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Reading the Sign of the Times: The Humanities, the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, and the Catholic Church

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Recommended Citation

Loris, Michelle. "Reading the Sign of the Times: The Humanities, the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, and the Catholic Church." *International Journal of the Humanities* 2 (2004)

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International Journal of the Humanities

Volume 2, 2004

Article: HC04-0067-2004

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Proceedings of the Humanities Conference 2004

Edited by Tom Nairn and Mary Kalantzis

International Journal of the Humanities

Volume 2



www.HumanitiesConference.com



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This paper is published at www.Humanities-Journal.com
a series imprint of the UniversityPress.com

First published in Australia in 2004/2005 by Common Ground Publishing Pty Ltd at
www.Humanities-Journal.com

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ISSN 1447-9508 (Print)
ISSN 1447-9559 (Online)

The International Journal of the Humanities is a peer-refereed journal published annually. Full papers submitted for publication are refereed by the Associate Editors through an anonymous referee process.

Papers presented at the Second International Conference on New Directions in the Humanities,
Monash University Centre in Prato, Italy, 20-23 July 2004.

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Abstract

This essay proposes that the humanities (and new directions in the humanities) as the centerpiece of the Catholic intellectual tradition can help the Catholic Church “read the signs of the times” in the contemporary world and in that way the Church can better serve the human family of God.

Keywords: Humanities; Catholic intellectual tradition; Second Vatican Council

Introduction

Recent publications by Peter Steinfels and David Gibson are just two of many works which tell us that the Roman Catholic Church has entered ‘dark times’ and is possibly on the verge of an “irreversible decline” (Steinfels) in need of “a thoroughgoing transformation” (Steinfels) or a “revolution from below” (Gibson) to be led by the laity. The signs of its crisis are most dramatically seen in the multiple disclosures of child abuse by priests and the subsequent episcopal cover-ups. It is also most dishearteningly evidenced in the Church’s more recent declarations regarding morality and sexuality. While these authors and others offer several recommendations for reform, one way for the Church to forge a path through and out of this darkness is for her to return to the Second Vatican Council and Pope John XXIII’s invitation to the Church “to renew herself [and] to renew her relationship to the world so as to be of better service to the entire human family on its journey to God” (Cernera, RST, p.249). Pope John recommended that one way the Church could begin its own renewal and renewed relationship to the world was “to distinguish the ‘signs of the times’ {Matt.16.4}” (Humanae Salutis 6 in Cernera, RST, p. 250). With this phrase, “Pope John provided the Council and Catholic theology with a theological method that takes seriously the ‘signs of the times’ as a source of, and a point of departure for, theological reflection” (Cernera, RST, p.256).

According to Cernera, the bishops of the Council took this method of theological reflection to express a theology of human existence which recognizes the importance of culture:

“It is a fact bearing on the very person of man that he can come to an authentic and full humanity only through culture, that is, through the cultivation of natural goods and values. Wherever human life is

involved, therefore, nature and culture are quite intimately connected” (Gaudium et Spes 53 in Cernera, RST, p. 259).

A place where the Church may reflect upon and learn from culture is in the university. Catholic universities are in a special position to provide a forum for reading the signs of the times written within culture. Catholic universities are a place uniquely structured where faith and culture may engage with each other in the intellectual enterprise. They have this singular opportunity to join faith and reason because they can draw upon the Catholic intellectual tradition which has, as its centerpiece, a profound commitment to the humanities.

The Catholic intellectual tradition, with the humanities at its core, means keeping the human person at the center of inquiry (O’Brien-Steinfels, p.8-9). Education in the humanities proposes the human development of an individual. Such an education assumes that there is a profound humanizing value in acquiring the skills of critical analysis, interpretation, and communication; in acquainting oneself with an understanding of works which bespeak human excellence; in engaging questions of meaning, purpose, and value. Most significantly, being educated in the humanities presumes that to be human is to be able to question seriously; “to ask questions, all questions, any questions judged humanly significant” (Buckley, p.113). For in the words of the Second Vatican Council, theologian Buckley relates, “the Catholic university ‘strives to relate all human culture to salvation’” (p.113).

