

Ceremony 4
Academic Oration
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JESUITS' CHURCH – VALLETTA

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Questions like ‘What is the university?’ ‘What is its role?’ are typical philosophical questions. They are characteristically huge questions. But they are queries which engage us continuously. They are important questions. They were asked by a long line of distinguished thinkers who gave variant, yet overlapping, answers: universities should be governed by “an idea of reason” (Immanuel Kant); they serve the culture of the nation-state (Wilhelm von Humboldt); they exist to “civilise gentlemen” (John Henry Newman), to “develop an intelligent professionalism” (Karl Jaspers), to “promote the culture of society” (José Ortega y Gasset), to find a Christian-compatible set of values (Walter Moberly), to maintain an academic life (Kenneth Minogue). These descriptions are not just theoretical constructs; they are also ethical ideals: they have to do with values and with beliefs. But one must ask: is such lofty discourse still possible today? Today we speak of the ‘university of excellence’. But is this a mere tautology? Jacques Derrida’s question in the 1980s remains important: “What is the *raison d’être* of universities?” And, as Derrida reflected, the professors among us, and each of us as colleagues, implicitly make a profession of faith, a pledge; we take up a freely assumed responsibility. However, Derrida goes on to speak in a way that does not answer his question. He thinks that such a question *cannot* be answered.

Of course, it is mistaken to think that the university ever had a singular idea grounding it; it is clear, historically, that the university has always been the locus of contesting and overlapping ideas and values; it is mistaken to think that it ever existed in an ideal state from which it simply veered off course. However, it appears to be intellectually irresponsible to imagine that there cannot be any contemporary answer to such a vital question. It is true that the slopes of knowledge, truth and reason are more slippery than ever. It is easy to be pessimistic: universities often style themselves as multiversities as the conversations between disciplines become ever more fragile and fragmented and as universities become more and more entrepreneurial. It can be argued that universities often simply pander to an instrumental view of the world; they appear to limit themselves more and more to an instrumental reason that sustains a technological-bureaucratic society. They may see themselves as producing commodities – perhaps the commodity of knowledge – rather than as seeking wisdom. In some ways, high culture has given way to no culture at all (Bloom 1987). At the same time, universities are challenged and are even displaced as the primary producers and disseminators of knowledge. One must ask: is the very idea of a university at an end?

But universities do make universal claims: they are good approximations of Jürgen Habermas’ ideal speech situation. Universities do attempt to speak to a universal

audience, they do receive all comers. Universities do style themselves as being open to all realms and domains of reason. Perhaps the best way to describe the current university is to recognize that it is open-textured: universities, in order not to fall into ruin, must sustain a persistent and open engagement with all around them in their truth claims and in their activities. This kind of engagement requires courage, resilience, and determination.

It is also very significant to note that Derrida's call for responsibility is not extrinsic or alien to the human person. Our own experience tells us that this call for responsibility appears to respond to the human person's very constitution. Perhaps it could be understood best if we were to refer to the opening words of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*: "All human beings, by nature, desire to know". In this sense, it seems that the most significant source of the identity of the university is the desire or thirst for knowledge that is native to the human person. Hence, the question 'What is the university?' and 'Who is the human person?' are interrelated. It seems that universities find their distant roots in the kind of self-questioning Socrates was wont to indulge in. The human person wants to know and understand herself and wants to know and understand that which surrounds her. The human person wants to discern meaning. The human person seeks truth. In this light, universities and humanism are inextricably intertwined. Indeed, perhaps one should speak of a university as a society of various, yet interrelated, 'humanisms'. The various disciplines are different yet partial manifestations of the wonder of human personhood. Each of these 'humanisms' is partial and cannot think that its considerations are the singular answer to the question of a humane future, that is, to the promotion of knowledge, justice, freedom, solidarity and dignity in society. Such matters can never be approached through the work of any one discipline; seeking to reach our humane aspirations requires painstaking mutual collaboration and dialogue.

In such manner, different disciplines are like siblings with very different characters but who are nonetheless able to communicate with one another, where communication, although sometimes difficult, serves to enrich all those involved. The reasonableness of the various disciplines – including the reasonableness of theology – makes possible the *universitas scientiarum*: we have the variegated coherence of a single reasonability with its very different aspects.

For example, the Faculty of Laws examines the relationship between the individual and society, between freedom and law. These relationships are at the heart of the question of justice: how could we enact just laws? What is the relationship between ethics and law? How could a juridical norm that constitutes a just ordering of freedom, of human dignity, and of human rights be found? These are questions that concern us today in our democratic processes, in our media. These are questions that lead us to gaze on our future. Jürgen Habermas expresses the vast consensus of contemporary thinking very well when he avers that legitimacy could be derived from two sources: one source is the egalitarian political participation of all citizens and the other is the reasonable form of the political debate. With respect to the latter condition, he explains that the political debate must be characterized by a "process of argumentation that is sensitive to the truth".

Now, we know that political parties ultimately have as their aim the obtaining of a majority and so will often be preoccupied with the interests that could ensure such a majority. As we have experienced, time and time again, the sensitivity to truth is often defeated by the sensitivity to interests. Of course, a variant of Pilate's demand is a

perennial question: ‘How is truth recognized?’. One could respond by referring to “public reason”, as John Rawls does. However, one must then ask: “What is reasonable? How does reason show itself to be true reason?” What is very clear is that, in the search for just laws, apart from the voices of the political parties, other voices must be heard. These voices must include the university.

The Faculty of Theology, which includes the discipline of philosophy, is also represented at this ceremony. It is interesting that the combined role of these two different disciplines – theology and philosophy –, in the mediaeval university, was that of ensuring that the quest for truth was not lost in the important search for technical solutions to medical and legal problems. These two faculties served to preserve consciousness of the great and perennial restlessness in the human heart for the truth, a restlessness which continually leads the human person beyond any attained answer.

