



# FAITH & REASON

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## EDITORIAL

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NY GRADUATION CLASS IS VERY SPECIAL BUT THIS CLASS, THE LARGEST EVER AT Christendom College, is also a class of a very special year with especially big headlines. Among news that made the headlines in 1990-1991, one item must have struck a special chord here with this graduating class of 1990-1991 and with Christendom College at large. On November 14 came the news that Malcolm Muggeridge had passed away. In spite of the fact that he had become a Roman Catholic, the New York Times eulogized him as the greatest journalist of this century.

Muggeridge had for some time been called St. Mugg before he came to speak, in 1978, at a Christendom fundraising dinner. He spoke on news-twisters, his great topic. No wonder that he sounded very pessimistic. There is little to cheer about the manner in which the media try to run and ruin the lives of all the people most of the time. That St. Mugg sounded pessimistic chimes with a detail in his obituary in *The New York Times*. I do not mean a negative detail, or a studied omission of an important point. Unlike the *Times of London*, by comparison still a paragon of virtue, the New York Times did not recall Muggeridge's last book, *Conversion*. There he left no doubt about the sincerity and solidity of his conversion to the Catholic Church. This was news "not fit to print" for a newspaper notorious for its counter-spiritual fitness program. Such is a further proof, if one was needed, of the remark, that for the New York Times only a bad Catholic is a good Catholic, a remark made by Richard Neuhaus, before his conversion to the Roman Catholic faith.

But if St. Mugg could not be made to look a badly good Catholic or a goodly bad Catholic, he somehow had to be spoken of in such a way as to let the Catholic Church look bad. Therefore, and this is the other or "positive" detail in St. Mugg's obituary in the New York Times, much was made there of a remark of his about Vatican II. In that remark St. Mugg spoke of pessimism as Christianity's greatest strength, which he found underplayed in Vatican II's emphasis on joy, or rather, I would add, by that endless talk about joy that had flooded us regardless of the true intentions of that great Council.

And now let me return to that speech of St. Mugg at that Christendom fundraising dinner. After it was over, a young woman walked up to him and asked: If the situation is indeed so bad as you say it is, why should one have children, raise them, send them to college, and have them graduate? This question, of a very clean looking young woman, did what questions rarely did to St. Mugg. For a moment he groped for words. Then a smile appeared on his sad face as he gave his answer: "Please, forgive me for talking as I did. I am an old man, halfway into the other world, I am not the right person to give directions to young and good people like yourself. Please, forgive me, and by all means trust in the future."

To speak with this kind of intellectual humility was a sign that St. Mugg was on his way to heaven and along the best way toward that ultimate goal of all. Shortly afterwards he formally joined the Catholic Church and wrote his book, *Conversion*, about which the *Times (London)* wrote that "it seems to show that he achieved religious certainty." A perfect example of British understatement. One would look in vain for that book in the page-long obituary of St. Mugg in the New York Times. Certain news is certainly not fit to print in mid-Manhattan.

But here I have to part with this favorite topic of mine and return to the question of that young woman, mother of two children, as to what is the point of having children, of raising them and of having them graduate? To the last part of that question, I now have to give an answer.

Many answers are in these days given to that question at the three thousand or so graduation exercises all over the United States. Many of the answers are so trendy as to make St. Mugg even more pessimistic than he ever could be. Speakers who think (and there are many of them) that everything is anthropology may suggest that graduation is what tattooing was to primitive tribes. According to some others, graduation is but the final act in a four-year ploy to catch a husband or a wife. Still others view it as the coming of age in America. All serious teachers in all graduate schools would be very happy if graduation would assure that one had parted with one's adolescence.

Speakers with addiction to sociology may create the illusion that graduation is the handing out of academic union cards. Media celebrities may use graduation speeches to deliver another of their professional somersaults in logic. Two years ago I heard a famous TV anchorman urge graduates of a Catholic college to question everything, except, of course, that very speech delivered at their graduation. The speaker got away scot-free and with a fat check in his pocket, in addition to an honorary degree in jurisprudence. Apparently the practice of law is no longer supposed to include an elementary measure of logic, let alone of that prudence which is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and should be especially the hallmark of Catholic colleges.

As graduation speakers, professional politicians hardly ever do better than that media celebrity if they do any good at all. By comparison it is a rather innocent matter when the graduation speaker claims that graduation is fun and does so in the false belief that only this way can he please the graduates and their families and friends. It is, of course, not a bad idea to put some fun into graduation, provided one does not make it too funny. Such is the case when some students use graduation for political protest and thereby try to appear serious for the first time in their college lives.