For the Church, then, to renew her relation with the contemporary world, she may look to the Second Vatican Council’s counsel to ‘distinguish the signs of the times’ within the contemporary culture. One way for the Church to do that is to turn to its own Catholic universities and Catholic intellectual tradition which is formed around the humanities.



Having given this background as way of introduction then, this essay will discuss how the Catholic intellectual tradition, with the humanities at its core, may help the Church read ‘the signs of the times’ in the contemporary world.

Reading the ‘Signs of the Times’

By convening the Second Vatican Council, John XXIII made a remarkable move to turn the Catholic Church’s focus toward the human family and its human history. He wrote that the Church “has followed step by step the evolution of peoples, scientific progress and social revolution” (*Humanae Salutis* 6 in Cernera, RST p.251). According to theologian Cernera, for Pope John, the Church needed to “know how to distinguish the ‘signs of the times.’ The Council was to do this by understanding better the great events occurring in history and by listening to the voice of the Lord in these signs of the times” (RST,p.249). Cernera goes on to explain the significance of the Pope’s words:

“These statements are noteworthy for us because they show that Pope John was deeply aware of the intimate relationship between the Church and the signs of the times. Not only was there a message in the great events of the times, there was also a call for the Church to follow these events step by step.” (RST p.249)

Cernera tells us that “In the process the Church herself will be transformed and renewed” (Cernera, RST p.252). Furthermore, Pope John identified those issues which constituted the ‘signs of the times’: equality, peace, social and economic justice, civil and human rights, and freedom. According to Cernera, “the Church had the duty of ‘scrutinizing the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. [It was the responsibility of] the Church to recognize and understand the world in which we live” (*Gaudium et Spes* 4 in RST p.257-258). Cernera continues: “The Council recognized that ‘the human race... [was]...passing through a new stage of history... [characterized by]...profound and rapid changes”” (*Gaudium et Spes*4 in RSTp.258).

Cernera explains to us that the Council recognized the importance of contemporary culture especially due to the enormous growth of the natural, human, social sciences and the progress in technology and communication. He quotes *Gaudium et Spes* 53: “It is a fact bearing on the very person of man that he can come to an authentic and full humanity only through culture...Where human life is involved, therefore, nature and culture are quite intimately connected “(RSTp.259). Thus the ‘signs of the times’ can be seen in today’s historical events, social and political movements, and scientific discovery. Cernera asserts that reading the ‘signs of the times’ “requires the recognition that God’s word is not exhausted in the Scriptures or even in the living tradition of the Church. Rather, it challenges

theology to search for the word of God in contemporary history as well” (RSTp.271). So that the Church may renew itself and its relationship with the world, then, she can read ‘the signs of the times’ in contemporary history and culture.

The Catholic Intellectual Tradition and the Humanities

The Council recognized, too, that reading the signs of the times required ongoing exploration and inquiry into questions of meaning, purpose, and value. Such questions need to be “recogniz[ed] with a new sharpness” (*Gaudium et Spes*10 in Cernera, RST, p.259). The kind of questions to be explored typified the kind of inquiry that characterizes the humanities: what does it mean to be human? What is this sense of sorrow, evil, of death which continues despite so much progress? What is the purpose of our existence? What can the human person offer to society? What can the human person expect from society? (*Gaudium et Spes* 10 in Cernera, RST, p.259). Inquiry into such kinds of questions requires examining ‘the signs of the times’ for each era of human life and human history. Catholic universities, and the Catholic intellectual tradition which is formed around the humanities, are exquisitely situated to explore and examine these questions.

