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The Grace of Teaching

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The Grace of Teaching

Cover Page Footnote

Rev. Himes teaches theology at Boston College. This Convocation Address was delivered on October 21, 1999, when he accepted a Doctor of Humane Letters degree, honoris causa, from Sacred Heart University.

MICHAEL J. HIMES

The Grace of Teaching

Dr. Cerner, Monsignor Smith, Professor Roney, Dean Paolini, and all of the members of the faculty, administration, students, and friends and members of the family of Sacred Heart University. I am profoundly grateful to you for this extraordinary honor. I am very deeply touched by it. I am particularly glad for the way in which the citation is phrased and delighted to be able to accept it as a representative of the teaching community. There is nothing of which I am prouder than being a teacher. ``Scholar" is lovely, ``theologian" is fine, but ``teacher" is most important.

I have often said that if I had to give a single reason why I am a priest, why I am a theologian, and especially why I am a teacher, it would be a line of William Wordsworth's. Just before the end of his great autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*, Wordsworth, talking about the splendor of the tradition of learning and of thought and of life that he tried to express in his poetry, writes, ``What we have loved, others will love, / and we shall teach them how" (Book 14, ll. 446-47). That is the great joy of being a teacher: the conviction that what has energized and motivated and excited us will energize, motivate, and excite others. We have the extraordinary privilege of ``teaching them how." So it is as a member of the community of teachers that I am honored to accept this degree.

The penalty for your giving me this degree is that you must listen to a talk. I shall center my comments on three examples. The first is from Baron Friedrich Von Hügel in 1901, the second from Catherine of Siena in the fourteenth century, and the third from James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson*, written in the eighteenth century. I want to use each one to say something about what I think should be characteristic marks of a great Catholic university.

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First, the illustration from von Hügel. Were I to choose a single

figure to represent the Catholic tradition in all of its richness and its intellectual rigor in the past century, the person I would choose is Friedrich von Hügel. Von Hügel was a layman, and, despite his Austrian name, an Englishman, the son of an Austrian diplomat father and a Scottish mother, who by extraordinary personal effort made himself one of the finest scholars on the Hebrew scripture in his lifetime. I say "extraordinary personal effort" because, as a result of a childhood disease, he was totally deaf from the time he was eleven and was unable to attend any university or take any academic courses. Through an extraordinary program of self-education, by the time he died he had accumulated numerous honorary degrees.

In 1901, von Hügel was invited to speak to a gathering of Christian students at Oxford. One of the things he said in that talk must have seemed terribly shocking to a gathering of presumably earnest young Christian gentlemen at Oxford in 1901. In a rhetorical question, von Hügel asked them who they thought had been the greatest example of asceticism – of self-discipline for the sake of deeper insight – in the nineteenth century that had just ended. And he answered his own question with the name of Charles Darwin. Now this must have surprised those young Christian gentlemen, for Darwin was still a very controversial figure, and a rather dangerous one in the minds of many religious believers. Von Hügel explained that the point of asceticism is not to discipline the self as if depriving oneself of goods pleases God. The point of asceticism, insisted von Hügel, is to get oneself out of the way sufficiently, so that one is not forever looking only at one's own hopes and fears and dreams and desires but can see what is there to be seen. He cited Darwin as a striking example of extraordinary intelligence and energy patiently and painstakingly subordinated to the careful observation of the beaks of pigeons and varieties of barnacles: an insistence on seeing what is *there*, not what you would like to be there, or what you hope is there, or what you fear is there. I suggest that this should be one of the chief characteristics of a Catholic university. To be a great Catholic university is not to give prepared answers to questions no one ever really asks. A great Catholic university has the courage and freedom to see what is there to be seen.

How is that especially a mark of Catholicism? Because the Catholic tradition at its best always insists that the world in which we find ourselves, however we distort or obscure it, is fundamentally good,

that it is fundamentally rooted in the love of God, that, to use a good theological term, it is fundamentally engraced. To see anything in its depth and its full richness is to see it as rooted in the self-giving of God. And if that is true, there is no need ever to be afraid of where one's patient and painstaking search for the truth might lead. This is the ground of the conviction that the truth can never be in contradiction to the love of God and that, therefore, faith has nothing to fear from the intellectual life. That fearlessness must motivate Catholic scholarship at a great university, a fearlessness rooted in the conviction that the truth one discovers will never subvert the Catholic Christian tradition but finally can only be in accord with it.

This means that every aspect of the curriculum at a Catholic university is a sacred undertaking. Occasionally, church documents will refer to "sacred sciences," usually meaning theology, philosophy of religion, canon law, church history, and scripture scholarship. I suggest to you that the phrase "sacred sciences" is in fact redundant. *All* science is sacred — *all* knowledge is sacred — because all science is the quest for truth, and the truth always leads one to God. Therefore, there is nothing more intrinsically "sacred" about teaching theology than teaching biology or economics or history or literature or languages or chemistry or anthropology. All areas of the curriculum are sacred, because all have to do with the quest for truth, and all truth is God's truth. Consequently, asceticism is not a virtue only for monks and religious. Asceticism, at its best, is the virtue of the scholar and the teacher.

