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A CATHOLIC ALTERNATIVE TO DECADENT COLLEGES

The quality of culture is usually measured in terms of such things as the availability of operas, plays, art galleries, and poetry readings. It is common to associate both culture and civilization with cosmopolitan cities such as London, Paris, and New York, and with famous colleges and universities such as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. However, as Sir Kenneth Clark wrote in *Civilisation: A Personal View*, civilization "can be created in a monastery or a court just as well as in a city — perhaps rather better."

Civilization can appear in the most obscure, humble, and unlikely of places — not only in monasteries but also in a hovel, as Odysseus learns when he appears as the beggar in disguise in the hut of the swineherd Eumaeus (in Homer's *Odyssey*). This simple servant treats his disguised royal guest with hospitality fit for the gods: "Odysseus was delighted by this welcome and did not hide his pleasure. 'My good host,' he said, 'I hope Zeus and the other gods will reward you with your heart's desire for receiving me so kindly.'" This gracious hospitality resembles the same good manners that Telemachus displays toward the goddess Pallas Athene appearing in the disguise of Mentos at the beginning of the *Odyssey*.

Homer's *Odyssey* provides criteria for civilization that locate it, not in great cities or renowned centers of learning, but in the customs and rituals of daily life. The kindness of Eumaeus to the beggar and the welcome of Telemachus to his visitor form a recurring pattern throughout the book. Telemachus himself is received with the same gestures of hospitality he proffered to the stranger. Visiting Nestor and his sons for news of his father, Telemachus is greeted warmly: "But as soon as they caught sight of the strangers they all made a move in their direction, waving their hands in welcome, and beckoning the newcomers to join them." When Telemachus travels next to Menelaus's home to seek more news of Odysseus, the king is celebrating a wedding banquet. He tells the servant, "Unyoke their horses at once, and bring our visitors into the house to join us at the feast." Thus the custom of hospitality to strangers of all ranks and backgrounds, from princes to beggars, distinguishes a civilized people, who consistently demonstrate graciousness as a normal part of daily living.

More than the availability of art, poetry, music, sports, and scholarship, civilization is a habitual way of life, an environment or atmosphere that cultivates the art of living. It involves a set of actions that reflect manners, formalities, and rituals that uplift

human life and bring cheer to the heart and soul — not just on special occasions but in the course of daily life. Civilized ways awaken in man a sense of propriety and dignity and an appreciation of the true, the good, the beautiful, and the noble — the pursuit of which is desirable for its own sake rather than as a means to an end. More than the sophisticated, exotic pleasures of famous ancient cities, civilization involves the considerate amenities of gracious living and the delicious taste of simple goodness provided by life's purest enjoyments. In the scenes of hospitality from the *Odyssey*, the travelers appreciate the hearty welcome, convivial affability, sumptuous food and sparkling wine, the cheerful fire, and delightful conversation and storytelling. The opposite of civilization in the *Odyssey* is barbarism, the violence and cannibalism of the Cyclops, whose only pleasures are the visceral ones of eating and drinking like animals.

While colleges and universities have traditionally been associated with the qualities of civilization, they have to a large degree developed in recent times into decadent, barbaric places promoting immorality. While cultural activities like music, art, theater, poetry, and athletics continue to flourish, giving the illusion of refinement, true civilization has largely deserted the groves of academe. What is life like in most secular centers of higher learning? In the name of "safe sex," universities make condoms available and pander to the lowest desires of undergraduates. The presence of gay and lesbian organizations gives an aura of normalcy and acceptability to perversion. The one-sided, unbalanced nature of guest speakers and visiting lecturers caters to the extremes of political correctness. The curriculum bends to the multicultural and feminist agenda, and thought police go witchhunting for sexist language in the classroom. The absence of dress codes or standards of good taste in clothing encourage weird styles of fashion, from men wearing earrings to women wearing jewelry in their noses and lips. Add to this scene the constant bombardment of loud music, R- and X-rated movies, and homosexual plays. Such is the daily fare served to many undergraduates in colleges and universities throughout the nation. For example, the newspaper of a small liberal arts college in the Midwest reported that "sexpert"/entertainer Jay Friedman "demonstrated some tips on the best ways to use condoms with a huge replica of a condom on stage" and "ended his presentation by showing slides of photographs [male nudes] from an erotic Scandinavian magazine...."

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Fifty percent of education, remarked G.K. Chesterton, is atmosphere. A culture is the soil or environment in which something grows. The atmosphere or environment in higher education does not truly cultivate intellectual life or spiritual formation because the preoccupation with sex, hedonism, and vulgar entertainment attacks the virtues of purity and chastity which are germane to knowledge and wisdom. As Socrates explains in the *Phaedo*, chastity, temperance, and self-discipline are essential conditions for the cultivation of philosophy and the life of the mind seeking wisdom: "For one who is not pure himself to attain to the realm of purity would no doubt be a breach of universal justice."

