

The mind of the wise man seeks instruction

Academic Address

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As we gather, five sixths of the way through the academic year, I want to reflect with you on an issue current in our seminary community. It is an issue which has been talked about by others over the course of the year. Recently, Father Kartje devoted one of his Rector's Reflections to one approach to the issue. Today, in this annual academic address, I want to approach the same issue again, in the belief that multiple engagements of a topic lead to deeper insight.

The issue I am referring to is the perceived divide between academics and formation. You have heard Father Kartje say this, and I will say it as well, at the most basic level, there is no divide between the academic and formation departments. The two departments aim at the delivery of a single priestly formation program in its four dimensions of human, intellectual, spiritual and pastoral. And yet, there remains an experience among both the seminarians and to a certain extent among the faculty members as well, of a divide. The old cliché, "What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?" might just as well be rephrased in our day as "What does academics have to do with formation?"

You should know that this question is not new. The Athens/Jerusalem question goes back to Tertullian. The Academics/Formation question goes back to the reform of seminaries after the Second Vatican Council fifty years ago. Ask some of the long-time faculty members and they will tell you that there has been fussing over this issue for half a century. And yet, it is valuable to look at it again and again. Old though it may be, it is still a present issue for us. To approach it, I'm going to use a method outlined by Professor Peter Kreeft of Boston College. It is the method of medical diagnosis, which can as well be employed in philosophical practice. It has four steps:

1. Observation of a symptom
2. Diagnosis of disease
3. Prognosis of cure
4. Prescription for treatment¹

The first step, observation of a symptom. I think we all saw the symptom in the Formation session on March 9th. Different members of our community have different understandings about the role of intellectual formation in the overall enterprise of priestly formation and ministerial practice. I thought that day was a success because a serious issue was engaged and because we heard voices from all segments of the seminarian community. As a faculty member, I was pleased to hear how the comments evidenced greater reflection and nuance among the more senior students. The session did not bring resolution, but it was a good exercise.

¹ Peter Kreeft, *Back to Virtue: Traditional Moral Wisdom for Modern Moral Confusion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 38.

If that is our symptom, then, what might we diagnose as the disease? I have long subscribed to a claim by Dr. Martin Marty of the University of Chicago that the really big issues the Church has to face are not of her making. Rather, they come in from the world around us. Nothing we did wrong created them. Nothing we could have done differently within the Church would have stopped them. Still, we have to deal with them.²

For a diagnosis, I would turn to Justin E. H. Smith. Our problem is a difference over epistemology. It is a problem not limited to seminary education, but touches all aspects of higher education in the United States. The problem is the crisis of the humanities. Smith writes:

The humanities are today mere slivers of a once unified project, crystallized from the Renaissance through the 9th century only to shatter spectacularly of the course of the 20th. . . [what we need is a way] to restore the promise of re-establishing the lost unity of the human sciences with the sciences of nature, or, as we say these days, of the humanities with STEM.”³

² I have known Dr. Marty for many years. He first made this claim during a keynote address at the National Workshop on Christian Unity in Omaha, Nebraska. Since then, I have discussed it with him a few more times. A deeper claim, when he elaborates the point, is that these mega trends in society are the things which produce “crisis” in the Church. By crisis, good church historian that he is, he is referring to things of the magnitude of the Arian crisis. A crisis, by this definition is a controversy that has grown beyond the ability of a local or regional church or synod to solve. The crisis is ecumenical, covering the whole inhabited world. This is the stuff ecumenical councils are called to address. Marty’s claim is that right now we are experiencing two crisis, one of authority and one of human sexuality. Both were caused by changes in technology. The authority crisis comes from the democratization of knowledge in the information revolution. The sexuality crisis comes from humans achieving mastery of fertility. Marty will not predict a solution to either crisis, but like a good historian, he reminds us that it takes about two hundred years to work through such a mega trend.

³ Justin E. H. Smith, “A Forgotten Field Could Save the Humanities” in *The Chronicle Review* (March 13, 2016).

In short, the diagnosis is the fragmentation of knowledge. Our theological tradition was shaped by a remarkable period in the 13th century when all of the major thought systems agreed on epistemology. Whether Christian, Jewish, Islamic or secular, a common epistemology allowed interreligious and even, interdisciplinary discourse. This is not the case in the modern period and even less in the contemporary. In this address, I want to examine the fragmentation of knowledge and the need for an integrated approach. I'll offer one example of such an integrated approach and then examine one very early idea about how an integrated approach to knowledge can lead to proper spiritual formation, thereby once again unifying the academic and the formational aspects of seminary.

The Fragmentation of Knowledge

The fragmentation of knowledge we are experiencing today is a result of what Smith calls “society’s radical and unprecedented presentism. No textual culture in human history has been so indifferent to its own past, and this indifference strongly suggests that, though we continue to tweet and “text” and share memes, we are moving into a post-textual era . . . clueless about historical legacies [and] oblivious of origins.”⁴ “Presentism,” Smith continues, “not only cuts us off from what was long understood to be central concern of the humanities – to know who we are and where we come from – but also perpetuates and deepens the separation of the human from the natural sciences.”

⁴ Ibid.