When von Hügel cited Darwin as the great exemplar of asceticism in the nineteenth century, he meant the asceticism of the dedication of time, energy, intelligence, and talent that goes into scholarship and teaching. That asceticism, that deeply spiritual practice, should be the hallmark of scholarship and teaching at a Catholic university. It is that asceticism that gives us the courage to pursue scholarship in a free and untrammelled fashion at a Catholic university.

My second illustration is from the great Dominican Catherine of Siena. Part of the richness of the Dominican tradition finds expression in Thomas Aquinas' insistence that, if contemplation of truth is good, contemplation for the purpose of teaching truth to others is even better (*Summa theologiae* IIa IIae, q. 188, a. 6). It was in that spirit that Catherine is reported to have responded to the question whether a life

devoted to study is not a luxury. I must admit that I sometimes think that I live the most self-indulgent of lives. After all, I spend my life thinking, reading, writing and talking about the things that interest me, and I have a captive audience who pay me. Can you imagine a more self-indulgent life than that! How can such a life be made holy? Catherine of Siena's answer was that the one reason to study anything is to teach it to someone else. The reason one learns is to give one's knowledge away. If knowledge is simply curiosity, if it is simply the hunger to know, if it is simply a kind of intellectual concupiscence, then it is relatively trivial and might even be destructive of a truly Christian life. But if the reason one studies is to teach others, if the reason one learns is to give knowledge away, then the life of scholarship becomes a profoundly holy effort.

When I first arrived at the University of Chicago in 1974 to begin a Ph.D. program, I knew not a soul in the whole city of Chicago. I spent many a day in the university library reading late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century German books (the pages of many of which I had to cut since no one had ever bothered to open them since library had acquired them). I lived at a rectory nearby, but because the only priest assigned to the parish, a very dedicated man, was understandably busy with parish affairs, I ended up spending most evenings alone. So after long days at the library, I trudged back to the rectory with an attaché case filled with more books to spend a long night reading eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German texts. The walk from the university library to the rectory was two miles, and as I plodded along I would say to myself, "Okay, Himes, walk the next block for the students." I had no idea who the students were to be. In fact, the students I now teach hadn't been born at that time. Indeed, as I come to think of it, their parents probably hadn't met yet at the time when I was a student at Chicago. But the only way I could motivate myself to do that kind of work day after day was to remember that someday it would help me to help somebody else. It had to become a way of self-gift, or it would have been unbearable drudgery or pure self-indulgence.

The generosity of spirit which Catherine of Siena exemplifies has to motivate scholarship at a Catholic university. Research, by all means, but never research without teaching. Because always — *always* — the center of a teacher's life is not only the subject she or he studies, but

the person she or he teaches. Occasionally my doctoral students at Boston College, preparing for careers in scholarship and teaching themselves, ask me: "What makes a good teacher?" I tell them that there are many techniques and those they can learn, but that there are two qualities that mark a great teacher: you must passionately love *what* you teach and you must passionately love *whom* you teach. If you're in love with your subject and in love with your students, you'll be a splendid teacher. That kind of love that has to be expressed in scholarship and teaching at a Catholic university.

Finally, an illustration from Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson*. In the Catholic Church, Thomas Aquinas is traditionally regarded as the patron saint of the intellectual life. With deep reverence for the Angelic Doctor, I must admit that I have a different candidate for that role. The true saint of the intellectual life is an anonymous boy who made a living by rowing a boat on the Thames in the mid-eighteenth century. Boswell writes that one beautiful day in London in the summer of 1763 he and Dr. Johnson decided to have lunch at Chelsea (entry for Saturday, 30 July 1763). So they went to the Thames embankment and found a boy rowing a boat for hire. As they sat in the boat and the boy strained at the oars, Boswell, who was always plying Johnson with questions, asked the great man whether he thought that a liberal education was of value to everyone. Johnson replied that he did not, for there were people whose station in life was such that liberal education would be unnecessary and perhaps meaningless to them. For example, he said, what need has the boy rowing the boat to know what songs the Argonauts sang as they rowed the Argo in quest of the Golden Fleece. Then, one presumes jocularly, Johnson asked the boy rowing the boat, what he would give to know what the Argonauts sang. To which, Boswell reports, the boy replied, "Sir, I would give what I have." Boswell says that the answer so pleased Johnson that he tipped the boy double the fare.

Double the fare? He should have paid his fees at Oxford or Cambridge! I don't know who that boy was; Boswell does not give his name, if he ever knew it. I have no idea what became of him. But that boy is the patron saint of the intellectual life — because he knew what it was worth. It was worth what he had. I suggest that a hallmark of any great university and so of a Catholic university is that it is a community of people who will give whatever they have in order to come closer to

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the truth of things, because the truth of things is so transcendently, splendidly, graced-ly beautiful. That is the conviction that makes what we do sacred. And it is because I am privileged to be part of that *with* you, that I gratefully accept this degree. Thank you very much.