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EDITORIAL: THE DIGNITY OF MAN AND THE DIGNITY OF KNOWLEDGE

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ONE OF THE CENTRAL THEMES OF JOHN HENRY CARDINAL NEWMAN'S THOUGHT in the *Idea of a University* is the dignity of knowledge. This notion of the dignity of knowledge refers to a knowledge that is pursued for its own sake rather than for the sake of any practical consequences or benefits that it could bring. In one word - a word that may be quite shocking for the contemporary mind concerned with efficiency - knowledge that is pursued for its own sake is "useless." This does not mean that such knowledge cannot or does not bear fruit. What it does mean is that the moment we approach it as a means or a tool for bringing something about we somehow violate its dignity.

Implicit in the thought of Cardinal Newman is the notion that the individual who approaches the world and the knowledge of it solely from the perspective of using it violates not only the objective order but his own dignity as well. In the mind of the great Cardinal, knowledge pursued for its own sake rather than for its utility broadens the intellect and assures its "health." Thus, the exclusively utilitarian approach to learning brings about "sickness," and prevents man from becoming what he can and should be.

The present Pope, John Paul, made the dignity of man an object of thematic focus while he was still a priest. The dignity of man stands in one of the central positions in his writings and allocutions as Supreme Pontiff. In contrast to the current age which also speaks of the rights of and the dignity of man, the Holy Father's thought does justice to the true dignity of man where so many others simply invoke it. Two of the areas where we see the genuine concern of the Holy Father for the dignity of man are the spheres of marriage and the rights of man, especially the rights of the unborn to life.

At the center of the Holy Father's reflections on the dignity of man is the notion of self-possession. One of the essential and decisive marks of the human person is his capacity to possess his being and to govern it. Where man's possession and domination of inanimate creation is a rather incomplete and external possession, the possession of his own being can be complete because it is a possession from within. Compared with the possession of material things, the capacity to possess our own being is much more truly and perfectly a possession. The same thing can be said of a person's capacity to possess another personal being. We can possess another person much more intimately and thoroughly than we could ever possess what is normally called "property." And the reason for this is that the other person can give himself or herself to us.

And here we begin to glimpse the very sense, the reason why we have this ability to possess ourselves. The sense of the created person's existence does not simply exhaust itself in the fact that the person exists. No, the contingent person is created so that he will give himself or herself to another personal being, ultimately to God Himself. Thus, we have the capacity to take possession of our being so that we can give ourselves, for nothing can be given to another unless it first belongs to the giver. Because God created us for Himself, he gave us to ourselves.

God is Sovereign in virtue of His omnipotence by which He creates and shapes the “nature” of the beings that come forth from His hand. Yet, non-personal creation can never obey God.

The “behavior” of every non-personal being is determined by its nature. If we say that such creatures “obey” the laws of nature we do so only analogously. For they cannot “help” but behave the way their nature determines them. Only a person is capable of performing acts which are not predetermined and necessitated by its nature. Hence, God’s sovereignty is manifested in an entirely new and more perfect manner when the person freely submits to and obeys the Creator. St. Thomas affirms in the third part of his Summa the sovereignty of God which is actualized in virtue of Christ’s free and voluntary obedience to God, an obedience which we are all called upon to imitate. And the act of obedience involves precisely an inner act of taking possession of our being and “rendering it unto God” in self-donation and adoration.

The two areas in which personal dignity is violated in an especially odious fashion are those of marriage and of the rights of the unborn. The dignity of man is degraded more thoroughly and more irrevocably through impurity and abortion than in almost all other forms of human degradation. It is not an accident that modern man’s warfare against God’s sovereignty is waged on these fields. For in both the sovereign Lord can be deprived of His subjects and possessions; in both areas man can lose or be deprived of self-possession and hence of the ability to surrender to God.

It is also not an accident that the Holy Father, in defending the dignity of man against abuse through impurity and abortion insists on the truth about man and about God. For if we recognize that the true dignity of man presupposes his orientation toward some reality that transcends him, we recognize at the same time that one of the most fundamental elements of man’s dignity lies in his knowledge of truth. In his address to the Presidents of Catholic Colleges and Universities on October 7, 1979, the Holy Father said,

The goals of Catholic higher education go beyond education for production, professional competence, technological and scientific competence; they aim at the ultimate destiny of the human person, at the full justice and

holiness born of truth.

In that same address he speaks of the “total truth of man,” and of the “total truth of the human person” as defining and limiting the very nature of a Catholic academic enterprise.

If the ultimate destiny of man lies in his surrender to and union with God, it follows that his capacity to know God is already a manifestation of his dignity which involves, as noted above, the orientation and thrust to something above and beyond man. Knowledge itself is an element of human dignity.

The very fact that man can go beyond the limits of his consciousness and mere opinions, the fact that he can know reality as it is in itself and independently of his own mind is already a guarantee that man has an end beyond himself. For if we consider the matter attentively, we soon recognize that in order to acquire “dominion over the forces of nature” it is not at all necessary to know these natures as they are in themselves. The pragmatic thesis is sufficient, that is, what is important is that our hypotheses and theories enable us to manipulate and master nature, to produce results and do so as efficiently as possible.