The relationship between theology and philosophy means that human reflection never starts from zero, nor does the philosopher or the theologian ever think in isolation. The human person always participates in the great conversations of human wisdom, and is called to both critically and humbly receive and develop this ongoing reflection. The distinction between the two is also important: philosophy is a responsible undertaking of human reason in its freedom and in its relatedness; theology draws from the wisdom that humanity has received, wisdom that always surpasses human knowledge and that is never totally exhaustible through reflection. It can well be said that divine revelation has been and remains one key ever-vital source of human thought and reflection.

Perhaps I can end by proposing two areas where Theology, Philosophy and Law could interact. In the public square of our society, the place of public reason is undisputed. It is certainly possible to have a free and open argument about what concerns us all as citizens, where all kinds of voices could make themselves heard. These voices, of course, include secular ones. They also include religious voices that express the moral foundations of the choices and commitments of citizens. To try to distinguish neatly between public reason and ‘private’ commitments would be to lose hope in the possibility of negotiating or reasonably exploring real differences. It would be to lose hope in reason and its universality.

One contribution that Catholic Theology could bring to the area of law is that the Catholic faith has to do with a kind of citizenship that always exceeds the demands of the state. The theologian “seeks truth not custom” where truth has to do with a gift that is present in history and yet exceeds or transcends historical circumstances. This truth – who is God, who shares God’s life with humanity – cannot be destroyed by change, whether political or otherwise, nor is it bound to a successful realisation of some kind of political order in history. This means that the Catholic theologian always experiences a deep cultural and political unease, a sense of disquiet, about existing situations and systems. Like every university member, the theologian is aware that she is a citizen of humanity, not merely a citizen of her nation state. But perhaps her awareness that human persons are related to God through creation and salvation means that she is more conscious that political power is not the ultimate and sacred sanction. In most ordinary circumstances this is completely uncontroversial – there *is* a common rationality – but there are circumstances in which loyalty to God trumps the demands of the *civitas*. This is never a question of defining an earthly *panopticon*: there is always the need for

dialogue and purification of one's thoughts and beliefs through reasoned accounts and conversations. Nor is it merely a call for a different social arrangement: no social arrangement could satisfy these radical desires for love, truth and justice. But it means that, for the theologian, a legislature attuned to the dignity and capacities of the person can never be a legislature that sees the person as a mere social atom but rather as a person who learns over time to exercise freedom within a framework of intelligible communication and self-scrutiny. Such a conception of the person is at least implicitly religious in that it assumes that the person responds not only to circumstances or to others but also to a Creator who addresses us and engages us even before we embark on social and political negotiation. This is why we speak of human dignity in a strong sense; this is why Christian humanism regards the severely mentally challenged adult, the unborn child, or the dying child who is in a state beyond ordinary communication, as persons.

A second area has to do with the frontiers between disciplines. We can see that the various disciplines are often culturally viewed as forming a hierarchy rather than a democracy where the top places are occupied by the so-called hard sciences. This hierarchy is often seen as the guardian of objectivity and truth and this has a significant effect on our practical lives. For instance, one of the factors drawing ethics towards utilitarianism is undoubtedly a fascination with the mathematical sciences; also, the lure of the natural sciences tends to pull the philosophy of mind in the direction of naturalism or scientism.

Such a cultural hierarchy tends to divide intellectual activity into two clear camps: hard and soft. Science is hard; literature is soft. Analysis is hard; synthesis is soft. Autonomy is hard; dialogue is soft. Facts are hard; hermeneutics are soft. The 'objective' is hard; the 'personal' is soft. Perhaps, in this hierarchy, law is 'harder' than theology!

These trends, present in our culture, mean that the kind of education our students receive at university prioritises knowledge-transfer over other aspects like critical judgement, self-awareness, decision-making and decision-taking. The focus is on objective knowledge. Questions about what a good life is and how to live a purposeful life as a professional have been exiled. While globalization favours economic development and context-independent knowledge-transfer, the art of living a good life is being systematically marginalized. One can say that, in our university education, knowledge has been privileged over wisdom, where knowledge is learnt piecemeal, in a modular manner, often in the form of distinct propositions, whereas wisdom has to do with a life disposition that unites a reflective attitude with practical concerns. At our university, wisdom, being the acquired competence to evaluate complex life situations in striving to live a good life, given one's personal responsibilities and possibilities, is systematically excluded. And this marginalisation is a real pity and could have serious consequences.

The role of theology and philosophy can be precisely to allow for and encourage a space of robust moral discourse within all disciplines – a place in which discussion of the humane future, about who we are and our responsibilities to each other, are animated and sustained. Perhaps, in the light of the words of a Stoic philosopher: “just as wood is the material of the carpenter, bronze that of the statue maker, so each individual's own life is the material of the art of living” (Epictetus, *Dissertationes* 1.15.2), we should see how to reintroduce into university the virtue education which is so important to civic and professional life. This is a call for our educational efforts to give the importance deserved

to facets such as the personal striving for harmony within oneself and the ardour to bring to fruition in the lives of others what one has assimilated in one's own life.

To end with the question we started with: 'What is the university?' What is its role?', perhaps we can say that the university is called to be a place of hope in that it nurtures and encourages the search for meaning, truth, knowledge, freedom and rational articulation. These vital facets of human life are never simply achieved but are always to be sought and striven for. In this light, the university is called to become more and more epistemologically generous and imaginative. It is called to provide the possibility for one to live at ease with these different forms of knowledge often in some tension with one another, but where the tension is never irresolvable. It is called to allow members of society to develop the competences to live purposefully in this complex world. In this way, it could continue to offer the soil "*ut fructificemus Deo*" (Rm 7, 4).