INTELLECT AND VIRTUE IN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITIES TODAY

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The subject, or rather the subjects, on which I have been asked to speak to you is enormous and in 45 minutes I can offer little more than an introduction. That means that I shall pose more questions than answers, and I can only hope that the questions will point to basic concerns rather than dealing in bland trivialities on the surface. Because in pursuing what seems to be the immediate question, concerning the relationship between how we live and what we think (and what we think about), although statistics may be helpful (where they can be obtained), we are dealing largely in judgments. Thus Augustine – As the Catholic theologian par excellence he must always be on our minds in a Catholic institution, as elsewhere - thought that most metaphysical mistakes derive immediately from some sort of desire for self-justification. In the City of God he argues that the Roman search for glory (as Dodaro has recently argued in detail) arises from an attempt to assuage the fear of death, and more broadly that much metaphysical error, not least reductionism, is driven by deviant moral behaviour. A glance at the sexual antics of many of our politicians, journalists and academics, Catholic and other, will give you an idea of what he was getting at; and there is a saying that philosophers too are often rogues, especially moral philosophers.

My subject, though broad, is precisely defined: it concerns Catholic universities and the Catholic concept of virtue, but it should not be difficult to extrapolate from what I say and extend it to concepts of virtue which are compatible with Catholic teachings but not specifically Catholic or even Christian. Of course, Catholic universities exist all over the world, but my experience of them is largely limited to Europe and North America – where one must assume that the most intellectually developed versions exist, and where, I imagine, your own immediate concerns largely lie.

It is not merely self indulgent if I will start with the word “philosophy”. In early Christian times a curious dispute arose as to whether the word should refer to a way of life or a way of thinking. The more perceptive Christians, like Origen, thought that it referred to a way of life and pointed toward the good life, but that those thinking about the good life for man must heed the dictum attributed to Socrates in Plato’s Apology that the “unexamined life is subhuman” (ho anexetastos bios ou biotos anthropoi). To us, however, the whole dispute may seem odd, since many of our contemporaries assume that philosophy is just about thinking, examining premises and deriving logically correct inferences from them. The ultimately unclassical attitude that what we think about, even in moral philosophy, need have little relevance to our actual lives - and sometimes apparently (but perhaps only apparently) the reverse - was well summed up by the British politician Denis Healey who recounts in his autobiography that when he was studying in Oxford just before the Second World War, someone asked a moral philosophy lecturer, notorious for seducing his female students, why he did not practice what he preached, only to receive the reply “Whoever heard of a signpost going the way it points?” I may have been asked to give this address in part because as a student of ancient thought I know that in classical Greece someone who would deliver such a riposte would be despised, if not (in some places) lynched. The most extreme example of a very different approach was offered by the Cynics (capital C); they were taken seriously precisely because their unconventional views were reflected in their highly unconventional behaviour: unsuitable for family viewing!

Which brings us nearer the first and more general of our two basic questions, the second – already peeping up - being concerned with the relationship between virtue and intellect in contemporary Catholic Universities. Put bluntly, that first question might seem to boil down to whether a vicious life inhibits the effective use of the mind, and here, unavoidably, we must recognize that the humanities are in a different situation from that of most other subjects studied - whether or not they should be studied - in the contemporary University. For Plato (a second great thinker whose work should demand our regular attention) would undoubtedly argue that in many
subjects - literature, philosophy, history, music, etc – those subjects (mathematics aside), that is, which most obviously in his view relate to what should be the primary goal in life, namely to “make one’s soul as good as possible”, or in another formulation “to obtain likeness to god as far as possible” – in those subjects it is obvious that truth is more likely to be compromised or denied. Not, of course, that it cannot be compromised outside the arts and humanities, but the process is generally less obvious and more indirect. So let us start with the more obvious cases.

One of the challenges of the contemporary world – I hardly need to mention this in a University honoured by the presence and teaching of Robert Sokolowski – is that truth is denied altogether, and just in passing I will allude to a lecture I myself gave here a couple or so years ago, when I connected the comment of Tony Blair’s spin-doctor Alastair Campbell, “We don’t do God”, with the more immediately challenging proposition “We don’t do truth”. But it is not only spin-doctors who deny truth - or the possibility of obtaining it - or who claim that it is our job to invent the truth. The fashion exists also – and thereby obtains a kind of legitimacy – among academics (and especially “public intellectuals”) whose divine word seeps down through the media to a wider public, though there is normally a time-lag. Do we know, and how do we know, we may be induced to wonder, that Brutus stabbed Caesar rather than that Caesar stabbed Brutus? Perhaps those who recorded Caesar’s supposed demise were trying to manipulate us in some way, to acquire power over us. The example may seem fanciful, but some could find parallels elsewhere, not least in New Testament studies. Of course, we don’t know – demonstrably - that Brutus stabbed Caesar; we rely on plausible evidence. Facts in the humanities are in this way similar to facts in the hard sciences. We assume that Brutus stabbed Caesar as the most plausible hypothesis – until proved wrong - just as we assume that the gasses we name hydrogen and oxygen are the roots of water.

