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Ex Corde: Diversity in Higher Ed

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 12, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

The other evening at a cookout here in Connecticut, I was speaking with some very smart, very liberal women about the importance of small women?s colleges in shaping a cadre of women with the education and the self-confidence to break the glass ceilings of earlier times. The women were all agreed that while young women can now gain access to Harvard or Yale too, there will always be a place for the women?s schools such as Wellesley or Smith or Mount Holyoke, not only because their own traditions are worth preserving, but because some percentage of young women will want that experience of a mostly all-female school, the freedom it confers from the non-stop pressure imposed by a hyper-sexualized culture, and that the women there are capable of bringing something different, and something important, to their subsequent careers because of their time at a women?s college. I am sure that much the same argument could be made for historically black colleges. I felt at the time that such an argument could be made for the all-male status of some military academies such as the Virginia Military Institute, that the state had an interest in perhaps funding a co-ed military academy, but it also had an interest in preserving a diversity of choices in higher education and that VMI should have been allowed to follow its own dictates.

How does all of this analogize to Catholic Higher Education? If you don?t think Catholic universities have the capacity to offer a different approach to a liberal arts education, read this fine document [1], produced by our friends at Boston College, on the Catholic Intellectual Tradition and what it means to their work at BC. I would submit that the experience of an education guided by the eight qualities of inquiry outlined in the document would be a vastly different ? and vastly better ? education that what you can get even at the best secular college. Item #1, ?A conviction that faith and reason are mutually illuminating, that they are united in the search for truth, and that people of faith must devote themselves to building a world characterized by an ?uncompromising commitment to truth,?? seems to me a direct challenge to much of the opinion writing in our secular media about the role of religion in American life. For them, faith does its thing over there in a church or synagogue (or, Palin forbid, a mosque) on the weekend but reason is what does its thing the rest of the week and never the two shall meet. That is not a Catholic approach.

Asking, persistently, the question ? how does the Catholic intellectual tradition approach the issues of the day differently ? will not only yield a different answer from that offered by the secular academy, it will help fend off the reductionisms found within Catholicism. I have noted before that there is a tendency among some of our conservative Catholic friends to baptize the American Dream a little too readily, to reduce the role of religion in the economy to a set of ethical guidelines for corporate businesspeople, to make of our Catholic worldview a mere dollop of whipped cream on the banana split of democratic capitalism. It has been almost twenty years since Francis Fukuyama grandly proclaimed the ?end of history,? but history did not end, only the serious, critical examination of American life ended among too many conservative thinkers. There are reductionisms on the left, as well, a tendency to reduce the Church?s mission to a social justice agenda which, though integral, is not exhaustive, of Catholic identity.

One of the reasons to promote a distinctly Catholic approach to education is that one must come to love one?s patrimony in order to share it, indeed to transcend it. I have earlier voiced by conviction that there are problems

with the concept of ?identity? if it is taken as a stopping point, rather than a starting point, if it becomes a stick to beat back innovation and experimentation, both of which are essential to the task of education (and the task of evangelization), if it becomes an invitation to self-satisfaction. On the other hand, people are tired of the days when everything was fudgy when discussing religion, and especially Catholicism, when the tradition was not so much up for grabs as up for obfuscation without end, obfuscation for its own sake, when the post-conciliar years invited much needed new life in the Church, but like all new life, also invited pruning, a process that proved painful for some as pruning always is.

Final thoughts on Ex corde tomorrow from myself, in our Q & A with Professor John Cavadini of Notre Dame, and with a special guest commentary by Bishop David O?Connell, whose tenure as President of the Catholic University was marked by a firm commitment to implementing Ex corde Ecclesiae. Also, check back later today for Q & A with Msgr. Stuart Swetland of Mt. St. Mary?s University in Emmittsburg, Maryland.

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[1] http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/top/church21/pdf/Catholic%20Intellectual%20Tradition%20cropped%20pages.pdf