

---

## Catholic Universities: Why Bother with the Humanities?

John W. O'Malley, SJ<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction

I am deeply honored by the invitation that was extended to me to address you on the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Saint John Baptist de La Salle. It was suggested<sup>3</sup> that for this occasion I speak of the role of the humanities at a Catholic university. I am going to specify this suggestion and offer some reflections on how it is possible to be a genuine university in today's world and, at the same time, be faithful to our humanistic and Catholic heritage. I will argue further that it is not only possible but especially appropriate for a university in the Lasallian tradition.

In this context, the word humanistic needs a word of explanation because it is used so broadly today as to mean almost anything, even to the exclusion of the very possibility of the transcendent. I will use it, this evening, however, in its precise historical meaning to designate a form of education known as the *studia humanitatis*, a Latin expression from the Italian Renaissance that is best translated as "studies about what it means to be a human being." The *studia humanitatis* are roughly what we call the humanities today; but I do not want to restrict the goals and ethos of a truly humanistic education to the humanities, as we shall see.

I said that I wanted to speak about our situation today; but by mentioning the Italian Renaissance, I tipped my hand. My approach to our topic will be historical. It will be historical because our educational institutions are the products of two great historical traditions of education whose basic principles are as operative today as they were in fifth century Athens, in first century Rome, in thirteenth century Paris, and in fifteenth century Italy. Only if we understand those traditions and see how they are operative today, or at least should be operative today, can we fully understand what we are talking about as a university in the Lasallian tradition. Only then can we see what decisions we need to make to improve what we are about. In that regard, I love to quote William Faulkner's line in *Requiem for a Nin*, "The past is never dead. It is not even past."

Now fasten your seatbelts because we are going on a bullet-train ride through the centuries. To simplify things, let me say that for the history of formal schooling in the Western world, two dates are pivotal: the thirteenth century and the fifteenth century. It was in those two centuries that the two models of education that have dominated our thinking on the subject ever since took firm institutional form. The thirteenth century saw the creation of the university and the fifteenth century the creation of the humanistic school, which for convenience sake I will call the college.

Although the principles and values that animated these two institutions originated in classical antiquity with Plato and Aristotle for the university tradition and with a quasi-Sophist called

Isocrates (not Socrates) for the other tradition, we must concentrate on the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

These two traditions are partners in many respects, but they are rivals in others, to the point that some educators have argued that there is no room for the humanities in today's university. Nonetheless, the two have in many instances worked together, sometimes easily, sometimes uneasily and even antagonistically. I need not tell you that today the humanistic tradition finds itself very much on the defensive.

As I mentioned, the remote origin for these two traditions was in fifth and fourth century Athens, that remarkable city in that remarkable epoch with that remarkable outburst of genius in almost every conceivable expression of the human spirit. For our purposes, let Aristotle stand as the emblematic figure for one of the traditions and Isocrates for the other. Aristotle codified knowledge of the physical world, of the operations of human intelligence, and of other phenomena. His efforts constituted an organized and coherent system of knowledge, fully justifiable on rational grounds. The system's goal was *understanding*. This was an intellectual enterprise, pure and simple.

Isocrates, an older contemporary of Aristotle and a younger contemporary of Plato, had different goals in mind. He worked at constructing a system for training young men for active life in Athenian democracy, where ability to speak in public and persuade others to an ethical course of action was essential for ensuring the common good. This was an ethical and personalist enterprise.

For this tradition, experience of the deep wells of the human heart was of great value – of its yearning for goodness even as it felt itself pulled to what was base and despicable. Therefore, Isocrates' program was based on works of literature, which embodied and exemplified effective use of language and at the same time exposed and dramatized the mysterious workings of the human heart.

It was schools in the tradition of Isocrates, not Aristotle, that dominated education in the ancient world and the Middle Ages until the end of the twelfth century. At that moment, a new institution emerged that would change Western culture and ultimately change it dramatically. In that institution, the other tradition emerged from the margins and achieved tough and enduring form. It is the institution we know as the university. The creation of that institution is perhaps the greatest achievement of the Middle Ages.

What I find especially startling about that institution in its medieval origins is how rapidly, within little more than a generation, it established the goals, the basic structures, and the basic procedures that in their fundamental functions, purpose, and organizational strategies have changed so little over the 800 years that have intervened down to today. I mean things like departments, deans, presidents, faculty privilege and gowns, faculty meetings, set curricula, examinations, and most especially the conferral of formal degrees, such as Master of Arts, Doctor of Law and Doctor of Medicine – these public certifications of professional competence. Nothing like this, on this scale and with this measure of sophistication and institutional grounding, had ever been known before.