But this initial similarity between scientific and non-scientific facts (however differently our “knowledge” of these facts is acquired) masks an important dissimilarity. If we think that the components of water are identical with the components of sulphuric acid and then drink the sulphuric acid, we die, but if a distinguished professor claims he wants to prove the non-existence of time and asks for a year’s sabbatical leave to do so, he wins a large grant. That is not my example, but I want to use it to make a further point, albeit one of a different sort: the humanist, not dealing in facts determined by repeatable experiments, has the power – hence perhaps the lust - to act irresponsibly in a particular way: less in how he may choose to select his facts (though there are problems there too), than in how he makes judgments about them. By eliding the difference between the probable, the possible, the implausible, and the downright crazy, he has increased his opportunities to lie to or mislead his students. If he is an ideologist, he may think that such lying and misleading is morally good, since it brings his desired utopia nearer. And even if he is in good faith he may be lazy; he may himself have been deceived by his own teachers and not have bothered to think further about what he passes on to his students.

The modern student lives in an information–sodden world (as does the modern citizen), being ever increasingly at the mercy of those who purport to inform him. He does not know who to believe if he reads in one book that Plato – to use an instance which came up in the American courts a few years ago – disapproved of homosexual intercourse and in another that he didn’t. So he may adopt an attitude: a common (sometimes verbalized) query about his professor then becomes, “What’s your bias? And perhaps even the professor cannot honestly answer the question. Yet what both student and professor know, however post-modern they may be, is that all the books will tell them that (for example) king Henry VIII of England had six wives and not seven, though they will disagree as to why he had only six and whether he should have had more, or less, or just six. Who said there is no problem about the relationship of facts to values?

In dealing with questions of truth the Catholic student, in a Catholic University, may have an advantage. The Catholicism of his teachers should discourage them from deliberate lying and misleading. But unfortunately Catholics too can have their biases, not only about the nature of Catholicism, but about the nature and importance of truth more broadly. Thus Nancy Pelosi
appears to have been encouraged by certain members of the clergy to claim that neither Augustine nor Aquinas was opposed to abortion. That is a case involving facts and specific texts. Other more deep-rooted bits of wishful thinking and carelessness about truth are wider in their implications and less easy to correct, and are displayed, for example, by those who want to see no difference between theology and the history of theology. I can assure you that this is a serious problem in Roman ecclesiastical universities – and elsewhere.

What happens in such cases? Ideology, driven by convictions often masking wishful thinking, and, in Augustine’s view, immorality, trumps truth, or is thought to be truth? Catholicism claims it has the means to solve this problem. We have a tradition; we can think with the Church. But that is hardly possible if we do not know what the tradition is; if, that is, as liberal Catholics we think that true and original Catholicism was only recovered with Vatican II (as Lutherans used to think it was recovered by Luther), while as conservative Catholics we think it was already recovered - by Vatican I, or by Trent. I will return to such questions.

First, however, we need to say more about virtue and truth seeking. Aristotle offers a very interesting example in the Nicomachean Ethics. As we know - and to the delight of Nietzsche - he regards humility as a vice, but his reasons for doing so are interesting, even if he thinks about humility in a non-Christian sense. The humble man, he thinks, misrepresents his own worth, and is therefore in effect a kind of liar. Clearly there is a problem here about how or whether a human being is “worthy” – and there can be many different replies to that question – but granting Aristotle’s starting point, he is saying that it is a mark of the bad man to pervert the truth, even if in the interest of promoting what seems to some a virtue. But to return to the immediate themes of the present lecture, What harm does it do to a student, say, if his teacher misrepresents the truth, at least as long as the misrepresented truth lies outside the immediate topics he is discussing and teaching?

Here we face the question of what is called the lie in the soul, and the problem links up with one that I have already indicated. For I am now making judgments about the effects of certain sorts of behaviour on the overall character of the misbehaver. A common example arises with politicians, when it is alleged that their private vices have no necessary connection, or even no connection at all, with their public behaviour. Perhaps we should notice that in the eighteenth century Bernard Mandeville (“Man-devil”, as his many detractors preferred to name him) took the opposite and perhaps at times more plausible view; private vices may, and often do, contribute to the common good. That of course depends on how we define the common good, but that is another story. In any case, disagreeing with Mandeville, and agreeing with Socrates and Plato, I would want to argue that division in the soul, introduced by lying, cannot be restricted to one’s private affairs, any more than can other vicious activities. (Not that I would want to follow Augustine and Kant in arguing that all lying is immoral, though it is regrettable. I am again closer to Plato on this, but that again is another story that perhaps would involve seeing even Augustine deeply contradictory of himself.)

