

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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Commencement Address St. John's Abbey, Collegeville May 1980

I. INTRODUCTORY

- A. The members of this graduating class enjoy a special privilege.
 - 1. Their commencement exercises occur in the year 1980—the sesquimillennial anniversary of the birth of St. Benedict of Nursia, the founder of the Benedictine Order, the author of the Benedictine Rule, and, according to the proclamation of Pope Paul VI, the patron saint of all Europe—of the Western world.
 - 2. I hope, therefore, that they will carry away from this occasion some awareness of their good fortune not only in having been morally, intellectually, and spiritually nurtured in the splendid educational institution that is associated with St. John's Abbey, but also a deep sense of their indebtedness to the whole tradition of Benedictine life and learning:
- B. I, too, as the commencement speaker on this occasion enjoy a special privilege;
 - 1. My association with St. John's University takes me back many years—not as far back as the beginning of the Order, or even of this monastery, but in my own lifetime more than forty years, to the decade of the thirties when I was a frequent visitor to this institution and worked with Father Virgil Michel, then Dean of the College, in the perennial task of trying to improve the basic schooling of the young and to lift the efforts of both young and old to the high level on which the lifelong process of teaching and of learning should be conducted.

- a. Father Virgil was a sound educator because he was a good teacher.
 - b. He was a good teacher because he was himself a very good student, one who did not stop studying when he started to teach.
 - c. He was a good student and an excellent learner because he was a good liberal artist and because he had profound respect for the whole tradition of human learning.
2. I cannot speak to you today without remembering the insights that Father Virgil and I shared many years ago, insights that still control my own thinking about education.
 3. Nor can I speak to you about these matters without trying to draw light from the Benedictine tradition, and especially from the significance of its fundamental maxim—*Ora et Labore*.

II. THE BENEDICTINE TRADITION

- A. I need not recite the facts of St. Benedict's life or the history of the Benedictine Order, with its vicissitudes and triumphs. They are well-known to all of you.
- B. You know that he personally fled from the corrupt and licentious life that prevailed all around him at the end of the 5th century, and that in the beginning of the 6th century, he not only found a retreat for himself but also founded a number of communities in which those who, like himself, wished to find a better way of life could, in association with one another, pray, work, and learn together.
- C. You know that for the government of these monastic communities and for the direction of the life of its members, he composed the Rule which bears his name. We owe to that extraordinary document, one of the earliest of written constitutions for the government of a society, a number of insights and inventions.

1. The Benedictine Rule sets up the monastic community as a model of democracy, in which the members have an equality of status, in which the ruler, the Abbott, is elected by the members, and in which there are provisions for rectifying injustices in the government of the community, should they occur,

2. We learn from the Rule a truth that is the very opposite of Machiavellian counsel for the ruler who strives to maintain himself in power by foul means as well as fair.
 - a. Machiavelli told the Prince that it is much more expedient for him to be feared by his subjects than to be loved by them.

 - b. St. Benedict counselled the Abbots who were to succeed him that it is much more prudent, as well as virtuous, to be loved by their fellow monks than to be feared by them.

3. We also learn from the Rule the virtues that must be exercised by all members of the community to make life according to the rule a living reality. No rule of life can accomplish anything unless it becomes a habit of life through the establishment of firm and stable dispositions.

- D. The history of the Benedictine Order cannot be told without mentioning the eminent persons who have been among its outstanding representatives across centuries. Permit me to mention those who have special significance for me, men to whom I am most deeply indebted for their contribution to my own intellectual life.
 1. But, first, I must mention the Benedictine who, after St. Benedict himself, is most revered by all members of the Order—

St. Gregory the Great, in the Chair of St. Peter at the end of the 6th century, biographer of St. Benedict, and the Pope who sent Augustine to England as a missionary and who reformed the liturgy of the

church, a reform which introduced the Gregorian chant.