Even more startling and fundamental than the university's precocious sophistication is how, from its inception in the early thirteenth century, the university already embodied and promoted a set of values that still undergirds universities today. I am referring to the value and supreme importance of dispassionate analysis and critical thinking, of endless questioning of received wisdom, and of the necessity of exploring every aspect of the physical world.

What were the factors that helped create this new institution? As always with such questions about such a huge historical phenomenon, it is difficult to provide a fully satisfactory answer. The causes surely were multiple and included the rebirth of cities, safer travel and communication, an increase in commerce, which entailed a need for more professionalized skills in order to make a good living. Crucially important was the avalanche of Latin translations of works of Greek antiquity, especially the complete corpus of Aristotle, but also the works of Ptolemy and Galen and others. This meant that a curriculum unlike anything the Middle Ages knew up to that time began to dominate.

There were probably a few students who went to the university motivated by a pure desire to know, but the vast majority of them went because they wanted to make a career. They were willing to travel long distances to study with the best teachers in the best institutions. In Bologna in the late twelfth century, for instance, wealthy students from different parts of Europe hired experts to teach them law, thus giving rise to the university in that city.

By the early thirteenth century, universities had developed four faculties or schools – Law, Medicine, Theology, and Arts. The first three obviously trained professionals. Arts was more nondescript; but especially in Italy it soon specialized in natural philosophy, the seedbed of modern science. Not all universities had all four faculties, and different universities became known for the preeminence of one faculty over the others.

For all its sophistication, the medieval university, like its counterpart today, never articulated an explicit philosophy of education to explain and justify to itself and to others what it was about; but of course it operated out of one. Despite what we are sometimes led to believe, the philosophy of education of the medieval university was altogether secular. By secular, I mean that, even though a university might have a papal charter, it, *qua* university, did not concern itself with anybody's eternal salvation, did not professedly concern itself with playing a constructive role in Church or society, and did not concern itself with the students' personal development – religious, ethical, psychological or emotional. It was secular, moreover, in that attendance at a university spelled upward social mobility. Universities, then as now, were institutions for "getting ahead." Students went to a university so that they could "get a good job."

To be clear: The medieval university had two purposes. First, intellectual problem solving (or what we might call the production of knowledge). Second, career advancement through the acquisition of professional skills. The first purpose pertained especially to the faculty, the second to the students. These two purposes, I need not tell you, are the two upon which universities, including a university like Saint Mary's University of Minnesota, operate today.

After the founding of the Universities of Paris and Bologna at the beginning of the thirteenth century, universities proliferated across Europe. They became one of the most characteristic

European institutions. Although they educated only a miniscule percentage of the population, they enjoyed immense prestige. They were *the* schools; and thus the teachers in them came to be known as scholastics, that is, academics.

But a reaction set in. The humanistic tradition experienced a renaissance, sparked in large part as a reaction to the universities. It was no accident that the person most responsible for setting this renaissance on its way was a literary figure, the poet Petrarch. By the middle of the fourteenth century, he had already articulated the many grievances against the universities that soon became standard. Among them, two were crucial.

First, the universities did not teach literature and history, which according to these educators were the subjects that illuminated the great questions of human life as it is actually lived and that thus help students to deal with those questions in their own lives. Those subjects treated questions of life and death, of virtue and vice, of greed and redemption, and of the ambivalence in human decision-making. They did not do so through abstract principles, as found for instance in Aristotle's *Nicomachian Ethics*, but through stories, poetry, dramas and so forth. They embodied questions within the interplay of the emotions and the conflict of principles that we experience in life as it is really lived. These are the *studia humanitatis*, the subjects that teach what it means to be human.

Petrarch put the argument well: "It is one thing to know, another to love. One thing to understand another thing to appropriate. Aristotle teaches what virtue is – I do not deny it – but his lesson lacks emotional force, words that go to the heart and urge toward love of the good and hatred of evil."

The second grievance against the university, closely related to the first, was that the university had no interest in the spiritual, emotional, religious, and physical development of the students . . . . In fact, it often deformed the students by the self-referential values it implicitly inculcated. "Getting ahead," either as student or faculty, seemed to be the university's core value.

Unlike the founders of the university, the humanists of the Renaissance wrote treatise after treatise on their educational project. Their program was multi-faceted; but it was fundamentally formational, centered on the students' human development. It wanted to produce articulate individuals who said what they meant. It wanted to produce ethical individuals who meant what they said.

It wanted, moreover, to open students to broader horizons, to worlds and to cultures other than their own. It wanted them to ask questions not simply about the technical subjects they might be studying, but about the key issues of life itself. It wanted to develop their creativity by teasing them with enigmas. It wanted them to have healthy bodies and, hence, in time they introduced playing fields, teams, and coaches, a legacy that, for better or for worse, is very much with us today in the United States.