As an exception to the rule, the alternative Catholic colleges that have been established since the 1970s have created an intellectual environment that does not divorce learning from atmosphere or ignore the true meaning of culture.

In the two years (1990-92) I taught at one such college, Christendom College in Front Royal, Virginia, I saw the art of Catholic education at its best, the transmission of culture through daily living and through an ambience instilled by prayer and worship as a normal part of life. Before every class, instructors lead their students in a prayer, and every classroom has a crucifix on the wall. Students and faculty who eat the noon meal together in the commons say grace before dining. Students and faculty attend daily Mass together, and the rosary is recited each day. Outstanding Catholic intellectuals and leaders address the students as part of the lecture series. In my two years at the college I had the privilege of hearing addresses from Fr. Joseph Fessio, Fr. John Hardon, Peter Kreeft, and Joseph Scheidler—to name a few. To be in an atmosphere where the Catholic faith is loved, professed, and practiced is to begin to understand the meaning of culture as having origins in the *cultus*, divine worship.

To teach students who follow a dress code dignifies the whole activity of learning and gives it a seriousness of purpose that befits the life of the mind. To teach students who have a sense of vocation about learning, who have spiritual depth and place God at the center of their lives, and who are mature and responsible, is a teacher's dream come true. Prior to coming to Christendom I did not dare teach the entirety of *The Divine Comedy* to undergraduates or even attempt to teach works like Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, or T.S. Eliot's poetry, but at Christendom there is no "dumbing down" or pandering to the lowest common denominator.

The whole culture of the college cultivates intellectual excellence, and this statement from the 1992-1994 catalog summarizes the way of life that creates this culture: "Education is furthered not only in the classroom and chapel, but also at mealtime, in leisure time, and throughout the entire day as students converse with each other and with professors."

Culture is a way of life, man acting according to his noblest nature and the highest standards of intellectual, moral, and social excellence. The common meal at noon shared by faculty and students and the social occasions that are family-centered cultivate friendship and conversation. Students at Christendom are not ruled by peer culture or dominated by an ethos that seeks pleasure in safe sex, loud music, beer, and television. They enjoy the company and conversation of faculty members, and they delight in the spouses and children of their instructors. Exceptionally imaginative and especially sociable, these students understand the meaning of good old-fashioned fun. Faculty members and their families are invited to all of their extra-curricular activities, from dances to talent shows to Oktoberfest to St. Patrick's Day festivities. At Christendom one rediscovers old-world "mirth," jocund laughter, games, and festivals that recall the wholesome, innocent play of Robin Hood and his merry band. Students and faculty—young and old—revel in a common way of life and in an ancient patrimony that unites the college community in the bonds of charity and friendship and in the love of God.

Compared to the prestigious universities, Christendom is a humble, obscure place. The buildings and grounds are modest, not state of the art or lavish. To judge it merely from the outside is to be beguiled. Like a monastery or the hut of Odysseus's swineherd, it does not seek to dazzle or overwhelm. To be in the midst of an authentic Catholic college, however, is to see, feel, and taste the meaning of culture—men and women from all over the country and from foreign nations following a common way of life that recognizes the objectivity of truth, the universality of the Catholic Church, and the venerable traditions, customs, music, philosophy, history, art, and literature of the Catholic heritage. On any given day in the life of the college, one witnesses those civilizing actions and gestures that dignify the Christian way of life: the sign of the cross before

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the prayers that begin class, the teaching of Catholic authors and works in all appropriate courses, daily Mass and rosary, convivial discussions and rich laughter in the dining hall, propriety and decorum in language and dress, and lectures by great Catholic thinkers. If one multiplies this by four years of academic life, the meaning of education as the transmission of culture becomes even more pronounced. It is not just a habitual, customary way of life, but, to use Matthew Arnold's phrase, a life that conforms to "the best that has been thought and said"—the best of classical writers and great works, the most beautiful forms of the liturgy and Church music, the most considerate forms of conversation, the most wholesome, joy-filled forms of entertainment, and the most genuine forms of charity and friendship.

Is a Christian culture in a Catholic college a utopia, and are Christendom students perfect and flawless? No, a Christian society is not the City of God, and Christendom students and faculty reflect the same Original Sin that haunts all of mankind.