God, however, I take it, is all of a piece: by that I mean he is not discordant, he does not suffer from weakness of will; he does not regret; he is not in a world where, as Augustine sees it, we have no option but to do things which we regret; for that is what he calls the “darkness of social life”. Now such regret not infrequently arises, and must arise, when we seem to have to wear different hats on different occasions. Augustine’s frightful example is of the judge whose pursuit of justice seems to lead him into torturing a man who is innocent. Whatever we think of the example, I assume that most of us would agree that it would be better to be more godlike, less exposed to such situations, less liable to wear different hats – in our public life, our private life, our sex life, our family life. Socrates, of course, seemed always the same, though even he dressed up when he went out to a smart over-drinking party, whereas – a very contrary example - various prominent Nazi thugs were said to be very kind to animals. It would seem that moral compartmentalization is an enemy of human growth - might I say the growth of the soul? – precisely because it is the enemy of truth. The ancient Stoics used to say that I might have become a wise man years ago but not be
aware of the fact: that is because I do not know whether my motives are pure and my actions coherent, and I cannot discover purity of motive by introspection. Only if I could honestly survey all my actions over a long period of time – something very difficult to do – and recognize them as entirely coherent, could I wake up to the fact that my motives are pure and that I am, after all, a sage, that I am not, among other things, conveniently if sometimes immorally, wearing a different hat.

Psychologically then, I am saying, we are better off if we live coherently, but I am further asking whether and to what degree coherence is a possibility, and by what it is to be measured and validated, the Stoic proposal being impossible in practice. Again, the Catholic university should be the place where we are offered a yardstick: there we have, or should have, an intellectual tradition offering an ongoing scrutiny, so far as possible, of God’s own Revelation and its relationship to human nature and human prospects. It seems, therefore, that we should be asking ourselves how far this aim has been actualised, or even could be actualised. And that brings us to the place of a Catholic university in the context of a non-Catholic – indeed in the West increasingly non-theist – universe, and more particularly in the context of a secular system of higher education where the dominant model is now that of the research university. At this point many of you will begin to recognize that I am offering something of a midrash (or re-hash) on some well-known themes of Alasdair MacIntyre about the present state of universities in general and of Catholic universities in particular.

MacIntyre points out that the oldest form of Western university was normally a Catholic institution in which, although a variety of disciplines was taught (The Italians still refer to a university as a Universita’ degli Studi; that is, with more than two faculties), philosophy, and beyond that theology, were dominant not only in their prestige but more importantly in that they provided a framework within which all other disciplines could be developed and their scholarly findings recognized as parts of a larger whole. I shall return to the nature of that “whole” in a few minutes. In any case, among other effects of such an operating-system, those studying in that sort of university had the opportunity to become intellectually-rounded individuals, that is, not only narrow specialists, but specialists in a part of what they recognized as a larger whole: a whole identifiable as the work of God’s hands and via the persons of their teachers a place of their redemption, not least in an intellectual sense. That is, they at least might be able to recognize not only that they are Catholics, but also why they are Catholics. I do not think that many Catholic institutions achieve such a desirable effect; indeed I have it at first hand from a number of serious Catholic former students that they passed through Catholic institutions without being given any sense of the intellectual rather than tribal why of their Catholicism. Sometimes they have said that they have discovered – perhaps I mean that they have found themselves forced to discover - possible whys in secular institutions. Admirable though that is, it indicates that in many Catholic universities much remains to be done in combining what I may call the “intellectual” and the “pastoral”. Note that the latter word is widely used in a pejorative sense in secular academies; indeed I fear it was so used by myself in my non-Christian days.

Yet that usage was not and is not entirely unreasonable or unfair; many Catholic universities have come to recognize the dilemma it indicates. The problem they then had to face can be examined with reference both to their immediate choices and to the longer effects of those choices. Debate arose at least in part from a recognition that for many years before the sixties of the last century many Catholics, and indeed much Catholic intellectual life, were defensive and inward-looking: defensive in that it was deemed necessary to keep the outside world – in earlier times the primarily Protestant world, in later often the secular ex-Christian world – at bay. Remember that we were still living in the days of the Index, when for example, a Catholic student would need permission to read Descartes. But though it would be worse than useless to return to those times, what happened in the sixties reveals some sort of justification of the Index and similar restrictive instruments. That was an age when priests and religious abandoned their calling in scores, with or without being laicised, often then joining the countless lay people who gave up heir faith altogether,
and frequently becoming fiercely anti-Catholic. Many of these people were cradle-Catholics who had probably never learned the necessity confronting any convert of making a conscious intellectual decision for Catholicism on its merits.

No doubt psychosexual explanations can be given for many of the phenomena to which I allude and which confronted me when I entered academia in 1959, but to be satisfied with those is to evade a deeper problem. It is clear from the rapidity of their apostasy that many of those who left had little interiorized idea of the nature of Catholicism in the first place. It was, that is - and I use the phrase again – a tribal religion unfortified by adequate intellectual defences. Intellectually, Catholics had grown used to talking to themselves, and often in unreconstructed language that was steadily growing more remote not only from contemporary concerns but even from contemporary speech. Dogmas were uttered and repeated, but increasingly by the uncomprehending. For such lack of intellectual defences the comparative intellectual failure of Catholic institutions of higher learning must shoulder a good deal of the blame. For, as I have said already, ideas filter down from the top, in Catholic institutions and elsewhere, from academics to lawyers and journalists, eventually to the general public. It is clear that whatever their “pastoral” concerns, Catholic universities were failing to provide an adequate support for intellectual structures of Catholicism adequate to combat the neo-pagan models of life and society developing since the time of Hobbes in the seventeenth century – indeed from earlier still. Hence the near inevitable collapse into the arms not just of hedonism and scepticism but of secular (and often anti-Christian) ideologies. The convent-girl had escaped from school.