The aim of the humanist educators, therefore, was to produce well-rounded and socially aware persons, persons alive to the affairs of the day, and ready to share the burden of promoting the

common good, not persons exclusively intent on using their education to climb the professional ladder and make a lot of money.

In a word, their program, unlike the program of the university, was radically student-centered. If I read correctly the document known as “Characteristics of Lasallian Schools,” the humanists’ program seems very much in accord with them. Those characteristics are nothing if not radically student-centered. To be a school in the Lasallian tradition is to be a school where the person of the student holds pride of place.

In any case, Renaissance humanists such as Erasmus launched one of the most successful propaganda campaigns in all history and convinced Europe that a humanistic education was the absolute prerequisite for any young man (and eventually any young woman) who wanted to lead a humanly satisfying life and play a role, small or great, in the affairs of the day. To be educated was to be educated in the humanistic mode.

The humanists convinced Saint Ignatius Loyola and his colleagues that their form of education was not only compatible with the religious goals of the Jesuits but an enhancement of them. The Jesuits, founded primarily as a missionary Order, became the first teaching Order in the Church in the sense of being the first to undertake the education of the laity as a formal ministry. With that, formal schooling began to achieve a stunningly important role in Catholicism, as is clear from the history of the De La Salle Christian Brothers and other Orders of men and women founded after the Jesuits.

The humanistic schools, for all their smashing success, up into the twentieth century, did not put the universities out of business. Nor despite humanist propaganda, were the two institutions hermetically sealed off from one another. They interacted in various ways and were reciprocally influential. In that regard, the universities in the United States today present a special case.

Unlike their counterparts in Europe, all the older and even some of the younger American universities began as colleges, that is, humanistic schools. Usually known as a Faculty of Arts and Sciences in the universities, the college was quite different from the medieval faculty of that name in that the American college grew directly out of the humanistic tradition. Although secular universities in the United States today only rarely, if ever, profess to be for the betterment of society, some do support or foster programs to do just that. They never, however, publically profess to be in the business of helping to form ethically sensitive persons.

As time went on in the United States, professional schools such as law, business, nursing, medicine, agriculture, and others affiliated with the college to form one institution. The number of such schools or programs has grown exponentially in recent years. Moreover, beginning in the late nineteenth century right on top of the college was fastened the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, which constituted a new professionalization of the *studia humanitatis*.

The Graduate School’s single aim is to produce professional academics, whose badge of honor is proficiency in research or, perhaps better said, proficiency in publication. In such professionalization, the fundamental aim of the *studia* to produce a certain kind of person gets lost. Secondary schools in the humanistic tradition have to a large extent become prep schools

for college. The college itself has become a prep school for pursuing a professional career in a professionalized way in law, medicine, business, and the other professions – and even in the humanities.

In other words, the aim of the college to a large extent has become intellectual problem solving and career advancement through the acquisition of professional skills. Nonetheless, many universities in the United States retain vestiges of their humanistic origins such as theaters, student-life personnel, career counselors, sports teams and their coaches. These features are virtually unknown in European universities because those universities originated independently of the humanistic tradition.

It is at this point that Catholic schools in the humanistic tradition begin to play an important role. Although they are perforce and even happily allied with this professional turn in almost every branch of learning, they have not lost sight of the student-centered impulse of the humanistic tradition. At least in theory and in their advertising, they profess to enhance the educational experience of students with a concern for them as human beings – as human beings with a responsibility for the common good, as human beings with a transcendent destiny.

Where does this leave us today? The humanities are under siege and seem unable to mount a convincing rationale for their place in the university except as another field for intellectual problem solving and career advancement through the acquisition of professional skills. A few years ago, a distinguished professor from an Ivy League school addressed us at Georgetown University on the value of the humanities, which for him was their ability to help students think. Help students think! I thought that is what all disciplines were about, not just the humanities.

Ah, there is the sticking point. If the subjects we know as the humanities are taught as professional disciplines, as if they were courses for somebody contemplating a professional career in them, they hardly deserve the designation humanistic. Unfortunately, that is a pattern into which persons like you and me, trained in Graduate School, unthinkingly tend to fall. We teach as we have been taught. We might teach the so-called “Liberal Arts,” but we need to recognize that no subject is in itself liberating. It all depends on how it is taught. That is a truth we cannot afford to forget.

Well, this has been a whirlwind and desperately superficial tour of where we came from and how we got to be where we are. In the few moments that remain, I would like to distil elements from the venerable tradition of the *studia humanitatis* that I believe still have relevance today for Catholic universities. I have created four pegs or hooks or bullet-points on which to hang some basic goals that I believe capture aspects of the tradition as valid now as they ever were.