Christendom students commit many of the faults of typical students. They occasionally fall asleep in class, arrive late for an 8:30 class, fall behind in their reading, turn in papers late, study for a Spanish test in an English class, or miss an English class to study for the history test that follows in the next hour. Like all youth, they are often imprudent and fail to weigh consequences or exercise foresight. And like the way of all flesh, they are subject to temptations of the world and the devil.

However, the remarkable characteristic of Christendom students is that they do not deny their faults and sins. They do not call evil good and good evil. When confronted about dereliction of duty, they voluntarily apologize and show true contrition. Saying "I'm sorry" and meaning it comes naturally to these students—a reflection of the habit of sacramental confession, which tames pride and defensiveness and acknowledges sin.

Also, human failings are not encouraged by the lack of rules or absence of moral ideals at typical secular colleges. On the contrary, Christendom College expects students to be Christian ladies and gentlemen, and governs them according to the highest Catholic moral principles. On the other hand, the typical secular college leads students into temptations by creating coed dorms, providing easy access to condoms, authorizing gay and lesbian organizations, and cultivating an atmosphere of moral relativism in the guise of "tolerance" and "diversity." While many administrators and faculty in secular colleges abdicate their responsibility as adults by sacrificing the norm of *in loco parentis* for permissive policies and by failing to demand moral excellence, Christendom College always views students as images of God with the dignity of the sons and daughters of their heavenly Father. Students are expected to strive to follow the ideals of Christian perfection.

Skeptics will of course argue that the alternative Catholic college creates an artificial environment, an escape from the problems of life and the "real world." How will students ever learn to cope with the opposition they will face in secular society if they are protected from opposition and do not encounter a pluralistic world in their undergraduate years? Such a question presupposes that the purpose of education is to learn to cope rather than to be nourished and strengthened with the truth. Why should parents spend exorbitant sums for their children to cope—a lesson that requires no formal education since much of their lives will involve the many crosses, trials, temptations to which human flesh is heir? Who copes better with the opponent in battle, the soldier who is trained and disciplined or the recruit with no experience? Who is better equipped to win in athletics or in the battle of ideas or in the struggle between good and evil, those who have learned to use their bodies and minds and consciences to the fullest or those who are unarmed? Christendom College prepares its students with all the "armor" that St. Paul speaks of for the battles against powers and principalities. The purpose of a liberal education is to receive a moral foundation in wisdom and virtue, to recognize God's truth in all bodies of knowledge, and to lift the mind to a contemplation of truth, goodness, and beauty. Formal education has nothing to

do with "coping" or surviving, but rather involves learning to "live well."

Cynics will object that students at orthodox Catholic colleges become inflexible and excessively dogmatic—that their formation lacks balance. It is ludicrous to hear such accusations, for the real intolerance and bigotry occurs in the myriad politically correct colleges across the nation. These schools censor speech, politicize their curriculum, invite only trendy speakers with their ideological nostrums, and prevent students from hearing both sides of controversial moral issues. At one Midwestern liberal arts college, officially invited lecturers for the past few years included the president of the ACLU, the former president of the National Organization for Women, and a gay activist. Only one side, the politically correct view, was presented to the students. Indoctrination calls itself education. Although Christendom is an orthodox Catholic college whose guest speakers profess and defend the Catholic faith and support the Magisterium, students do not remain ignorant of points of view that challenge orthodox Catholicism. They study such things as the Arian heresy, the Protestant revolt, *The Communist Manifesto*, and *Roe v. Wade* in depth. They are thoroughly informed about and acquainted with the ideas that challenge Catholic faith and teaching (if they're going to cope in the secular world, they have to be!), and they are unafraid of the competition of ideas in the intellectual forum. Most students at secular colleges, however, *never* hear the case against abortion, study the thought of Augustine or Aquinas, or encounter *Humanae Vitae* or *Veritatis Splendor*. So which form of education is narrow, doctrinaire, and intolerant?

The prevalent decadence in academe is a descent into moral and intellectual barbarism. Evil is called good, darkness is preferred to light, propaganda is named education, and sophistry is called philosophy. Instead of transmitting the culture and wisdom of the ages, universities are subverting the very basis of civilization itself by lowering their moral standards and diluting their curriculum. The ending of Pope's *Dunciad* perfectly summarizes the state of affairs:

Religion blushing veils her sacred fires,
And unawares morality expires.
For public flame, nor private, dares to shine;
Nor human spark is left, nor glimpse divine!
thy dread empire, Chaos! is restored;
Light dies before thy uncreating word:
Thy hand, great Artarch! lets the curtain fall;
And universal darkness buries all.

The Christendom Colleges of today are what the Harvards and Yales of yesterday once were—testimony to the sacredness of learning and the beauty of daily life.

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