2. For me, personally, there are three others of special significance—

a. One is Cassidorus, a monk contemporary with St. Benedict, who wrote a Manual of the Liberal Arts in the early years of the 6th century. The first part of this manual is devoted to the study of scripture; the second, to the wet liberal arts, and to the whole range of pagan learning that can be helpful in the understanding of scripture,

b. Another is St. Anselm, Abbot of Bec and, after that, Archbishop of Canterbury in the 11th century. To his Proslogium, I owe the direction of my mind in its effort to think about God. Anselm may not have proved God's existence by his ontological argument, but he did, for everyone and for all times, lay down the logical necessities that follow from the premise that if, we undertake to think about God, we must think of the supreme being, the being than which no greater can be thought of,

c. The third is St. Thomas Aquinas who, though later a Dominican monk, was himself nurtured in his youth at the Benedictine Abbey at Monte Cassino. To the monumental contributions of his philosophical and theological writings, but especially to insights to be found in Part One of the *Summa Theologica* I owe an indication of the step one needs to take to complete what Anselm began in thinking about God,

E. Finally, I would like to comment briefly on the significance for all of us of the Benedictine maxim: *Ora et Lahore*.

1. The two activities we are directed to engage in are prayer and work.

2. The activity of prayer is the one which gives us a foretaste of heavenly rest, for in this earthly life it is only in moments of contemplation that we have surcease from

all forms of work and enjoy rest, the rest that God himself enjoyed on the seventh day of creation.

3. The other activity, work, subdivides into two forms of work—manual and intellectual, the work of the hands and the work of the mind.
 - a. The Benedictine maxim called all members of the community to engage in mental as well as physical work.
 - b. Mental work is work; the activity of thinking, which must be present in all forms of study, of teaching and learning, is hard work and wearying not at all restful as contemplation is.
4. St. Benedict's Rule lays proper stress on the importance of intellectual work, The avoidance of it by the lazy or the shiftless is one of the seven deadly sins—the sin of sloth, of not putting to good use the intellect which is the greatest gift that God gave to man in creating him a rational animal.
 - a. Senior monks are instructed by the Rule “to go about the monastery at the hours when the brethren are occupied in reading and see that there by no lazy brother who spends his time in idleness or gossip and does not apply himself to the reading”—that is, does not do the hard intellectual work required to understand what one reads
 - b. “If anyone should be so negligent and shiftless that he cannot study or read, let him be given some work” manual work—“to do so that he will not be idle.”
5. These two provisions of the Rule, aimed at overcoming idleness and at preventing sloth, should be the guiding principles of every educational institution.

III. *CONCLUDING REMARKS*

- A. This brings me, finally, to a few concluding remarks about the educational ideals to which St. John's University is

devoted, not only because of its allegiance to Benedictine principles, but also because of the leadership it has had over the years from such educators and teachers as Father Virgil Michel.

- B. First and foremost among these ideals is the dedication of the individual to a lifetime of learning.
1. The teacher who does not go on with his own learning does not compare with the teacher for whom the process of teaching is itself an adventure in learning.
 2. The student who regards the completion of a course of student, or of any part of the curriculum, as the closing of a book that need never be re-opened again does not compare with the student for whom each stage in the process of learning is at best a preparation for going on with that process, either in school or after schooling is finished
 3. I have every confidence that the faculty and student body of St. John's University understand the unending obligation to carry on learning throughout all the years of one's life.
 - a. For you are graduating here today, there is no message I can leave with you of greater importance than this. What this university has begun for you in the life of your mind is a treasure that you will properly cherish only if you work hard to enrich it in the years ahead.
 - b. And for those of you especially who are going to become teachers, let me add to St. Augustine's remark that teaching is the greatest act of charity, my own observation that there is no form of study that is more profitable than the studying one does to teach, and no form of learning more gratifying than the learning one derives from teaching.
- C. There is just one other educational insight that I must mention in closing. It is an insight that lies at the heart of the Benedictine Rule and, therefore, one that I am sure has influenced your life as students in this fine Benedictine institution of learning.

1. To emphasize the development of the intellectual virtues as the specific aim of university education. is not to deny the primacy of the moral or cardinal virtues in human life, and especially the life of the student and the teacher.
2. A good moral character is not only indispensable to a good human life; it is also indispensable to the intellectual activities of a good student and a good teacher.
3. The university cannot perform the specific tasks to which it is dedicated in a moral vacuum.
4. Once that is fully and deeply understood, one can then go on to say that the university performs its specific function well, as St. John's has performed it for you, only if it inculcates the intellectual disciplines requisite for continued learning and only if it cultivates a proper respect for the whole tradition of learning—the accumulated knowledge and wisdom of mankind.

The End



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