The *first* is “the fly in the bottle.” I adopt the well-known metaphor of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. What the humanistic tradition is meant to do is help the fly out of the bottle. It is meant to help students escape from the confines of their experience up to the present, to expand their awareness beyond their comfort zone, to expose them to other cultures and to other modes of thought, to lift them beyond the quotidian, to help them out of the bondage of unexamined assumptions and prejudices. Finally, it is meant to encourage them to ask questions not only in the area in which their profession or trade moves but in life itself.

The *second* is “heritage and perspective.” This goal or value is closely related to the first. It is based on the truth that we are the products of the past and that we cannot fully understand ourselves unless we know how we got to be where we are – and how we got to be what we are. As Faulkner said, “The past is never dead. It is not even past.” Students need to know for instance, that 9/11 did not happen out of the blue but fitted into a long historical trajectory.

This value also looks to the cultural enrichment of students and goads them, for instance, beyond considering texting as the highest form of literary expression. Inculcating this value seems almost perforce to entail study of at least a few classics of literature and the arts – another aspect of getting the fly out of the bottle.

The *third* is “We are not born for ourselves alone.” With those words, Cicero in the first century expressed the ethical and altruistic impulse in the humanistic tradition of schools from the days of Isocrates down to the present. Those words of a pagan philosopher and politician, which is what Cicero was, resonate beautifully with Jesus’ words about laying down one’s life for one’s friends.

In that regard, I think of what Eleanor Roosevelt, that tireless advocate for the underprivileged and for social justice, said about Allenswood School in England, the school in which she was educated and which she remembered with great fondness. She said that whatever she had become since then was due to what she learned in those years. It was that humanistic tradition that inspired her, for instance, to chair with such patience and courage the extraordinarily difficult committee that in 1948 produced the United Nations’ landmark “Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”

The *fourth* is eloquence. I use that old-fashioned word because I cannot think of a more appropriate one. I use it here to express the goal of being able to say what one means, as well as meaning what one says. This has been a key feature in humanistic education since the days of Isocrates. We live, alas, in a culture in which “ya know what I mean” is supposed to substitute for actually knowing what one means. The dreary, cliché-ridden speechmaking of our public servants is the result of an educational system that in fact, if not in theory, underestimates the power of the word. As Mark Twain said, “The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between a lightning bolt and a lightning bug.”

We in the humanistic tradition believe that immersion in great literature fosters the ability to find the right word. Moreover, we experience the epistemological principle that we do not have a thought and then search for the right word to express it. No, only when we have the right word do we have the eureka experience of the thought. Somewhat ironic about this aspect of the humanistic tradition is that the ability to speak and write effectively is a great boost to one’s ability to achieve career advancement.

These four goals belong more properly to the humanistic tradition, but that does not mean that today teachers in other disciplines cannot or do not work to instill them in their students insofar as their disciplines allow. As I said, the two traditions of schools are not only rivals. They are partners, and they interpenetrate one another in many ways.

We need to remember that these goals or values are and will remain ideals. Ideals are never fully achieved. They at best are fulfilled only imperfectly and approximately, but that is no reason not to strive to fulfill them. Just because we might be disappointed with the human condition is no reason to throw in the towel.

For me two things are certain. First, even if an institution subscribes to the humanistic ideals, it will be meaningless unless faculty strive to put them into practice. Second, I think many of us – maybe most of us – do strive, but I will speak for myself. I spend my hours, days, weeks, months, and years trying to be a good university citizen. That is, I spend them in intellectual problem solving, which today means doing research and publishing books. I spend them helping students acquire the professional skills they need to make their way the world – that is, helping them get a good job when they graduate.

But I do not want to stop there. I want to go further. Inside the classroom as well as outside, I want to help my students have satisfying lives. I want to help them get the fly out of the bottle, have a sense of their cultural heritage, see their lives as meant for something more than making a lot of money, and being able to say what they mean and mean what they say.

Whatever we might theorize about the compatibility or incompatibility of the two great traditions of schooling I have described, there is no doubt in my mind that they can be reconciled in ourselves. If they are reconciled within ourselves, they have a chance of being reconciled in our students and even of affecting the ethos of the institution with which we are affiliated.

## **Endnotes**

1. These remarks were delivered on 7 November 2019 on the Minneapolis campus of Saint Mary's University of Minnesota. The lecture was part of the university's Cardinal Virtue presentation series of speakers and topics selected to create thought-provoking dialogue.

2. Rev. John W. O'Malley serves as professor of theology at Georgetown University in Washington, DC. He earned his PhD from Harvard University. This well-published Church historian is a member of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits).

3. Rev. James Burns, IVD, president of Saint Mary's University of Minnesota, was credited by the speaker as both the person who extended the invitation to him and the one who suggested the topic for the occasion.