sake of teaching subjects that are merely relevant and ostensibly useful to the pursuit of careers, and the result is the ossification of mental powers, a blind addiction to relevance, which renders the mind incapable of dealing with any situation that has not first appeared in the pages of the textbook."

At the same time, the university must engage the predominant ideas of its surrounding culture. Take Newman again as an example. His own intellectual and spiritual formation was powerfully influenced by his wrestling with the new ideas of the English and German Romantics—especially those of the poet, Shelley, who was a noted atheist. Catholics cannot stand aloof from the world but are obliged to work actively for justice, freedom, respect for the dignity of the person, the common good, and peace. This obligation is no less urgent for faculty and students in the university; indeed it shapes and informs the attitudes by which they undertake their studies and research. Pope John Paul II was emphatic on this point during his Jubilee address to university professors and students: "The Christian cannot limit himself to analyzing historical processes as they happen, maintaining a passive attitude, as if they were beyond his capacity to intervene, as if we were led by blind and impersonal forces."

No other pontiff has been as insistent as Pope John Paul II that engagement with the culture and its animating ideas is a serious obligation for Catholic professors and their students. The main thrust of his encyclical letter *Fides et Ratio* is the restoration of one of the most important achievements of Western culture—the unity of faith and reason. The restoration of this unity is not for the sake of the college or university community alone, even though it is the place where such a restoration must begin. Rather the rehabilitation of reason is ultimately for the sake of the wider human community. John Paul II makes it clear that in our era, when relativism and historicism have corrupted the pursuit of truth in secular academic circles, the Catholic Church stands as an unabashed defender of reason. The Church's commitment to the fullest understanding of reason, moreover, both invites and requires her to engage the modern natural and human sciences at the highest levels. Christians, Pope John Paul II reminds us, are obliged not only to bring light to the world, but also to remain open to discover "every fragment of truth . . . in the life experience and in the culture of individuals and nations." What the Holy Father has given us is a blueprint for the reform of university education and the culture of which it is an integral part. It is a beginning, and it places Catholicism in harmony with a full-fledged intellectualism.

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Let us probe more deeply into the paradoxical position of the Catholic college in relation to the wider community, the need to be sequestered and isolated from the temptations to educate for immediate relevance and usefulness on the one hand, and the imperative to engage the culture, on the other. The faculty and students of the twenty-first century Catholic university must engage deeply the ideas of its time, no matter how frightful and repulsive to Christian ideals some ideas might be. Let's consider more carefully this notion of engagement with the hope that it will shed greater light on the idea of community of scholars and the relation of the community with the larger community of which it is a part. I raise the issue of engagement here because there is always the danger of separatism when one speaks about a community of scholars and especially one that is truly Catholic and finds itself in an inhospitable cultural environment. I propose to you that there are two paths that a community of scholars can take. One is marked by a separatist, ghettoist conception of the Catholic intellectual tradition; the other is the way of deep engagement with the surrounding community.

The separatist position first. It is not difficult to appreciate why it is that a college or an individual Catholic would adopt the separatist position. The very same pope whom I have been quoting in support of deep engagement with the ideas of the present culture, has also characterized the culture of the West as a "culture of death." The prospect of entering into communion with the dominant ideas and practices of contemporary Western culture is not at all attractive: widespread abortion, pornography, avaricious careerism, crude commercialism, a cult of cynicism, mindless promiscuity among the young—the list goes on. Given the degraded moral state of American culture, the prospects for its enrichment through an engagement with Catholic ideals do not seem very promising. With such dim hope for successful engagement, one might even argue that the risk of contamination from this "culture of death" outweighs any benefit that might come of such engagement. One could point to the wreckage of the last thirty years, the near-complete eradication of that which is distinctively Catholic from Catholic colleges and universities. Those in favor of the separatist position would remind us that colleges such as the ones I have been associated with—Franciscan University and Ave Maria College—came into being precisely because authentically Catholic higher education in America has been destroyed in

good part through its dialogue with the surrounding culture. Most of the two hundred and fifty Catholic college and universities in America have largely capitulated to the surrounding culture.

Accordingly, the separatist Catholic position, seeing nothing but indomitable hostility to authentic Catholic education, would say that a Catholic college today ought to hire a faculty and establish a curriculum whose goal is the preservation and the handing on of the Catholic tradition. Under the separatist and preservationist model of a Catholic college, creative and serious engagement with the surrounding culture is eschewed in favor of passing on what has been received uncontaminated. Thus when the faculty and students do encounter the wider culture they do so stiffly, with a set of set stock formulas. For example, in a Catholic college estranged from the culture, a professor of ethics or Catholic moral principles can teach a body of moral truths that cohere perfectly with the Catholic catechism, ignoring as he or she teaches the reasons that keep many contemporaries from agreeing with me. This professor can teach as if the outside world of non-Christian culture does not exist. To be sure, such a course would pass on the accumulated truths of the faith; and in an atmosphere of moral confusion this is an important and valuable service. But such truths would likely come across as calcified and artificial. We forget that many of the truths of the faith that have come down to us had been tested by the fire of debate with heretics and non-Catholics.