First, the Catholic university provides a forum for both faith and culture to join each other. As theologian Buckley explains, “the Catholic university essentially presupposes that serious religious and humane commitment constitute a crucially important focus of human life and belong in a university that is to comprise all human culture” (10). He elaborates:

“Any academic movement towards meaning or coherence or truth, whether in the humanities, the sciences, of the professions, is inchoatively religious.... [that is, it is] the drive of the human mind toward ultimacy, i.e. towards a completion or a whole, in which it can obtain comprehensive sense...unless the culture arrests its progress by dictating the despair of its fulfillment....Similarly, the commitments and instincts of faith are inescapably towards the academic....the dynamism inherent in the experience of faith – if not inhibited by fideism – is towards the understanding of both itself and of its relationship to every other dimension of life.”(15-16)

Buckley reasserts “the Catholic university is that community of higher education which issues out of the Church and in which the Church, in the words of the Second Vatican Council, ‘strives to relate all human culture to the announcement of salvation.’ This is ‘all human culture,’ comprising whatever passes for significant discourse, for philosophic, scientific, and humanistic inquiry” (16).

Inquiry is the essential work of the university intellectual, and inquiry requires the ability to ask any question judged humanely significant. Catholic universities can provide this forum for inquiry. In the words of Cernera, "The Catholic university maintains that there is a fundamental relation of compatibility and continuity between faith and reason....Reason can be allowed to, indeed, encouraged to, in the words of John Paul II 'search for truth wherever analysis and evidence leads'" (Cernera, SHU REVIEW, p.78). Cernera concludes that "This principle forms the basis for a strong defense of academic freedom at a Catholic university" (79).

The basis for this freedom of inquiry within the Catholic university can also be found in the humanities which are the core of a Catholic university education. The freedom for inquiry into all that comprises humanity and human culture constitutes the core of education in the humanities. Education in the humanities, even in its origins in the Middle Ages, was founded upon this idea of inquiry. Buckley relates that "in the 1120's Hugh St Victor, giving directives to students who came to Paris to study, insisted that the 'seven liberal arts are called liberal either because they require minds which are liberal, that is liberated and practiced...or because only free and noble men were accustomed to study them.' To educate in the arts and humanities is to educate for freedom. One taught these universal [subjects] to students in the Middle Ages because these disciplines would free them" (Buckley, p90). During the Renaissance, Buckley relates, "Renaissance humanists bent upon reforming the program of the Middle Ages, proposed another program, 'that of the five studia humanitas'....a program that would have as its purpose the formation of a competent Christian leader....Such an education would form the whole person" (94). Buckley continues to explain that the focus of education in the humanities, then, is on "what it means to be a human being, a lived and accepted experience which can be articulated and examined in such disciplines as psychology, literature, philosophy, history, sociology, education, and theology" (113).

The humanities, therefore, as the centerpiece of the Catholic intellectual tradition, and based upon the free and full inquiry into all that comprises the human and human culture, can provide a way for the Catholic church to read the 'signs of the times' in the contemporary world.

New Directions in the Humanities

Today many agree that a reformulation of the humanities is in order. Buckley tells that "it is almost universally agreed that a radical reform is again needed in the liberal arts or humanities" (115). He cautions that "the university cannot simply return to the solutions of the Middle Ages or the

Renaissance, however much it can learn from its genius....It is faced with problems whose special character demands its own response and whose continued presence demands rethinking of the humanistic aim of the university"(115). Peter Stienfels similarly calls for a new direction in the Catholic intellectual tradition which is formed around the humanities: "A changed intellectual context, with a growing appreciation of community, tradition, diversity, and multiculturalism offers opportunities to explain the intellectual and educational integrity of Catholic higher education to the academic world" (17). According to Cernera, "The Catholic university is the place where the search for truth is cherished and nourished. Since the truth is whole, there is also a fundamental unity and interconnectedness of knowledge. This conviction of the Catholic intellectual tradition is the basis for interdisciplinary approached to learning" (SHU REVIEW, p.81). To explain the need for a new interdisciplinary approach to the humanities, Buckley quotes Richard McKeon, a major figure in American philosophy of education, "Interdisciplinary education and research cannot be achieved simply by juxtaposing, adding, or uniting disciplines....We need new disciplines to identify and transmit the arts by which men act and integrate their purpose and knowledge"(116). Further, the call for a reformulation of the humanities must include a call to serve and to act within the contemporary world. Buckley advocates that "the humanities themselves must advance in their self understanding to cultivate the kind of human being who can respond to this contemporary world of suffering"(121). Robert Hutchins (quoted in Buckley) adds that a student "may even derive from a liberal education some concept of the difference between a bad world and a good one and some notion of the ways in which one could be turned into the other"(Buckley, p. 116).

