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The Task of a Jesuit University in the Philippines

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Notes and Comments

The Task of a Jesuit University in the Philippines

BIENVENIDO F. NEBRES, S.J.

In his editorial preface for the *Philippine Studies* volume on the Human Development Committee papers, Fr. Roque Ferriols speaks of the common theme of rootedness: "rootedness in the human mind . . . and rootedness in the — for want of a real name — culture."¹ This concern for rootedness pervaded much of the discussions in 1973-74 and we return to it in this note. In talks given recently to faculty and students, I have presented the goals for the students of the Ateneo College as: academic excellence, social concern, interiority, and personal spirituality. For the institution as a whole, these goals are perhaps better expressed as: the creation of an intellectual tradition, the "situating" of the Ateneo within the sociocultural context of the Philippines, the formation of a community (and communities) of prayer and faith.

INTELLECTUAL TRADITION

The search for academic excellence is common to all universities throughout the world. The tradition of scholarship and the life of the mind is, of course, the heart and pride of all institutions of higher learning in the older countries. In the Philippines, the difference is that this tradition is lacking or at best weak. This differentiates us (and, therefore, our tasks) from universities in the Western world with their centuries-old understanding and reverence for the life of the mind and from a country like Japan, which at the time of its opening to the West, already had an ancient tradition of learning, though of course, non-Western. It

1. "Editor's Preface," *Philippine Studies* 21, 4 (1973): 407.

differentiates our universities even from other universities in Southeast Asia. The universities in Hongkong and Singapore can build on a tradition, which derives from ancient Chinese respect for learning. In my work with the Southeast Asian Mathematical Society, I have found a tradition of mathematics (and probably in other fields of learning) in Vietnam (mainly in the north). Let me hasten to say immediately that this is not to speak of IQ's or talent. The Romans certainly had IQ's as high as the Greeks. But there is no significant Roman scientific tradition. There is no Roman Apollonius or Archimedes. We certainly have talent, but schools of thought, a milieu (even in universities) that truly reverences the life of the mind, that is something else.

One measure of intellectual tradition is what one might call the presence of the force of genius. The poor working conditions and low compensation of academicians is something we are very much aware of today and it is a situation which we must remedy. But it is not a recent phenomenon. Teachers and thinkers in the past have seldom lived well. But in some cultures the internal force of genius inspired many to think and to create under adverse circumstances. We all have our favorite heroes in this respect, but I always think of the Norwegian mathematician, Niels Hendrik Abel, who lived his life in destitution and finally died of tuberculosis at 27, yet produced some of the greatest mathematics in the world. There was a very striking report in the early seventies about mathematics in Hanoi. It was remarkable how much good research was being done in what were certainly not particularly conducive circumstances. In contrast, I have heard our educators in numerous meetings come up with the question of why can not we produce a Nobel Prize winner. We understand (and respect) the glitter, but not the substance.

Another measure of the vigor of the intellectual traditions is the amount of external support from society. We do have some patrons for the arts and for sports. But who really looks after philosophers or physicists? Or who really cares? One of the strengths of the Department of Mathematics of Nanyang University, Singapore, is support from a private foundation (The Lee Kong Chian Foundation). It seems surprising that a city-state half the size of Metro Manila can provide support for an intellectual effort which the Philippines cannot. Not really surprising, since it simply reflects our values.

There are other measures of intellectual tradition in our country: the quality of our newspaper editorials, articles in newsmagazines, level of conversation among academicians, and so forth. But all of them point to the weakness or nonexistence of intellectual tradition. Our task thus differs from universities in an older culture. It is not to preserve, but to bring to birth (or at least to nurture to maturity) an intellectual tradition.

This is one of the tasks of a Jesuit university in the Philippines. To give birth to and nurture an intellectual tradition – to “root” or to use a current term, to “inculturate” a tradition of scholarship and learning. This is a task that does not readily lend itself to 5-year plans or 25-year perspective plans. But there are some guiding principles we might keep in mind. These principles have emerged mostly in my own work of trying to find a home for a mathematical tradition in the Philippines. But they probably apply in a more general setting.

There is a story (probably apocryphal) told about a Western nation wishing to help an African country modernize its farming. In the generosity of their heart, they donated millions of dollars in tractors, had all the usual photos at the signing of the donation, as well as at the arrival of the first tractors, and then went home quite pleased with themselves. A year later, another mission was sent to take another round of photos beside lush fields and vibrant tractors, only to find the tractors rusting in the villages. They had forgotten that tractors need gasoline and that there were no gasoline stations within hundreds of miles of the farming villages. This illustrates

Principle 1: The development of an intellectual tradition or a school of thought in a third world country requires the identification and development of necessary supporting infrastructure.