In contrast to the separatist position, a professor and his or her students interested in deep engagement with the culture would consider seriously the common objections to Catholic moral truths, and let themselves be challenged by these objections to think more carefully and clearly about moral truths. Such deep engagement I should add is perfectly consistent with the *disputatio*, the method of intellectual inquiry that prevailed in the middle ages when every university in the world was Catholic. The principles of the *disputatio*, like the principle of good debate and argument, require one to enter into the mind of one who disagrees with him or her, to suspend one's judgment until he or she has thoroughly appreciated the other. There is, of course, a risk in entering imaginatively into the mind of another, namely in doing so you may change your mind. Nevertheless this is precisely what St. Thomas Aquinas did. He so thoroughly engaged the minds of his adversaries that often he articulated their positions better than they did.

John Paul II, even as he had diagnosed the surrounding culture as a "culture of death" wrote the following in his papal constitution on Catholic colleges, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*: "A faith that places itself on the margin of culture would be a faith unfaithful to what the word of God manifests and reveals." It would be "a decapitated faith", or worse, "a faith in the process of self-annihilation". Cardinal Newman argued vehemently against what I have called the separatist position. Newman reminded his readers that the Church had always engaged the culture deeply and seriously. Such engagement was not only consistent with her mandate to evangelize the nations but also a source of energy. Newman illustrated this position by drawing an arresting analogy with the body/soul composition of the human person. He pointed to the Genesis account of Adam's creation by which God took clay from the earth and infused it with His spirit. Newman said that the Church does something similar when it takes elements from the earth—representative of non-Christian cultures—and purifies them with the spirit of Christ. What a wonderful incarnational justification for engagement with culture, even and perhaps especially with a hostile culture!

The Challenge of Higher Education: Enriching Impoverished Souls

A generation ago, the late Allen Bloom warned Americans in his unexpected best-seller, *The Closing of the American Mind*, that American colleges and universities were endangering American democracy by impoverishing the souls of their students. The students he wrote about were in college during the 1980s. The failure on the part of mainstream American colleges and universities to enrich the souls of their students has become even more scandalous than when Bloom wrote. It seems that by themselves American colleges and universities are either incapable or unwilling to perform what for Bloom was their reason for being: *the ennoblement of souls*. The degraded condition of higher education in America cries out for a Catholic response, and the mode of response must be through a Catholic college committed to the unity of knowledge and the lively interplay of faith and reason; for what is at issue here it is not a matter of doctrinal formation or pastoral counseling, but of how to form a habit of mind that is more richly imaginative and poetic in its understanding of reality.

What I mean by poetic understanding is not about appreciating verse, lyrical writing, or a graceful polish of style; rather I refer back to the ancient understanding of poetry as an entire cast of mind. And here I am indebted to the thinking of Louise Cowan of the University of Dallas. Poetry or *poesis* appeals to the imagination, that faculty of mind which enables the intellect to know the things of the senses *from the inside*—in other words to experience by empathy things other than ourselves and to make that experience a new form. In contrast to poetic knowledge, rational knowing muses on things from above and sees the structure of things in the world with a certain detachment that prevents any knowledge of an object on its own terms. It must abstract from things, reason about them, analyze them in order to reach its conclusions. To be sure, such analytical thinking is indispensable to the well-formed intellect, but the possession of only rational analysis deforms the intellect. Only through the agency of imagination, which begins always with cherishing the things of sense—with finding a fullness of being in such lowly acts as seeing and touching—can the intellect come to know the essence of things. The active functioning of the imagination is not the act of a child, a kind of make believe,

nor is it fantasy or mere fancy. It is a mature and vigorous act of the mind and heart, oriented toward reality, expanding and not diminishing the cosmos within which the knowing mind dwells.

By way of example of what I mean by poetic understanding, let's consider the ideal of the heroic person, which is personhood in full stride, and starkly at odds with the materialist and neuroscientific conception of the person. My argument here will be that the absence of certain ancient texts from the college curriculum has led to the anemic conception of the person underlying the new scientific models of the soul. The late professor Cedric Whitman of Harvard argued that it is from the ancient classics that American culture inherited the idea of the heroic. Two major strains of heroic ideals influence the American founders: the Greco-Roman and the Biblical, but because America sought to model itself on the ancient republic of Rome, it took to heart especially the Roman ideal of the heroic person given to us by Virgil.

This view of the heroic life has had an immense influence on the West. Until the 1920s every schoolboy and schoolgirl read the *Aeneid*. It taught the natural virtues of gratitude, duty and mission. The loss of Virgil to the modern world, wrote Thomas Greene in *The Descent from Heaven*, "is an immeasurable cultural tragedy".

In an unpoetic age, unschooled in so many of the virtues necessary for civilization and genuine Catholic culture, we have tc consider carefully what and how to teach our students. A main thrust of the Catholic intellectual apostolate must be the reinvigoration of the imagination for the enlargement of the human soul. In many cases it's a necessary first step in the new evangelization called for by John Paul II. For college students the imagination must be prepared by way of a liberal education—an education in the classics, in the context of a genuine community of scholars.

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