Well, I blame Friedrich Nietzsche. Smith notes that Nietzsche rejected the traditional approach to textual science as seeing “the text as an artifact of the past” where the goal was to bring the past alive in the present and instead redefined the goal as “bringing the text alive in the present.”⁵ This turn is no less dramatic than the move to *sola scriptura* in the Reformation. But what results from Nietzsche’s move is a *sola experientia*, where my experience is the sole source of authority, which is bounded by the parameters of my life, thus resulting in the presentism Smith criticized. What is more, my experience falls prey to all the traps of *sola scriptura*. It is believed to be plain, without need of hermeneutic, and also that its interpretation is infallible, because what other authority can judge an individual’s experience?

And with that move, conversation stops. Discourse is impossible. All that is left is power.

The Need for an Integrated Approach

As should be plain, both from my description and from your experience in university studies, this is an intolerable situation for a person of faith. Yet, as tempting as the trap of fideism might be, the narrow fundamentalisms which result lack any power to evangelize the contemporary world. We cannot become a kind of Catholic Amish. We have to be in this world, this world of contemporary thought, while at the same time, not of it.

⁵ Ibid.

Nietzsche was right about one thing. If you aspire to be a preacher then it is not enough to present a text as an artifact of the past. The preacher, as Nietzsche wanted, must bring the text alive in the present. As I wrote this sentence, I recalled an experience I had in my own college days. Every Saturday, my friends and I would go out to breakfast at a Denny's restaurant not too far from the university. There, every Saturday, we would see a man sitting in the corner table, the one that seated eight people. He was there alone, but the table was covered with books. It was clear to all who saw him that he was a preacher writing the manuscript of his sermon for the next day. Four books were always prominent on the table: the *Scofield Chain Reference Bible*, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*, *Green's Interlinear Bible*, and *Matthew Henry's Commentary*. With these, a Grand Slam Breakfast and a great deal of Denny's special Kona coffee blend, he would edit and refine his manuscript for about three hours each Saturday morning.

Philology

That preacher, whose name we never learned, spent those hours each Saturday morning at breakfast with Schofield, Green and Henry, all of whom were in lively conversation with Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and I suspect Paul. It is no wonder he needed a table for eight in the corner. I also suspect (given the books on the table) that he believed that the Bible, as an inspired text, had the ability to speak both to the people to whom it was originally addressed, and with equal power and immediacy to the people who would sit in front of him in less than one day's time.

His approach was philology. He studies what the words meant, so that he would be able to bring them into dialogue with the present moment and offer an interpretation of what they might mean right now. In doing so, he overcame the presentism Smith decries. He also, offers a view of where academics and formation find unity. While I would recommend he get a different translation, theology and commentary, his basic insight is sound. Anyone who would preach the gospel must at once competently carry in his person the artifacts of the past and an integral virtue and holiness which makes him able to help people do what Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof* describes as the role of tradition, to make everyone know who he is and what God expects him to do.

Intellectual Intimacy

As a concluding illustration, I want to call your attention to the inscription above the McEssy Theological Resource Center. Msgr. Charles Meyer proposed this verse, *Cor Sapientis Quaerit Doctrinam* from Proverbs 18:15 and translated it as “The mind of the wise man seeks instruction.” Everyone challenged him about the translation, as the Latin word “cor” is usually translated “heart.” But taking on Msgr. Meyer should be done with caution. Remember that Latin is not the original language of the Bible, but a vernacular translation. The original language was Hebrew and the original word in the Book of Proverbs was *lev*. This word, Father Schoenstene tells me, might best be translated as interiority. The other word which people challenged Msgr. Meyer’s translation on was *doctrina*. They wanted to translate it as doctrine. He noted that the

Latin implied more than content. It implies the transaction of teaching. It's like the Ethiopian eunuch saying, "How can I understand if there is no one to teach me.?" (Acts 8:31) What happens if you substitute these words in the translation? What happens if instead of "The heart of the wise man seeks doctrine" you instead write "The interiority of the wise man seeks instruction"?

The solution to the problem I have been discussing, then, is to recognize that we are all affected by the megatrend of presentism and the novel doctrine of *sola experientia*. The prescription, then, is to overcome the fragmentation by seeking intellectual intimacy with the Lord as a legitimate goal of seminary formation. The intellectual path is not in opposition to the formational path, in fact, neither can exist without the other. But the intellectual path offers a privileged tool to address the error of *sola experientia* which is the basis for the flawed epistemology of the present day. Intellectual formation is essential, for it instructs us about which experiences are trustworthy. At the same time, the intellectual path must be a spiritual path. I have said before, the library should be your oratory and the chapel your stadium. You can pray anywhere, and think deeply and analytically while in prayer. My Oratorian friends told me, though I can't find the citation, that John Henry Newman said, that he prayed best with a pencil in hand. And of Saint Thomas Aquinas it is said that if he did not pray, he could not write.

There is no trace of fragmentation of knowledge in these two saintly scholars. Nor should there be in us. Catholic, as a word, means "according to the whole." The whole is human, intellectual, spiritual and pastoral. The best way for us to address the

problem of the fragmentation of knowledge is to be truly Catholic, truly “according to the whole.”