Clearly when in the latter years of the nineteenth century, with his encyclical Aeterni Patris, Pope Leo XIII invited Catholic universities to revitalize the study of Thomas Aquinas, he hoped to provide a corrective to what he saw as the mistaken ideas and ideologies of the outside world, to promote a positive alternative for Catholics to the “modernism” in philosophy, theology and biblical studies against which his own more unimaginative contemporaries and successors were merely reacting. The move was to a degree successful among those equipped to profit from it; many Catholic thinkers became more aware of at least a part of the philosophical riches of their own tradition. But the Thomist revival was too little, too restricted in its impact, and too late - and was often (and often remained) mechanical: a new manualism that in its turn provoked renewed hostility, frequently to the idea of philosophy itself. Certainly it sometimes anathematized the old “manualism” of much “traditional” Catholic thinking, but its proponents neglected two related truths about the society for which they were trying to prescribe.

The first of these – I have already alluded to it - was that after the Renaissance and the Reformation the centre of Western thought shifted to Northern Europe, normally into lands that vehemently rejected the Catholic tradition, the true nature of which now became widely unknown. Accordingly, those moving towards emancipation from God developed ways of thinking from which first his transcendence, then – inevitably – his importance, indeed existence, was radically challenged. One of the effects of all that was that when Thomists after Leo XIII talked about philosophy – and this has nothing to do with the correctness of their positions – they were increasingly supposed to “dialogue” with a world that quite simply did not and could not understand what they were talking about, and assumed it to be mumbo-jumbo. For by Leo’s time the disastrous effects of being out of touch – not least in having forgotten the specifically Catholic mentality with which their ancestors had been familiar – were increasing exponentially.

That brings us to my second point about the ineffectiveness of Leo’s positive steps as well as of many of his predecessors’ and successors’ more repressive and negative ones. For as the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth, so knowledge of even the most basic truths not merely of Catholicism but of any form of Christianity was fading fast; now the Catholic was intellectually, publicly, even literally speaking another language. When a few years ago the English bishops published their document about the common good, it was only too clear – except apparently to the bishops and their courtiers - that the phrase “common good”, though in wide circulation, was little more than a slogan.
The problem facing Catholic universities was becoming wider and deeper by the day than Leo imagined, and it was increasingly a problem these institutions were not originally constructed to solve but which they now had to face on pain of lapsing into triviality and irrelevance. Much basic knowledge about Christianity should have been supplied at home or in Catholic schools, but intellectually at least this regularly did not happen, largely perhaps because the long-standing defensive stance of the Church left its ordinary members naked in the changed society in which they found themselves. That left the problem of handing on a Catholic mentality – and especially an intellectual mentality - for the universities to try to solve.

So we should try and understand what many of them attempted to do when they recognized the challenge they faced: that is, that they were not supplying an adequate intellectual education for those for whom they had pastoral concern. It is widely recognized that over the years since Vatican II the policy they often adopted to improve the situation was that of imitating the leading secular institutions, and perhaps especially the so-called research universities. In many cases this resulted in a considerable improvement in intellectual standards – in secular terms – though whether it widely encouraged a more intelligent and deeper Catholicism remains very much in question.

For the research universities have no rationale beyond teaching their individual subjects, beyond the pursuit, that is, of piecemeal knowledge often with complete lack of interest in the moral or more holistic aspects of what they are teaching. Let me recount a personal anecdote to illustrate the point.

Many years ago I met an American stranger on a train in England. We got into conversation and he told me that he was a medical professor in a distinguished university, now working on a contract for the US government. He was studying the effects of stress on air force pilots who, among other things, spent a lot of time flying upside down. When he realized that, as a would-be philosopher, I was interested in the ethical aspects of scientific work, he told me that when he was a medical student he was wholly opposed to “wasting his time” on medical ethics, but that now he had come to regard this as an essential part of medical training. I asked him why he had changed his mind and his reply was “Because I am afraid of my students”. What he was afraid of was the pursuit of scientific enquiry with no interest in the human cost. As Tom Lehrer put it, with regard to space research: “‘If the rockets go up, who cares where they come down. / That’s not my department’”, said Werner von Braun.”

