Entering into the Company of Educated Men and Women:

How Your Ave Maria University Education Can be Better than my Harvard Education

Address at the Honors Program banquet, at the opening of the academic year

Feast of St. Augustine, August 28, 2013

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There are some institutions which strive to imitate what Harvard is doing (including especially, as we might mention here, a certain Harvard wannabe university in the snow-blinded plains of the northern mid-west). Now, most of these Harvard-imitators fail, because Harvard has a 30 billion dollar endowment, and the others are far behind, and because Harvard is in Cambridge, and they are, for example, on a prairie and in an unexceptional, mid-sized industrial city past its prime.

I don’t want to discuss this evening how you could imitate, or be like, Harvard undergraduates, in your years here, and (maybe) succeed better at the same game. That is not the sense of my title. The sense of my title is that you can do what Harvard wants to be, but never succeeded at: what it still says it wants to do, but has never put into practice.

I understand my remarks to be part of a kind of pause, and sizing up—a big catching of your breath—before you begin your college years. Now it’s right that you this. Why? Well, you have read, in preparation for you orientation here, Joseph Pieper’s great, life-changing book, on Leisure the Basis of Culture. If I were to give you a quiz on it right now, and ask you what leisure is, what would you say? Don’t worry: I’m not really going to give you a quiz. I’ll tell you: leisure is, in the first instance, a negative concept. It refers to the absence of something. In particular, it refers to the absence of, and therefore a certain freedom from, the yoke of necessity. Of course, leisure in the fullest sense has a positive meaning, referring to what this “freeing up” from necessity is supposed to be used for.

To understand this correctly, think here of the agriculture year as marking the standard mode of life for most of our fellow human beings who have walked this earth. In the spring, you sow. In the summer, you work hard at cultivation. In the fall, you break your back harvesting. In the winter, you preserve, repair, and get ready for the following spring. The cycle is endless, and children are immediately welcomed as additional, unpaid hands, to help with the work.

Now suppose that on some farm one of the young men, reaching the prime of his physical strength, or one of the young women, at the peak of her fertility and child-bearing capacity, were to say, out of the blue, to the father or the farm administrator: “I would like to go away for four years, at your expense, to read, converse, and to think.”

From a purely natural perspective, this request would be … insane. “The realities of life,” the father or farm administrator might say, “are the realities of productive work on the farm. What you are asking for is some kind of foolish, airy-fairy, essentially childish avoidance of the real world. You want those of us who are working to pay for you to shirk work.”

So much from a purely natural and secular perspective: What if we view the request from a higher perspective, a transcendent and supernatural perspective?
As we tell this story we can simplify a bit and say that, just at this point, it is as if the Church intervenes, and it does so following the example of God, who long before that stepped in and gave the human race a massive correction in its propensity for endless work, in its willingness, as fallen beings, to enslave itself needlessly to the yoke of necessity. For God worked for six days in creating the world, and then He took the seventh off, to rest, and He said that we were to follow him and do likewise. You rest one out of seven days. The work is for the rest, not the rest for the work. The rest is a time of worship, prayer, reflection on God’s law, fellowship, family, and recreation.

The Church has followed God’s example, not simply in insisting that we honor the Lord’s Day, which tellingingly is on the start of the week, not its end, but generally by teaching that “Mary has chosen the better part, and it will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:42). When the Church founded the first universities, it did so out of the same motive with which it fostered contemplative prayer, and great art: that it is good for man to be freed from necessities and turn towards beauty, goodness, and truth, which have their origin and ending in God.

This is a great gift for you, which ultimately derives from the offices of the Church, and, before that, the mercy of God, and which of course depends on the sacrifices of others, such as your parents, who when they help you to attend college are standing in the place of God. I want you to understand this gift, so that you use it well. Almost no one understands it: be one of the few who understands and uses it well. Only one of the ten lepers gave thanks (Luke 17:17). No one invited to the wedding banquet could free themselves from their entanglements and attend (Mt 22:1-8). But, you, give thanks, and you, go to the banquet.

So, you have four years to study, learn, and seek the truth. You wish to use that well. What is the mark that you have done so? How will you be able to tell, at the end of the day, that you made good use of your talents?

