

Generosity and Wisdom: Jesuit Higher Education and the Life of the Mind

Fr. Ridley, Dr. Haddad, Dr. Buckley, Dr. Cunningham, and particularly my colleagues who have honored me with the Nachbahr Award, I am grateful to you all. I did not have the opportunity to know Bernard Nachbahr personally. I do, however, know that those who have preceded me as holders of this award have been some of the brightest and most accomplished scholars at Loyola. I am humbled at joining their ranks.

Although my name appears as the author of books and articles and it is, in part, because of that that I am here today, I have always been aware that my scholarly work has depended on those around me who have helped me on my way. First and foremost among those is my wife, Melinda. My field is not noted for its clarity of expression. Having been an editor of a journal, I am confident that we theologians are among some of the worst writers in the academy today. To the extent that I have been able to escape that occupational curse, it is largely due to Melinda's scrutiny of my work and her probing questions which force me to think and write more clearly. I have also been blessed with an extraordinary group of colleagues. From the moment I arrived at Loyola, they have provided the sort of stimulation, criticism and encouragement that are the hallmarks of all true friendships. It is they, as much as any book I have read, who have helped to make me into a theologian.

Last April when I learned that I had won the Nachbahr Award, I began to think about what I would say to you all this morning. I knew that if I had not finished my talk by the time the school year began, that it would be too hard to complete once the hustle and bustle of the early part of September came around. Hence, my remarks for this morning were already set down before the horrors of the 11th of September.

Today we celebrate the life of the mind and those in the Loyola community who have made significant academic contributions over the past year. Nevertheless, it seems somehow inappropriate to simply carry on as if events of the past weeks had not intervened, pushing themselves to the forefront of our attention. In that light, I would like to direct our attention briefly towards those who more than any others have captured our attention and admiration over the past several weeks. I am, of course, speaking of those who have devoted themselves to the rescue and recovery of others.

I do not know any of them personally, I cannot really imagine the physical and emotional demands of their jobs. I simply stand at a distance admiring their stamina, courage and resilience. As I do so, I am reminded of the words of the Jewish sage Jesus ben Sira. Ben Sira lived in the second century before Christ. He was a scholarly man who lived his life amid books, and students and teachers. At one point in his writings, however, he reflected on all those around him who were not, for various reasons, able to devote themselves to the life of the mind. He wrote with great respect of craftspeople, artisans, business people and builders. I am sure that had he known of them he would have included police and firefighters and EMTs as well. He knew of the great debt the scholar

has towards all those who make a community's life possible. He says that "All these people rely on their hands. They are skillful in their own work. Without them no city can be inhabited, and wherever they live they will not go hungry." Indeed, without them no college can function. He goes on to note that nobody asks these working people to do the jobs that scholars do. This, however, does not diminish them or the contributions they make. Instead he concludes by saying that, "They maintain the fabric of the world and their prayer is in the exercise of their trade."

We who are here today to celebrate the life of the mind must not forget the profound lessons in living which these people have taught us in the past weeks. We have indeed seen that they have maintained the fabric of the world and their prayer has been in the exercise of their trade. As we hold them in our minds and hearts, let us also turn with a sharper and more acute focus to the life of the mind.

I am not here to speak to you today as a professional theologian. I promise you, no lectures on St. Paul, St. Augustine, or Thomas Aquinas, though I hope you will hear their voices behind mine. Instead, I am to speak on the life of the mind, and to do so in about 20 minutes. No matter how much time I had, I do not think it is possible to speak about the life of the mind apart from the rest of life, apart from one's own life and its own particular twists and turns. As I indicated earlier, I cannot imagine writing about the things I have written about, and addressing those issues in the ways that I have tried to address them apart from my 12 years here at Loyola. Hence, when it comes to reflecting on the life of the mind – or at least the life of my mind – I naturally think of Loyola's role

in forming me as a teacher and scholar. As I have reflected on this over the past weeks, I find that there are several concrete ways the intellectual tradition which Loyola represents has formed and continues to form me. I want to talk about these things today.