Augustine would have concluded that such attitudes are a variety or a combination of power seeking, selfishness and curiositas. The Latin word – used not only by Christians – meant wanting to know things you should not know, originally through the techniques of the so-called “black arts”. But its connotations are not to be so limited: should a Catholic scientist be unconcerned about the use to which his work will be put? Should he engage in research that undermines human dignity? If he does, he becomes hardened and ambiguous; perhaps he gives up his Catholicism or reduces it to tribalism (which may not be entirely without value: perhaps his children will do better). Or he develops a lie in the soul, the effects of which I have already indicated. When Plato’s Socrates asks Gorgias, the professional teacher of rhetoric, what he thinks about the concern that his pupils might misuse the skills he has taught them, Gorgias at first appears not to understand the question – a brutal little Platonic touch - but then the penny drops and he says, “You mean, if they don’t know the difference between right and wrong”. “Yes”, says Socrates. “Oh well”, comes the reply, “If they don’t know the difference between right and wrong, I’ll teach them that too.” Perhaps he had in mind a course in business ethics.

So it would be a serious mistake to assume that such problems only exist in medical schools. Consider economics and business. It may be easier to test an economic theory under a military dictatorship where its political ramifications can be discounted. Business ethics may seem to some as irrelevant as medical ethics, and certainly can be as badly taught. Another anecdote, however, can illuminate things further: a PhD student of mine in Toronto found that his first job in a philosophy department – a Catholic philosophy department, though he himself was Jewish - was to teach business ethics. He did not welcome this assignment, which, he explained, had been
dumped on him as the most junior member of the department. But after teaching his one semester course he wrote to me saying that he now realized that after all the course was worth teaching because, in his view, when it began he realized that the students thought not that there is no difference, but that there could be no difference between what is legal and what is moral. These were Catholic students, mostly practicing, who had “solved” the problem of the relationship between morality and positive law by prescinding from morality altogether.

Of course, it is not enough just to teach courses in medical ethics and business ethics; you have to teach serious courses. Very often what happens in such programmes is that a number of moral approaches are laid out and you have to choose: you can decide whether you are or feel like being a Kantian, a consequentialist, or whatever, and then just work out the implications. Basic questions are evaded, not least because employers of ethicists may want people not to worry too much about the “right” answer but rather to find something congenial to themselves. For the most general implication of my remarks thus far is that in the present Western climate – probably much more in Europe than in the United States which is still comparatively speaking a religious society – to be an intelligent and practising Catholic - socially as well as liturgically - is to accept to be counter-cultural. You will be unpopular in many quarters; you will have to risk embarrassing your friends. It is not the good old days of martyrdom by fire and rack, but it can be very unpleasant nevertheless. But the price of not following what your mind knows to be right is to live that lie in the soul, to become hardened in such a way as to lose the ability to think honestly and seek the truth intellectually. Catholic universities need to make this clear: their job is not to train students to enjoy shaking hands with the great and the good, but to teach them to encourage the great and the good to become greater and better than they usually are. That does not entail theological sentimentality, showy piety or self-righteousness; it means searching for and promulgating truth, plus an ability to make reasoned judgments about the ways in which conscience-driven activities can most usefully – and not self-servingly – be carried out.

Thus far I have argued that the principal aim of a university is to defend the concept of truth and think about what is true – which should be obvious but isn’t; that it is easier to do this honestly in the hard sciences than in the humanities, but that there too there are important questions about what kinds of truths should be pursued and what kind of means should be adopted in their pursuit. And I have argued “pastorally” that unless such approaches are followed, the student, teacher and researcher will be corrupted. And if this is the case in the sciences, the temptations are much greater in the humanities where experimental methods are less readily available and where, as I have noted, judgments are more readily vitiated by ideological assumptions and assertions. The late lamented Elizabeth Anscombe, asked on the BBC what her fellow teachers of philosophy were doing in Oxford, replied: “Well, I suppose they spend most of their time corrupting the youth”. So we need to attend further to the little matter of corrupting youth, and that – unsurprisingly – will bring me back to Socrates, who was accused of it.

We cannot afford to be naive about why students want to study and why they choose what they choose in identifying their courses. Like the rest of us, their motives are mixed and their thoughts confused. They want to learn but they often want learning without tears, and in universities this can lead to a version of Gresham’s Law: popular and easy courses will find many consumers and thus tend to drive out more demanding alternatives; then, say, a physics department is closed down, as has happened several times in England in recent years. In the sixties, when much of this tendency began to develop, critics of the brave new world used to ask, “What is the difference between a Bird course and a Mickey Mouse course?” The answer is that in a Bird course the content is badly taught, while in a Mickey Mouse course there is no content at all - though the title may look (and be) seductive. Or perhaps that a Bird course is trivial while a Mickey Mouser is merely childish. Course-titles in philosophy would often be something like “Existentialism and Psychosexual Experience”, while the content would incline to the autobiographical.

Which leads me to another general observation deserving, I think, of serious reflection. If you want to know what is happening intellectually, look at the changes in University curricula.
One of the things you will notice if you look at humanities courses from 1960 to 2010 is that older material is disappearing. In many language departments you can increasingly get away with being unable to read (let alone understand) anything written before 1800, and whereas in the seventeenth century Archbishop Ussher thought the world began in 4004 B.C. at 10 in the morning, many departments of history suppose it began in 1789, if not in 1914 – if you judge by the courses they insist on for a history degree. Nor should we suppose that philosophy and theology are exempt from similar trends: when lecturing at the University of Chicago Divinity School I was told by a number of very intelligent students that they studied virtually nothing before Schleiermacher, and a much respected Dominican friend of ours (now dead) said to me in his often puzzled tone on one occasion, “Yes, it’s true that when I was a scholastic we spent too much time on Aquinas; our philosophical training was too narrow - but I do now feel a little uneasy when some of my confreres appear not to know who he was”. And it is still true that most Augustinian seminarians know almost nothing about Augustine, though some would like to.