Here is where (if it is not blasphemous) I wish to bring in Harvard—not the reality which is Harvard, but the aspiration which it originally had and occasionally still gives lip service to (and it must have had a great aspiration, to end up where it is now). At graduation at Harvard, by an old tradition, after the names of all the graduates have been called, and the diplomas have been handed out, the Dean says, “welcome into the company of educated men and women.” And I think that is a good statement. If at the end of your four years, you enter the “company of educated men and women,” that is, well-educated men and women, you will have succeeded, but otherwise, your four years, understood as years of schooling, will be a failure. So it is very important for you to know what makes someone well-educated. I take it that you are not well-educated now. So in the next four years, one hopes that you will change, from being not well-educated, to being well-educated. What will effect, or constitute, that change?

One wants to avoid the mistake Socrates warned against, of thinking one knows, when one does not. When I was graduated from Harvard, I believed I was well-educated, but I was not. I was among the top ten students in my class, I had won a highly competitive and prestigious fellowship to study in Britain, and I knew that I had studied harder, and in a greater range of subjects, than any of my peers. But, again, I was not well-educated, and I will tell you why in a moment. I discovered that I was not well-educated only after I had left college.

Socrates would have said that I was not better off than another undergraduate, one of my peers, who wrote at the time an essay, which I disliked very much, called “The $60,000 Smirk.” Harvard has a slick magazine, called naturally enough Harvard Magazine (those Harvard people are so clever, aren’t they?), and back then they chose, each year, an undergraduate who would be a regular columnist and contribute, for each issue, an essay from an undergraduate’s point of view. As you can imagine, to be invited to be that writer would be a huge honor, especially for someone wanting to go into journalism. Anyway, this undergraduate writer, after he had received his diploma, as his last column for the magazine in June – I remember this very vividly even now—wrote a column called “The $60,000 Smirk”, in which he reflected
on what he had learned in college. It used the figure, $60,000, because (shockingly), back then the total cost of year at Harvard was only $15,000, and therefore four years totaled to $60,000. (No, I am not *that* old! Rather, you can see now why people complain about how sharply the expense of college has risen. Today, as you might guess, Harvard costs $60,000 for just one year!) His column was a jaded and somewhat angry statement that, in his four years of college, all that he had learned was how to pose, and say nothing, but appear to be smart at cocktail parties, through cultivating a kind of skepticism and cynicism which led him to deflate and debunk everything. Hence, college for him meant acquiring a very costly, $60,000 smirk.

Well, at least he was honest. And, as I said, Socrates would praised him for being wiser than I was, because at least he knew he did not know.

I should have listened to the Dean of the College at the time, Henry Rosovsky. In researching this address, I found an interview that Rosovsky did back then, on how Harvard was overhauling its curriculum and instituting a new Core Curriculum. When asked why it was going to do this, Rosovsky replied, “When our students graduate at commencement, we welcome them ‘to the company of educated men and women.’ Hearing it year after year started to bother me. I felt many of our students weren’t getting a true, well-balanced education. Instead they were being quickly thrown into career and hobby education. There seemed to be an important missing ingredient without which people aren’t truly educated.” (Hobby education! I haven’t seen that phrase before – but how telling! And it is the only alternative given to vocational education!)

Harvard never did institute a Core curriculum, even though it said that it had and still claims that it has a Core, and when Dean Rosovsky, later in the interview, went on to explain what he meant by a Core, he gave a very flawed response, which I will tell you about.

But first I want to tell you how I discovered that I was not well-educated. In a word, I became a Catholic. Before that I was an Evangelical Christian, and, a couple of years before that, before I had a conversion experience, I was an atheist.

What I am going to say next may sound very curious, but I will say it nonetheless. Before I became Catholic, I was profoundly anti-intellectual, or, better, anti-reason and anti-rationality. It is strange to say this, because while being profoundly anti-rationality, as I say, I was getting marks at the top of my class in subjects like statistics, formal logic, and computational theory, which certainly seem to be rational subjects. But perhaps what I am saying is not so strange, if we look at the flourishing of relativism and nihilism among ‘rationalist’ intellectuals today, and if whether one is pro-rationality or anti-rationality hinges ultimately on whether we have confidence that the universe and the human understanding are rational because of their relationship to God.