There would be no point in wasting so much time, effort, and money on reaching the great moment

of graduation if its purpose were just the going through of a rite - tribal, social, cultural, academic, or farcical-theatrical. To begin with, graduation, which is not a birthright, should not be a mere ritual.

Let graduation be graduation. This type of phrase makes sense only if it prompts one to take a close look at the word itself.

The word graduation has obviously something to do with grades, a touchy subject in more than one respect. Here let me touch only on some impersonal aspects of grading. I do not know how strong is still that fairly recent fantasy of some educators who wanted to do away with all grades in order to turn schools into a blissful heaven for students as well as teachers. Legislators now have to cut money for schools that in the process have become so many social hellholes. As is typical with all tragic misconceptions this too has been ushered in by some of its milder forms. I mean a grading in which grades are given with an accuracy to two or three decimal points. Such a cultivation of accuracy is a cover up for putting any and all on a slow inclined plane, if not on a socialist skid row where one is supposed to slide, mostly down, and never to step up. It is the farcical equivalent of surrounding the educational enterprise with gently rising inclined planes as if all in our society were intellectually handicapped to be pushed around in cultural wheelchairs.

Quite a change from the grading system as I found it when I came to this country forty-one years ago. There were only five grades, A, B, C, D, and F. The letter E had not yet been discovered. I am not suggesting that this Spartan method of grading be reinstated. Much less would I recommend the bringing back of that unwritten rule that those grades had to be given in such a way as to reflect a perfect Gaussian distribution to the greater glory of some educational unwisdom.

Those stark grades, with nothing between them, not even with A plus or B minus between them, were, however, characteristic of now bygone times that differed at least in one respect from these times of ours. Then no secret was made of the fact that there are differences, and in fact differences in the vertical direction, the kind of difference which the word grade stands for. In other words, grades meant that some people stood higher and others stood lower. And there were no apologies offered for that way of seeing people and things. But this vision also meant that one who stood higher could be demoted

to a lower level and the one on the lower level was not dreaming when he thought that he or she really could move higher up. There was a firm belief about higher grades and lower grades. One could still roll downwards, if sliding down a staircase can be called rolling, but if one wanted to move upward, one had to make a far greater effort than what is implied in just sliding.

Today, it is pretended all over the globe that there are no real differences. Children are supposed to know as much as their parents, if not more. They are not decried when they “parent” children at the biologically earliest age, with the result that neither the teenage parents nor their offspring will ever grow up. Students are egged on to imagine that they know as much if not more than their teachers, which, in some places at least, is not too far from being the case. Thirty years ago when in some places of higher learning it became trendy to consult students about the curriculum, it was still possible to hear a strong dissenting voice, such as Jacques Barzun, of Columbia University, who quipped: “If students know so much as to be given the task of drawing up the curriculum, they should be given diplomas and not courses.”

The only area where this abolition of grades or differences received a setback in recent years is economics and industry. Western admirers of socialism had to fall silent as Marxist economies began to reveal colossal cracks in their structures. All those economies were based on the theory that grades are the plot of theorists, some of them theologians, to maintain the exploitation of almost all by the very few. Such is the origin of that most famous Marxist phrase that religion is the opiate of the people. Marx was not yet twenty-five when he portrayed the socialist heaven as a place where even the differences of jobs were abolished: “[Communist] Society regulates the general production and then makes it possible for me to do one thing today, another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner ... without ever becoming a hunter, fisherman, cattleman, or literary critic.”

Thirty years later, Marx congratulated Darwin for having provided the biological foundation of Communism. On the face of it, Marx spoke only about the struggle for life as a biological justification of class struggle. But he must have sensed that the struggle in question made sense only if the variations, the differences, later called mutations, were insensibly small and therefore could be smeared out in terms of bad logic. Chesterton

was much more to the point when he spoke of “the grey gradations of twilight.” He spoke of the absence of any true gradation or grade, as the essence of Darwinism and the ideology on which it rested and which it still foments in a powerful way.

In fact it was the foremost American Darwinist of this century, George Gaylord Simpson of Yale, who said that the central point in Darwinism is the abolition of substances. He knew what he wanted to abolish. The word substance has meant, since the time of Aristotle, to convey the foremost difference or grade that can exist among beings. It is in this light that one should see that famous piece of paper on which Darwin scribbled, “Never say higher or lower.” All his writings were to contradict this most healthy warning he had addressed to himself.