Who knows, as the Stoics used to note, that his (or her – though they would normally say “his”, generically) motives are pure. Students are supposed to come to a university, especially as undergraduates, because of a desire to learn, not as a way of making money or more money or of confirming prejudices which they already hold. I have already cited Socrates’ remark that the unexamined life is subhuman. So they may want to look for a charismatic teacher – and note that I am not to be taken as implying that undergraduate teaching is comparatively unimportant, or at best just showmanship, as many prima donna professors in high-priced research universities seem to suppose. As one of the dons put it in C.P. Snow’s novel The Masters, “I do not see why the arrival of the young gentlemen should in any way diminish the pleasures of our society”. Those pleasures may include the pleasures of research; teaching can – in the view of some - be left to graduate assistants who, anyway, need the money.

The more basic question, though, is what charismatic teachers teach, and that brings us back to corruption and to weaknesses of both staff and students. Which in its turn brings us back to what the students of the humanities and social sciences often want and what charismatic professors are often very happy to provide, to the great credit of their own reputations. I am not, of course, trying to offer you an account of the nature of charisma; rather I am interested in the nature of the content of many charismatic courses, especially those that have some connection to what can broadly be called the history of ideas. For the fact is that many such courses trade in exciting half-truths whereby students are invited to look for a simple solution to complex problems. The study of Marxism has been drearily illuminating in this regard. Marxist interpreters of history, philosophy and literature have in the past decades abounded in universities. They have attempted to explain complex historical, philosophical and literary movements in terms of economic determinism. I do not want to claim that Marx is mistaken in urging the importance, sometimes the enormous importance, of economic factors in the processes of cultural and political change; what I would want to dispute is the claim by many academics that economic explanations (or Darwinian explanations, or Freudian explanations, or Nietzschean explanations or religious explanations) are the key which will turn every lock. When a professor urges that they do, he is either succumbing to ideological prejudice – which is bad for his soul – or he is merely manipulating – which is even worse – while the student is sent whoring after false gods and thereby, in passing, honing his own intellectual laziness. The function of a student is to learn, to come to understand, not to be converted. Indeed, the ideological interpreter of Marx frequently stands condemned of misrepresenting Marx’s own genuine importance, thereby treating his students unjustly.

Manipulation can come in different forms, some of which appear high-minded and claim to look to relevant contemporary problems – and in making this point I am obviously not limiting myself to what happens in Catholic universities. Let me give an example from the study of ancient philosophy. In that pursuit the first essential is to discover what problems the philosopher was trying to resolve, because if you get that wrong, you will misunderstand the answers he has given,
probably misrepresenting him as facing our problems but not his problems – or at least his problems in the form in which he has been able or willing to confront them. I commented in my book on Augustine that I was not going to discuss what people in the thirteenth century or the sixteenth century thought Augustine was or ought to be interested in, but what in the fifth century he was in fact interested in.

Yet simple anachronism is not the only problem; even more serious is what I call the “poisoning of the wells” approach: the view that, say, Plato’s *Sophist* is an early and primitive attempt to solve problems that have now for our sophisticated contemporaries been definitively determined by Quine. Hence we can “co-operate” with Plato by explaining what he is “trying to do” in Quinean terms. Thus ideas that he raises which to us seem odd can be airbrushed out. That has the effect of seriously damaging the students’ ability to learn from Plato. For it is the bits that seem odd – as it were from a foreign land - which might, if given serious attention, invite us to think again about some of our own most cherished (if ill-defended) assumptions. And if the student victim of such airbrushing then goes on to teaching in his turn, he may make things even worse for his own pupils – while if he remembers something of what he learned in his student days but now lives far from academia, he may be able unintentionally to mislead his even less well-informed contemporaries – and his children - who, not unreasonably, may think him to be something of an expert. So manipulating in the interest of apparent relevance is another vice of the instructor that may well encourage intellectual laziness – and therefore the inability to learn – in his students.

I have been suggesting that a lack of active concern for truth - I won’t more waste time addressing this audience about the denial of it altogether – harms the professor in dividing his soul so that he in his turn can encourage mental habits (fuelled by the impatience of the young) which will discourage a love of truth in others. Now I want once again to repeat the obvious, namely that any University which calls itself Catholic should have an overall vision of the coherence of the curriculum it proposes to teach. Even though it cannot replicate formally the old medieval structure whereby theology was the queen of the disciplines, it can maintain unambiguously that theology – significantly reconstructed - should be informally so recognized, thus enabling the university to remain more than nominally Catholic – in fact a secular institution decorated with a chaplaincy or a Newman Center - and helping the individual student to reconcile his moral and spiritual life with the life of his mind. And it cannot be repeated too often that a university which purports to be Catholic but which is ignorant or contemptuous of Catholic truth because its rulers believe, as it is said, that the most important thing is to remain in communion with the New York Times, is seriously damaging to Catholicism, to Catholic intellectual life and to Catholic virtue. If the Catholic university kowtows to secular values, to utilitarianism and the worship of economic success, it enables anti-Christians and Catholic quislings to play the Church off against itself – as regularly happens.