A response to this call for a reformulation of the humanities may be seen in an article published in THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION. Authors Davidson and Goldberg explain that calling for a reformulation of the humanities is no longer a matter of proposal, but more gladly, is now a matter of fact to be acknowledged, celebrated, and utilized. They write: "Over the past two decades the humanities have been reconfigured both across traditional divides and within entities called 'traditional humanities departments'....Humanities departments have been transformed in many directions, with many emphases, but all show the marks of interdisciplinary areas such as ethnic studies, gender studies, cultural studies, or global studies.... Critical theory has broadened the base of reading in philosophy, sociology, ethnography, anthropology, and political and social theory. Concomitantly, those areas of social sciences...have adopted literary theory and methods of

narrative....Social science studies and science and information studies are all within the province of humanistic study. Service learning models have further extended the reach of the humanities and the arts into the larger community..." (B8). The reform of the humanities, in their view, is already underway and includes changes in both theory and service.

Further, the reform of the humanities does not necessitate discarding the traditional humanities and what they offer. In a book on the new humanities, Fuery and Mansfield explain that the new humanities are at home inside older departments and would not want to give up their engagement with older traditions. The authors explain that "the engagement of the new humanities with older formations focus on problems that older disciplines took for granted: issues of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality" (xiv). In their article, Davidson and Goldberg propose that a way of thinking that links the humanities, old and new, is to look at the three broad sets of questions that engage the humanities: questions of meaning, value and significance (B8). The authors conclude that this way of thinking "yokes the best of both" the old and the new humanities and it prompts the following characterizations of the humanities:

1. The humanities at once reflect and depend upon historical scholarship
2. The humanities bring a relational, social perspective and insight
3. The humanities serve as the conscience and critical memory of intellectual and social life

4. The humanities and the arts are vital to one another
5. The humanities can help delineate the assumptions and values in social arrangements
6. The humanities bring interpretive, analytical, and critical skills to the table
7. The humanities have been the principal (and for the most part the principled) site of diversity....just consider the contributions of ethnic studies, gender and sexuality studies.

Education in the humanities, old and new, are an exploration of and an inquiry into all matters human and all matters of human culture, both historical and contemporary. In this way, the humanities, at the core of the Catholic intellectual tradition, can provide a way for the Church to learn and understand better the 'signs of the times.' Theologian Cernera relates that the bishops of the Second Vatican Council realized that "the Church requires special help, particularly in our day, when things are changing very rapidly and the ways of thinking are exceedingly various. The Church must rely on those who live in the world, are versed in different institutions and specialties, and grasp their innermost significance in the eyes of both believers and nonbelievers" (*Gaudium et Spes* 44 in RST.p.266). The humanities and the new directions in the humanities offer the Church the special help it needs to renew itself and its relation with the contemporary world in order that she may better serve God's human family.

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About the Author

Dr. Loris holds doctorates in both American Literature and Clinical Psychology. She is the author of a book on Joan Didion and a coeditor of a book on Gloria Naylor. She has published articles on Saul Bellow, Toni Morrison, and Willa Cather. She has also published articles on trauma and abuse in psychological journals. She teaches courses in American literature and in Psychology at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut in the USA.