In Darwinian ideology, which is very much the ideology of modern secularist culture, there can be no real gradations or grades. There everything is in continual flux which makes it impossible to graduate. This is why the educational system of that society frowns on flunking, on forcing students to repeat a year or two, while that same system assures everyone automatically of that social initiation rite into which it has degraded graduation itself. An early straw in the wind about this degradation of graduation floated within my ken when in December 1950, aboard the liner Queen Elizabeth II, I bought my first copy of the Readers Digest. There I learned that the State of Mississippi had just made it a misdemeanor for high school principals to let students graduate who were still literally illiterate. Other states have since duly graduated to that higher level of dire legislative necessity, or are sliding slowly towards facing up to a similarly tragic legislative task.

Secular society wants graduations without grades or gradations. This is why it does not want the difference between the morally good and the morally evil. Society cannot tolerate that the greatest novelist of this century, Graham Greene, was influenced by his Catholicism along the line which counts most for Catholics. The villains of Greene’s novels, so one reads in *The New York Times Book Review*, “are not simply wrong - they are wicked and evil.”

In other words those villains know that greatest difference which is between what is morally good and morally wrong. To be wrong in this way is worlds removed from being just wrong, that is, unpractical or unprofitable or counterproductive.

Our secularist society acknowledges only such varieties of “wrong” that amount to behavioral patterns that are evaluated with a statistical method void of all values. Therefore all those wrongs are looked upon as variations on the same theme which is neither right nor wrong in the sense in which Graham Greene and far better Catholics meant it. The philosophy of that society is an exclusive cultivation of the quantitative approach that can merrily move from curves into straight lines and from straight lines into curves of any shape. Within that society monogamy for life (formerly called marriage) is just a variation on consecutive monogamies (legalized by divorce), on experimental monogamies (implemented by adultery), on pluralistic monogamies (equivalent to bigamies and trigamies and polygamies), on monosexual monogamies (formerly called plain abominations), and so forth. Alternate lifestyles that continually alternate have replaced the categories of life and decay and the substantial difference or grade between them.

On the speculative level we now have endless rationalizations instead of reasonings. Their epitome is process philosophy according to which everything becomes everything else. Process philosophers (and theologians) preach individualism while abolishing the individual mind or soul which alone can assure man his real individuality. That philosophy is so consistent in its grim resolve to abolish all grades as to claim that there is no difference even between being and nothing. It defines the act of “to be” as “the boundary condition of socially useful variables” and gives endowed chairs to those who keep elaborating on this gobbledygook with their analytic hogwash.

We have indeed come a long way from Hamlet’s insight about “to be” and “not to be” as the foremost of all questions. We have indeed come to the point where scientific aura is given to the claim that between a universe that is and a universe which is still to be, the only difference is the scribbling of some esoteric equations in one’s notebook.

This deadly game of abolishing differences is now invading that Church which worships that very be-

ing who gave as His name “He Who Is,” or existence itself. But we need not go to the philosophical heights connected by that Most Holy Name. The grassroots level is full of instructive details. I have in mind a questionnaire sent out to all parishioners in all parishes in a diocese somewhere between Washington and Boston.

One could dwell at length on the psychological imbecility of the first part dealing mostly with the person or rather the personality of the pastor. While better-grade psychologists have recognized that personal problems or deficiencies demand a most circumspect approach, the pastor, the priest, is now turned into the target of opinion polls which always aim at abolishing differences. Such is the roundabout way of nipping in the bud priestly vocations as a calling to a state which is a good grade higher than the level on which the faithful stand, for the very simple purpose that he may pull them higher up. And God have mercy on him if he is instrumental in their sliding downward.

The second part of the questionnaire, dealing with general problems of the Church gives, again in a roundabout way, the impression that the Church is not on a grade, again a very good grade higher than the rest of society. And just as society is not supposed to have a clear idea, except through the ever shifting opinion polls, about the chief dangers it has to face, the Church too is now supposed to learn, from opinion polls, the most important things it should know. For if those who stand on that higher grade do not tell loudly what is obvious, why should those who are supposed to be taught by them know, for instance, the answer to question 27, “What is the biggest problem humanity has to face?”

Has that problem not been from time immemorial the merry sliding of humanity down the road to eternal perdition? Has this problem not been specified in the very question, a question of our Lord himself, “What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world, but in the process he loses his very soul?” But if this question could not make the grade of that questionnaire, it is then logical that it should include question 26: “What is it that I most seek from the Catholic Church?” Have we Catholics grown uncertain that it is eternal life and, by comparison, nothing else, that we seek or should seek from and through the Church?

At a time when secular public education realized the madness of an experimentation that dispensed with

the difference between teachers and pupils, many Catholic educators decided to jump on a cultural bandwagon that had by then started careening. A new Catholic generation was supposed to see deeper into matters of faith and morals through “teach your catechisms” and through their “color it” variations. A fearfully colorful picture has emerged, a picture dominated by psychedelic hues and by a measure of ignorance unheard of fifty years ago when a far smaller number of Catholics were college-graduates. Thus question 24 asks them to answer with YES, NO, or UNSURE, whether they believe in a personal God, whether they believe in the divinity of Christ, whether they believe in Heaven, many grades. She still insists that three of those sacraments are grades to such an unheard of degree as to engrave indelible grades upon the soul. She still teaches and will forever teach the essential difference or grade between her dogmatic truths and errors she dogmatically rejects.