That is all very well, you may think, but how do we know what sort of intellectual instruction is going both to limit itself to the search for truth and to do it in a specifically Catholic framework. In the twenty-first century the only way this can be approached is through encouraging an awareness, in whatever degree it can be afforded, of the history of Catholic thought in all its rich variety. Catholic virtue cannot exist without Catholic dogma and Catholic culture, and Catholic dogma and Catholic culture can only be understood in terms of the adaptation of that dogma and that culture over historical time. It is one of the greatest merits of Augustine - who could indeed be the great teacher of the twenty-first century – that he recognized that Catholic culture, the culture of the City of God, has to be founded on a combination of rational metaphysics with a grasp of the fact we live not only in a world of abstract ideas but also in a world of historical time within which the drama of human and sacred history has been and is being played out. Aristotle noted in the *Metaphysics* “Of the individual there is no definition; we recognize it by perception and intuition”. That piece of wisdom identifies what philosophy can and cannot do, and shows that individual human virtue must be worked out within metaphysical parameters by an understanding of human
growth, and for Catholics, people, that is, who believe in the Incarnation, that growth can only be understood historically, by thinking, as the pope is still inclined to say, with the Church.

One of the advantages of thinking historically about what we believe and therefore, hopefully, how we act – and not least how we consequently act with our minds – is that we can rediscover what we have lost, how with all our apparent progress we have become impoverished: impoverished especially by the loss of any strong sense of the transcendent – which means that in many areas of life we need to be re-mythologized. And please note that I am not thinking simply in liturgical terms, as of which way the priest may face during the Mass – doubtless there are good arguments on both sides of that question and concern with it can help evade more fundamental problems – but in terms of an understanding of God as a final cause, not only in the Aristotelian sense as a prime mover but in the much wider sense of a being who gives intelligibility to all aspects of the universe only because he is over against that universe.

I have already drawn attention to the poverty we experience in our loss of much of the sense of Christianity as a historical religion. I am now trying to indicate something of an even more fundamental spiritual loss; not, that is, of something which can only be revealed to us directly by God, but of a truth that great thinkers taught us to understand even wholly outside the immediate context of Revelation, yet which was (and is) capable of being the foundation of an intellectual approach to Revelation itself. For virtue is not to be achieved by fideism – as the apostasies of the last fifty years have demonstrated only too clearly - but by using our capacities, and those capacities have propelled men in the past towards a recognition of that which, though somehow beyond their reach, gives intelligibility to their reaching.

Certainly our sense of metaphysical transcendence has often been misused, as when some attempt to treat it as a substitute rather than as an enrichment of analytic, empirical and in general scientific thinking. But to condemn abuse is not to condemn use, and if we grow accustomed, as many in the West have now grown accustomed, to leaving the transcendent aside, we are tolerating the atrophy of a fundamental human capacity – a capacity which Catholics should believe has been given to us as part of our nature as created in the image of God - and that to the great detriment of character and humanity, and not least of our intellectual nature. For however skilled we may be – and should want to be – in our analytic and experimental studies, we are born with a certain insight into what is above the mere proposition, but to which the mere proposition points. Such an insight can be understand by any who have had the time to think about a natural beauty – of a leaf, say, or a mouse - or a work of human genius whether in art, literature, music, mathematics or astronomy.

In the introduction to his book A View from Nowhere Thomas Nagel remarks that sometimes when pondering the harder problems of metaphysics it seems that there are truths beyond the capacity of the human mind to grasp. There is nothing illogical about such an idea; what is illogical is to be – and in universities to be encouraged to be – so concerned with the immanent that this sort of recognition is crowded out of our minds and our imaginations – or relegated to the status of a spare-time hobby. For if that happens, in the end our intellectual capacity is also impaired. And remember that although such thoughts appear beyond the capacity of the human mind, the human mind still feels the necessity to try to think them – unless it is stultified by some experience or another - let us hope not by the experience of a Catholic university. Yet alas that often does seem to happen. Just talk, for example, as I have, to some of the more intelligent seminarians at present studying in Roman ecclesiastical institutions and lamenting the wasted years of their intellectual lives.