In doing this, I am joining my voice to an already ongoing and lively conversation. Many of you will know that over the past decade Loyola, like most other Catholic institutions in the U.S., has been thinking hard about its identity. What, in particular, does it mean to be a Jesuit university? What is the Jesuit tradition of education? How do we infuse that into the life of the college? You would think that these questions would be relatively easy to answer. You simply ask the Jesuits. There are two reasons why this will not suffice as a strategy. The first is a pragmatic reason related to the declining number of Jesuits in this country. It is simply a fact that there are very few Jesuits engaged in the day to day life of the college either as teachers, or campus ministers, or administrators. While the number of Jesuits at Loyola has grown over the years I have been here, it is unlikely that we will return to the point where Jesuits comprise a significant proportion of the faculty. For the foreseeable future the task of articulating, embodying and passing on the Jesuit tradition in higher education is going to require a partnership between Jesuits and the lay faculty and administrators of Loyola, the Catholics, the non-Catholics and the non-Christians.

The second reason you can't simply rely on asking the Jesuits to define what it means for Loyola to be a Jesuit university is that, in regard to these questions, the Jesuits themselves are not very good at giving clear answers. This is largely because asking a Jesuit to

describe the Jesuit tradition of education and intellectual life is kind of like asking someone to describe their own face. A nose, eyes, a mouth, hair – or not. Well, really all faces have these. What makes your face uniquely yours? What makes Jesuit education distinctively Jesuit? That is much harder to say. In fact, it is much easier simply to show our faces and leave the descriptions to others. My point is that sometimes it is more helpful to have someone else describe our face for us. I can't give such a full description today, but as one who is a Christian, but not a Jesuit, or even Roman Catholic, I will speak about a couple of things that strike me most about the Jesuit intellectual tradition, at least as I have come to know it here.

First, we must look to the motto of the Society of Jesus – AMDG, ad maiorem dei gloriam, to the greater glory of God. What happens to teaching, thinking and studying when they are done to the greater glory of God? Well, this may seem odd, but from the start, teaching, thinking and studying to the greater glory of God allows one to relax in one's intellectual endeavors. Now, I am not talking about being lazy or slothful. Rather, when teaching, thinking and studying are done to the greater glory of God you are freed to take the subject matter seriously without having to take yourself seriously. You can be much more open to criticism and to collaboration because your glory is not at stake. Should benefits come to you as the result of your work, receive them with joy and gratitude. If those benefits don't come your way, you can still rejoice in hard work done well, knowing that you have been faithful in the tasks God has set before you.

Indeed, one of the added benefits of teaching, thinking and studying to the greater glory of God is that you are free to be more attentive to those around you whose work, though done well and faithfully, does not get acknowledged because it is not the sort of work our society values highly. Of course, each of us who walks into an office or a classroom or a dorm room at Loyola is the beneficiary of just this sort of work. Even though those who do this work are not directly engaged in thinking, studying and learning to the greater glory of God, we could not do our work if they did not do their work well and we should recognize this and make our gratitude plain.

Now the Jesuits, like most other Christians, believe that God's glory has been rather profligately displayed throughout all of creation. They are, of course, right in this. The Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins gave one of the best accounts of this view when he wrote, "The world is charged with the grandeur of God." In less poetic terms this view works itself out in St. Ignatius' desire that Jesuits learn to find God in all things. In terms of the life of a university it means that all sorts of subjects can be studied to the greater glory of God by those who can find God in all things. Indeed, the Jesuits have entered into all of the academic disciplines and have made significant contributions in them.

When it comes to teaching, thinking and studying this disposition to find God in all things results in a confident intellectual generosity. People who have been formed by this intellectual generosity engage the ideas, cultures and habits of others as new found friends or guests. Rather, than treating others and their ideas and cultures as threats or

potential enemies, the intellectually generous person welcomes them as guests who may bring us gifts we might never have imagined existed.