On her altars, so many embodiments of a step or grade that are not approachable along smooth ramps, the Church will keep putting saints who have a little noted thing in common. To take just some giant teachers of spiritual life - Saint Teresa, Saint John of the Cross, Saint Benedict - they all describe progress in spiritual life in terms of grades. In the Rule of Saint Benedict the longest chapter is on the thirteen degrees or grades of obedience. He does not ask the monks to slide upward, if this were possible at all, but to make those grades, one after another, no matter what effort this may take.

So much about the broader perspectives of graduation insofar as it involves another grade. It has not been preceded by a four-year-long exercise in that futility which is upward sliding. It will not therefore be followed, I am sure, by an illusion that from now on one can hitch onto a perpetual ski-lift. Hitchhiking in that sense, which has become the cultural pastime, can generate only that pessimism which St. Mugg could articulate so well. Here I wanted to give you the reasons why your graduation from Christendom College will save you from becoming pessimistic about the future and about your future.

That future will include a great variety of circu-

mstances, a great variety of jobs, many children or few children, a stable homestead or a perpetual moving from one place to another. It may include another graduation or no more of this happy ceremony. Of course, there will be no repetition of this uniquely happy day for all of you. There will be, for all of you, many times of joy as well as of sorrow. But in all those variations there will be with you one unfailing source of true happiness which excludes pessimism properly so called.

As long as you know that you are standing on a higher grade - intellectually, morally, and religiously - you will be able to do what is the source of the greatest joy and satisfaction in this human condition that offers more than one good reason for being a pessimist. A chief of such reasons is that there are many who keep pulling down others to their own miserable level and enjoy the applause of this world for doing so. To justify themselves they keep saying that there are no grades, no differences, all is on the same level. What they actually do is to rob others all too often of their best inheritance.

Exactly the opposite happens when one tries to pull others up to the higher level where he or she stands. Of course, in order to do so, one must retain, in spite of all public pressure to the contrary, the conviction that there are grades and that one is higher than the other. But once on that higher level or grade one can dispense a good dose from one's higher energy level and thereby pull others higher up. It is in that giving that you will find the most effective and never failing antidote to pessimism

and the reason why it is worth graduating. Has not our Lord himself said that it is a greater joy to give than to receive? Does not this saying of His imply that there are indeed grades, the grade between those who have and the have-nots. When he said that the poor you will always have with you, did he not say that the opportunity and the duty to give will never know bounds and will always be around?

And this is precisely what that great Pope Leo XIII said almost exactly one hundred years ago to this very day, when he issued his Encyclical *Rerum novarum*. I mean his warning about those who claim to themselves “the art of banishing forever all tribulations from human

  
*“There will be, for all of you, many times of joy as well as of sorrow. But in all those variations there will be with you one unfailing source of true happiness...”*  


life.” The Pope rather insisted on realism or, to quote his very words, to follow “the best course which is to view human affairs as they are.” Not that Leo XIII wanted to promote complacency. In the same breath he urged any and all “to seek appropriate relief for those tribulations elsewhere,” that is, not in a naive optimism which is bound to generate pessimism through its wishful abolition of all grades.

Grades are an inherent feature of this life, precisely because the life to come is structured on them. Eternal life means a dwelling in one of its many mansions. To restore everything in Christ (*instaurare omnia in Christo*), a program to which your college years have been dedicated, is to engage in pre-structuring, or pre-fabricating, here on earth those heavenly abodes which, as sound theology teaches us, are of different grades.

There is still another parallel between life down here and the life to come. In both, a principal purpose of having homes is to have a proper place where nourishment is taken, most of the times in a routine manner,

but on occasion in a special way. This is why graduation is followed by a family banquet.

Possibly some, with some mistaken goodwill, may try to steer you, decked out as you are in your shiny cap and gown, towards the head of the table. Please, don’t let your head be turned. Think of that great banquet of life of which our Lord spoke. His special attention was given to that guest to whom He could say, “Friend, move up higher.” What He meant to say was, “Friend, please, graduate.” For an answer to the question, “Why graduate?,” we graduation speakers need thousands of words. He, as the Word Incarnate, could give the answer in a word or two that last forever. May He also bless you all and be with you always! Godspeed to all of you!

- Stanley L. Jaki

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