The realization that I was profoundly anti-intellectual came in the course of my conversion, when I was reading a book by G.K. Chesterton called The Dumb Ox, an introduction to the life and philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas. Chesterton describes a scene of Luther standing over a fire and exulting over the burning of books....(I was going to paraphrase it, but then I realize, hey, I can find it on the internet easily enough, and quote the passage exactly for you.)... So I am going to read this long passage from Chesterton, and I apologize for that, but I also know that when I am done there will be no need to apologize, because—as you will understand if you have read Chesterton—his writing is so wonderful that we could read lots of it aloud and still wish to hear more.

Anyway, this is the passage:

It is said that the great Reformer publicly burned the Summa Theologica and the works of Aquinas; and with the bonfire of such books this book may well come to an end. They say it is very difficult to burn a book; and it must have been exceedingly difficult to burn such a mountain of
books as the Dominican had contributed to the controversies of Christendom. Anyhow, there is something lurid and apocalyptic about the idea of such destruction, when we consider the compact complexity of all that encyclopaedic survey of social and moral and theoretical things. All the close-packed definitions that excluded so many errors and extremes; all the broad and balanced judgments upon the clash of loyalties or the choice of evils; all the liberal speculations upon the limits of government or the proper conditions of justice; all the distinctions between the use and abuse of private property; all the rules and exceptions about the great evil of war; all the allowances for human weakness and all the provisions for human health; all this mass of medieval humanism shrivelled and curled up in smoke before the eyes of its enemy; and that great passionate peasant rejoiced darkly, because the day of the Intellect was over. Sentence by sentence it burned, and syllogism by syllogism; and the golden maxims turned to golden flames in that last and dying glory of all that had once been the great wisdom of the Greeks. The great central Synthesis of history, that was to have linked the ancient with the modern world, went up in smoke and, for half the world, was forgotten like a vapour.

I remember the exact moment and place when I read those words, on the train I was taking from Boston to Washington, DC, to congregate there with the other scholars who were going to fly to Britain later that week and take up their fellowships there. When I read that passage, I said inwardly, He is describing me. I recognize myself in Luther. And in the world I was educated in, what Chesterton is referring to really has vanished like vapor. Luther's world is Harvard's world. In my spirit it was as if I said to myself, in the words of Isaiah, "Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips, from a people of unclean lips!" (Is. 6:5).

Here is evidence of what I mean – not the whole story, by a long shot, but just some evidence: Except for two semesters when I was studying the history of philosophy (and where we spent the greatest amount of time studying skeptics such as Zeno, Berkeley, and Hume), and a one semester course on the Hebrew Bible (which was also taught from a highly skeptical viewpoint), in my four years of college, I studied nothing written before 1850. Ethology, psychopathology, computational theory, logic, cosmology, quantum mechanics, human physiology, computer architecture, as well as philosophy of language and philosophy of science— in fact, hardly anything was older than even 50 years.

In the years immediately after becoming Catholic, I turned to the classical languages, Greek and Latin, and the classical world, and I became familiar with something which was entirely new to me, and which I never so much as encountered at Harvard — what I would refer to now, and what is known as, "classical humanism". I became acquainted with the Fathers of the Church and learned how to read Scripture according to the mind and heart of the Church. I studied St. Thomas Aquinas and began what for me has been a very long task of patiently rediscovering and reclaiming that entire civilization that Chesterton speaks about but which, strange to say, had been “vaporized” at Harvard.

I came to see that there is a rationality other than scientific rationality and, if I may say it, higher than it – the rationality which for the ancients was found in the twin virtues of wisdom (sophia) and prudence (phronesis). I was deeply affected when I encountered John Henry Newman, since for the first time I saw, or fully appreciated, that the highest standards of thought were possible not only in quantitative reasoning, but also in the rhetorical and forensic reasoning that masters such as Newman had learned from classical models. With the help of my study of Latin, which I began at that time — and this may also seem strange to say — I mastered English grammar and diction for the first time. Because I "believed that I might understand" (St. Augustine), I came to see that the systematic study of metaphysics is possible, and that there are fundamental explanations of the world which are both valid and deeper than, although complementary to, those provided by the natural sciences.