I have said that there is no point in trying to recover the world we have lost by dreaming that we can return to the imaginatively small universe of (for example) the thirteenth century. Different eras require different patterns of intellectual activity. The greatest threat – and therefore the greatest challenge faced by our Catholic Universities – is to recover an intellectual mentality we have largely forgotten. It should now be obvious that I do not mean that this should be attempted by the omission or to the detriment of those subjects on which the contemporary research university justly prides itself. What I do mean is first that those subjects should - certainly informally and
where possible to an extent formally – be seen from within the Catholic tradition which alone is capable of moulding Catholics as Catholics both spiritually and intellectually. No one should leave a Catholic university without being aware of why he or she is a Catholic. Such awareness is an awareness of how the Catholic tradition can make sense of the world in which we live, in all the growing complexity of that world of which we are also becoming constantly more aware.

There are necessary practical corollaries to the mentality I am advocating. It is impossible to think about Catholicism historically, at the university level, without the necessary intellectual tools. When still a Cardinal, Joseph Ratzinger said that Latin should be offered in every Catholic high school. If that is true at high school level, how much truer is it at college level. It is a disgrace to hear of Catholic colleges no longer offering subjects without which a deeper intellectual grasp of their own faith cannot be attained. An approach to Catholicism through its history entails that Catholic universities should always make available those subjects – Latin, hopefully Greek, various modern languages, obviously history from ancient times – which enable our traditions to be properly understood, and not least to protect those less well trained from sophists who want to manipulate the past. And such subjects should not only be offered, but students, who desperately need guidance, should be encouraged to study them, having learned why such study is essential for their apprenticeship as the incoming intellectual vanguard of Catholicism.

If Catholic universities do not pursue the forms of intellectual endeavour I have been proposing, there is no reason to think that any other institution – individual teachers aside, of course - will do it for them. But, as I have also said, it does require moral courage, not least among those who administer the universities. It is not the job of administrators simply to raise money, to massage their secular acceptability and their university’s bank-account by giving the great and the good (however identified) honorary degrees, or to service the economy or generally to ape the characteristics good, bad and indifferent of the secular world and its institutions. It is a central part of their job to promote an intellectual vision of Catholicism as more than just a consoling way to spend parts of the weekend and the increasingly occasional holy days, but as a way of life that has been developed over 2000 years. Just as a Catholic hospital should be a Catholic hospital, so a Catholic university should be both Catholic and a university.

At the beginning of my remarks today, I noted that in the early days of the Christian Church there arose a dispute about what was called the philosophy that is Christianity, and that some were aware that for Christians too the unexamined life is subhuman – that is, inadequate to satisfy the deepest needs of humanity. But it always required the virtue of courage to take that step: private religious fideism looks attractive and easy, if only you decline to think, and it can pose as giving God his due; and following the way of the world in the public square is safer and more likely to yield its appropriate quota of social success, and at times – still now as then in many places – a greater chance of physical survival. Yet pondering the lot of a Catholic in the secular world and not least the secular academic world, those hoping to live a life both Catholic and examined, must beware of a particular vice: a version of what used to be called by the now unfamiliar word “acedia”: that is, a loss of confidence in the vision of transcendent reality in the face of contempt; hence an unwillingness to mention it, as though it were something a wee bit obscene. It is no use learning in a Catholic University that the world of Catholicism is very like the world of contemporary society, not least through picking up a misguided version of ecumenism whereby we exaggerate our similarities to other ecclesial communities or to other religions. Knowledge of history and a clear-headed glance at society show that matters are not so simple, and if Catholics think that they can hedge their bets in dealing with secular colleagues, they are more likely to earn contempt than if they make no secret of the wider vision that they claim to profess. For if the vision is indeed wider, it is unjust to others as well as dishonest to act as though it is not. For Catholics to present themselves as Catholics – and Catholics for a good reason – is not arrogance, let alone triumphalism, but truthfulness; and truthfulness can be offensive.

Let me conclude – almost - by proposing, as a final example of proper proceeding, Plato’s depiction of Socrates in the argument with the nihilist Thrasymachus at the beginning of the
Republic. Thrasymachus mocks what he sees as Socrates’ naïve and sentimental beliefs about justice; the mere fact that he holds such beliefs indicates that he is out-of-touch, irrelevant to the world of Realpolitik. Socrates dismisses the abuse; maybe I am simple-minded, he appears to agree, but please, I would like an argument by which I can be shown to be wrong. I should be most grateful to you for helping me learn. And then he proceeds to defeat Thrasymachus at his own game. He is not really ignorant or stupid; he merely knows how to use his intelligence in a less partisan, less self-centred, less conveniently dishonest way. (Consider therefore what he might have said had he been arguing against a fashionable and powerful abortionist.) Be that as it may, as we read on in the Republic, we are eventually invited to believe that it is in virtue of Socrates’ possession, whether implicitly or explicitly, of an awareness of transcendent and eternal truths, that he is able to understand the world better than his opponents, quick on their feet though they may be.

For a final example I come back to modern times and to a contemporary challenge. Nowadays we all hear a lot about rights, but without a transcendent God inalienable rights cannot be defended. Those who want to talk about a godless world delude themselves if they deny that such a world is very bleak indeed. Catholics educated in genuinely Catholic Universities can show them things like that, and invite them to think again – if, that is, they themselves have the courage to do so, and if they are not discouraged by their experiences of intellectual and moral inadequacies in Catholic universities.