The plant or the animal, both have their end within themselves. This end is the full actualization of their potential. Hence they have absolutely no need to know reality as it is in itself - either their own reality or that of their surroundings. However efficient and exquisitely attuned to the external world their “organs” may be, their contact with the world is, for all this, blind. For all that matters are the “effects” of the plant’s or animal’s contact with the world. The wolf is indifferent to the true nature of the rabbit as is the latter to the true nature of cabbage. All that matters are the harmful or beneficial consequences for them. And when we consider this “concern” of the plant or animal for their own well-being and survival we are in no way scandalized or dismayed, for this self-centeredness is completely natural. In no way do we consider this self-centeredness base or undignified.

And in both the plant and the animal, knowledge of the true nature of the beings in their environment would be entirely superfluous and meaningless. The wolf is as indifferent to the true nature of a child as he is to the true nature of the rabbit. This knowledge would make no difference to the wolf’s predatory behavior. Indeed

it would constitute the absurd situation if a being that is determined by his nature was to destroy another being whose worth and dignity he knows.

What does this suggest? Nothing more and nothing less than that in beings that are non-personal and have their end in themselves, knowledge of reality as it is in itself would not only be superfluous but absurd as well. Nietzsche, the great enemy of God, saw this clearly. He considered it vanity for man to claim that he knows reality, because man has no ends transcending the narrow limits of his own existence. He clearly understood that the very fact of knowing something outside of man already implies that man cannot have himself as his own exclusive end. For the known truth already necessarily implies that man is not free to change and manipulate it or even disregard it. This is so true that when man knows something to be true he is convinced that it is so, he is bound by the truth. On the level of experience so potent is reality when it becomes known that it subjects man to itself. In every case where man knows something as it is in itself he has the experience, more or less explicit, that he is not his own absolute master and that something is demanded of him. Every instance of genuine knowledge humbles man. And this “humbling” of man which is an integral part of all true knowledge is radically opposed to the attitude of mastery in which one refuses to be bound by anything.

Knowledge of reality, then, is the first moment, as it were, of man’s dignity. In the knowledge of reality man is raised above and outside himself and brought into contact with something which he must serve in some measure. The greater the reality, the higher its value the more does man become aware of the distance he can be raised above himself, that is, of the dignity to which he has been called. But the greater the reality and value, the greater the submission and service which is exacted of him. For those who see the true nature of reality there is no opposition between the dignity, the heights to which man has been called and the submission and service which is demanded of him. It is the truth, goodness and beauty of the reality in question which engenders the longing to give and surrender one’s being as well as the awareness that one has the obligation to do so. In the confrontation with truth, goodness and beauty the height of the reality is not a confirmation of one’s superiority but rather an indication of the greatness of the gift that has been given and the magnitude of the task that follows.

For those that refuse to serve God, reality is neither a gift nor a task but something that comes from the hand of man rather than from the hand of God. That is why anyone who wars against God and would deprive him of his subjects will make the dignity of human knowledge the primary target for destruction. And today such a destruction has become the primary end of many whose formal vocation is the defense and transmission of truth and the leading out - the education - of youth out of themselves and into the real world.

The attack against the sovereignty of truth is not frontal and direct. On the contrary, we find the pervasive motive “search for truth” which is used as a justification for the “critical attitude” and for “questioning.” It is the sublime dignity of truth which is invoked as the reason for refusing assent and submission to the realities that present themselves to the students’ intellect. It is said that truth is greater than man and stands above him. True. It is said that the human mind is so limited that it can never exhaust the depth and the breath of reality. Again true. But these very truths are used and manipulated not to instill a sense of reverence for and humility before the sublimity of truth but to destroy the fecundating contact with reality. For man’s contingency, his limitations, even his fallenness are affirmed with such humility that they now become invincible barriers to any contact with reality in knowledge. But this is a pseudo-humility since it destroys the true humility implied in the willingness to receive something one has not created himself. It is an act of war against God, the rebel’s vengeful use of his limitations and inferiority to raise himself above God.

Notwithstanding the existential urgency of defending human dignity against violation and desecration by impurity and abortion, there is a unique urgency for the defense of the dignity of knowledge. It is not an urgency restricted to the academician looking for a job since it is virtually impossible to find a position in teaching today if one is “absolute” and unequivocal about the primacy of truth. Nor is it an urgency restricted to parents of college age youth. The defense and cultivation of the dignity of knowledge is an unconditional task, especially in an age where it is so universally rejected even while it is used when profitable.

I restrict myself to three reasons for the urgency and even a certain primacy of the defense of truth and reformation of Catholic education, particularly higher education. First, just as all being, even the most insignifi-

cant, is already a reminder of and initiation into a realm of reality which stands above us and demands something of us. Every truth is in this sense an echo of God's call to us. Every truth is a gift not only in its own right and worth but because it leads man outside of and beyond himself. Even the most insignificant truth can be the first step in the transcendence toward God. And third, even though it can not and ought not be used it is the seed of

that fruitfulness which will lead to a successful defense of human dignity in marriage and in the womb. Truth about man, about the world and about God cannot be used, but it allows man who possesses the truth to possess himself and become a profitable servant.