As you become more familiar with the Core at Ave Maria University, you will see that what the Core provides, and mandates, coincides pretty exactly with everything that I discovered I was missing in my Harvard education. That is not an accident. The Church, besides being the Founder of universities in modern times, is always an “Expert in Humanity,” as is said, and a Custodian of the true riches of the
past - intellectual, cultural, artistic. This is all explained in a document called *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, on Catholic universities, written by Blessed Pope John Paul II, which provides the framework and foundation of Ave Maria University, and which serves as its true charter.

Incidentally, please note that at Ave Maria University we do not wish to make the flip-side mistake of teaching only the old and neglecting the new. That would actually be far less of a mistake, but still it would be a mistake. After you study the Core in your first two years, no one would be more delighted than I, if you spend the next two immersing yourself in the latest science, social science, mathematics, or principles of business and finance. Indeed, the possibility of doing so is one thing that sets Ave Maria apart from some other genuinely Catholic universities.

However, to return now to my original question: How can you tell whether or not, after your four years here, you are well-educated? Will you be well-educated simply because you have studied the Core together with some specialized discipline?

Dean Rosovsky, when he was being interviewed about the Core, had no consistent answer to this question. He had no coherent idea about the purpose of a Core, what the Core was supposed to foster and lead to. *Everyone has to study something broad, and something specialized,* he said. – But that’s not a core, since broad areas need not overlap. -- *Everyone will specialize, but, in order that each may understand everyone else, each person has to study a little bit of everyone else’s specialty.* – But that’s not a core as well, but only a requirement for avoiding a complete lack of mutual understanding. – At another point he says, *An educated person should be able to control our language, to read and write English effectively, to express ideas, to communicate.* – But neither is that a core, or a recipe for a core. The ancient Sophists had a similar view of a good education.

At last the interviewer asks, “Do you agree with Charles Eliot, the turn-of-the-century president of Harvard, that a five-foot shelf could hold the books necessary for a liberal education?” That is, the interviewer is asking whether the Great Books approach would be a good education. One would think that Rosovsky would not agree with this. But even here he says, “Yes, if President Eliot meant that there is such a thing as a self-taught student. I’ve met many people who’d never been to school and were obviously self-taught. There is no substitute for an inquiring mind and books.” Perhaps it was not possible for a current Harvard Dean to disagree directly, and in print, with a past Harvard president. In any case, when Rosovsky spoke approvingly of this Great Books approach, which Harvard as an institution has not endorsed for about 150 years, this was the closest Rosovsky ever came to describing a true “Core” system of education.

The so-called “Core” that was instituted under Rosovsky and has been recently revised at Harvard never was a Core, but simply a distribution requirement — that is, the college mandates only that every student has to take at least one course chose from each several different areas (note: theology is not one such area) --which does little to guarantee, in itself, that every Harvard undergraduate has a good shot at becoming a well-educated person, or, let us say, has a good shot at remedying whatever deficiency Rosovsky saw or thought he saw in those graduates being year after year welcomed into the company of educated men and women.

There are several good ways of describing a well-educated person: Aristotle said that a well-educated person was someone who was a good judge in any area of thought or art, that is, someone whose opinion would be interesting and have weight. Newman said that it was a person who had acquired the intellectual virtues, including the virtue of knowledge. The Church has a view on this matter, I think, which is implicit in *Ex Corde*: namely, a well-educated person is someone whose knowledge is both comprehensive and integrated. It is comprehensive, because he is widely familiar with important things, but his knowledge is also integrated, and this in two ways: it is integrated, as we might say, “downward,” and also integrated “upward.” It is integrated “downward” in the sense that he can trace what he knows to more fundamental causes and realities. For example, he sees Western culture and
history from the viewpoint of its origin in Greece, Rome, and Judaism. He sees physics in relation to
metaphysics. He sees economics and psychology in relation to a sound philosophical account of human
nature. So he can understand everything in terms of what is ultimately more fundamental. But then his
knowledge is also integrated, so to speak, “upward,” because he integrates faith and reason, and he sees
the same realities, though in different ways and to a different extent, both with the light of faith and with
the light of reason.

All teaching is meant to take the place of trial and error. I myself was an auto-didact in this most
important matter of what counts as a good education. However, together with your other professors at
Ave Maria, and with the help of the Dean and the administration, we have shaped your studies to save
you from some of the wasted time and wrong turns, and to help prepare your path so that under our
guidance, you can more quickly learn what we learned, and, with a little help from above, I hope, in your
own time far out-pass us.