The downside of this is that intellectual generosity is very hard work. It usually demands that we learn new languages, study times and places very different from our own, and that we learn to understand arguments cast in strange idioms. Although I had done some of this hard intellectual spade work, my prior education had not encouraged intellectual generosity. My college years were spent at an institution which prized the integration of faith and learning. In many respects I received a fine education. But because it did not have the intellectual generosity that comes from finding God in all things, way too much time was spent protecting faith from learning. I then went to an avowedly secular graduate school. This place was, in many respects, no more generous than the place I had come from. The ideas were different, but the basic disposition was to treat different approaches and alternative ways of thinking as enemies who must be defeated, at least intellectually defeated. No doubt, others will tell you that I have not fully left my past behind. Nevertheless, it was here, within this particular aspect of Loyola's Jesuit character, that I really began to see the connection between finding God in all things and becoming more generous intellectually. If I pass on anything to my students I want it to be this.

Even in the course of learning to find God in all things, we should not forget that that world is not yet the way God wants it to be. Learning to find God in all things must not lead to a sort of moral blindness. Finding God in all things does not mean that God is

present in all things in the same ways. In certain times, places and contexts finding God means finding a judge or a prophetic critic. If learning to find God in all things will make us intellectually generous, we must also cultivate a discerning wisdom that enables us to recognize when and why things are and are not in the state God wishes them to be.

This is not a new challenge. You do not have to read very far in the Bible to see that one of the most pervasive problems among the people of God is their inability to recognize when God is not pleased with them, when their lives have become so corrupt that they can no longer recognize the ways in which God is present among them. Of course, nobody then or now wakes up one morning and says today, "It is Saturday. The sun is shining, so today I will become corrupt and spiritually blind." Such things happen to us over time, through a series of seemingly benign or even prudent decisions we make in the course of our day to day lives. It is rare that a single event or decision that we make leads us astray. It is much more likely that we lose our way through inattentiveness. A small concession here; a half-truth told there; a seemingly clever business decision here; a loss of temper there; and slowly but surely we lose our ability to find God in anything, let alone all things.

Being wise, then, means being attentive to the manner in which God is found in relation to all things. Without such wisdom, intellectual generosity simply becomes fatuous or worse. Without wisdom, the generous openness characteristic of studying, thinking and learning to the greater glory of God risks becoming a mask for indifference or self-interest. Without wisdom our teaching and studying will not testify to God's glory or

worse, it will testify falsely. It will misdirect people away from God, inviting them to join us in our blindness or indifference.

Within the context of an institution like Loyola, such wisdom is often formed and sharpened through the Jesuits' passion for social justice. Almost a year ago Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, the Superior General of the Jesuits made just this point in a speech about American Jesuit higher education. He noted "If the professors [at Jesuit universities] choose viewpoints incompatible with the justice of the Gospel and consider researching, teaching and learning to be separable from moral responsibility for their social repercussions, they are sending a message to their students. They are telling them that they can pursue their careers and self-interest without reference to anyone other than themselves." I suspect that there are few, if any, professors here or at any other Jesuit institution who willingly and aggressively choose viewpoints incompatible with the justice of the Gospel. Alternatively, through a failure of wisdom, by inattention, and a lack of reflection and self-examination, it is very easy to adopt patterns of thinking and acting incompatible with the justice of the Gospel. Wisdom, then, must be honed by rigorous attentiveness to the ways in which God is to be found in all things, including ourselves.

Had I more time, it might be interesting to reflect on how generosity and wisdom must walk hand in hand throughout all aspects of a college's life if it is to be true to its Jesuit identity. My time is just about up, however, so let me summarize by noting that wisdom in conjunction with intellectual generosity form what I take to be two of the central

pillars of the Jesuit intellectual tradition. Moreover, they are the two central components of intellectual work which has the power to endure long after we have left the scene. Finally, it is these two characteristics which mark all thinking, studying and learning which are done to the greater glory of God.