E. F. Schumacher has an eloquent passage about the transplanting not of mathematics, but of a great refinery: the evolution of this refinery from something simple, “then this was added and that was modified, and so the whole thing became more and more complex.” But even more, this complex establishment is but the tip of an iceberg. We cannot see

the immensity and complexity of the arrangements that allow crude oil to flow into the refinery and ensure that a multitude of consignments of refined products, . . . reaches innumerable consumers through a most elaborate distribution system. Nor can we see the intellectual achievements

behind the planning, the organising, the financing and marketing. Least of all can we see the great educational background which is the precondition of all, extending from primary schools to universities and specialized research establishments . . . the visitor sees only the tip of the iceberg: there is ten times as much somewhere else, which he cannot see, and without the 'ten', the 'one' is worthless. And if the "ten" is not supplied by the the country or society in which the refinery is erected, either the refinery simply does not work or it is, in fact, a foreign body depending for most of its life on some other society.²

A fundamental problem to the task of building an intellectual tradition is to be aware of the rest of the iceberg, of the infrastructure that is a condition of possibility of the great intellectual centers of the world. A school of research requires at least as much societal infrastructure as Schumacher's factory. Unless we are aware of this need and try to identify and build such infrastructure, our intellectual house will be built on shifting sand.

We ask, then, what is this infrastructure? We may divide it into two parts; internal and external. Parts of the internal infrastructure are: first, talent or genius: the development and growth of any serious discipline always depend in large extent on the force of genius of a few; secondly, inspiring teachers: most of us owe our intellectual "vocation" to an inspiring teacher in school; thirdly, a "critical mass" of scholars: a stable scholarly tradition can only grow from a school of thought; and finally, continuing contact with scholars throughout the world.

Of the external infrastructure we may mention first society's support for high quality education in terms of sufficient rewards for teachers and identification and support of talent and genius; in addition, clear career opportunities (with commensurate professional rewards) for scholars and teachers; and lastly, the general value that society puts on an intellectual career.

How can this infrastructure be developed? In part, at least, through organization, through the identification and nurturing of talent, through efforts at visibility and influence on decision makers, through the general upgrading of education.

The second principle may be illustrated by another story about foreign aid. In terms of food assistance to a poor country during famine or in the wake of a disaster, Western countries have often donated foods such as powdered milk, only to find that the diges-

2. E. F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful* (N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1975) pp. 164-65, *passim*.

tive tracts of the native babies could not handle such foods. The aid literally went down the drain (with no little abrasion to the receiving tract). This illustrates the second principle:

Principle 2: While an intellectual discipline cannot be developed in isolation and there is need of cooperation and assistance from outside, it is imperative that local organization and other requisite local conditions be first developed so that outside assistance can be properly assimilated.

In many of our countries, there have been any number of visiting scholars from overseas or scholarships for our students abroad. Usually, of course, the success of such programs is measured by the evaluations of the scholars and the students. If ever an evaluation were made, however, in terms of what was the situation before such a program was initiated (State A), and what the situation had become after so many years of such a program (State B), we may find that, as with the powdered milk situation, the aid simply went down the drain. The reason? Other local conditions essential for the absorption of such aid were neglected, in particular, an organized local community of scholars.

The third principle may be illustrated by a reflection on the colonial history of our countries. Within our colonial histories, culture, whether it be language or music or wearing white for tennis, was seen as something that could be transplanted, whole and reasonably untarnished. But those of us who in these neo-colonial times have struggled with who we are and what we mean, realize that culture cannot be seen as a full-grown tree to be transplanted in our underdeveloped soils (it will die or produce amusing but alienated little brown brothers). Rather, it is a seed that must be allowed to grow in our peculiar soil and air and perhaps grow into something somewhat different.

Principle 3: The development of an intellectual discipline is not the transplanting of a body of knowledge from Paris or Harvard. It is the building up of a tradition, of a school of thought. It is the organic growth of scholarship as an integral part of national society and culture.

Again, how is this to be done? Here we must return to critical points made in the first principle. For the seeds of an intellectual tradition are ultimately the talented geniuses we have in our midst. We must identify and nurture them. We must create an environment that will allow them to grow. Ultimately, only they can root an intellectual tradition in our soil. The task that is given to us is to make our environments more favorable or at least less hostile to them.

The fourth principle really speaks of a condition of possibility for all the other principles. There is a story that I like to relate in this context. It is Aesop's fable about the cat and the mice. A society of mice had the usual problem with a cat which often caught them by surprise with the expected disastrous consequences. The mice, therefore, decided to hold a council. And after a few hours of deliberation they hit upon the solution – an early warning device. Tie a bell on the cat. It would then not be possible for them to be caught unaware. The council then congratulated themselves on the perspicacity of their analysis and the brilliance of their solution and started to disperse to their holes. Till suddenly a little mouse squeaked up: "Who will bell the cat?"

It is the question of leadership. In a stable and structured society, structures and traditions often take care of things. But in our situation, where traditions are weak or nonexistent and structures tentative and fragile, the burden falls on persons. Only they can establish the traditions and firm up the structures.

Principle 4: An intellectual tradition and schools of thought do not develop themselves. Someone has to develop them. Leadership is, therefore, an absolute prerequisite for the development of an intellectual tradition in our countries.

CONTEXTUALIZATION:

In a report written for FAPE on liberal arts education in the Philippines, I put down the following points regarding the development of national consciousness in a Third-World perspective.³

1. Our universities and colleges are institutions within our nation. They must find their self-definition primarily within the national context. This is in opposition to a view which sees our self-definition primarily within the matrix of universities through space and time, searching for roots from the University of Paris, Oxford, considering how we compare with foreign universities. In the latter context, success and failure would have been seen in comparison with foreign universities, e.g., how well our graduates do in graduate school abroad, rather than in terms of what they would be contributing to the nation.

2. They are institutions within a Third-World nation, wherein the principal problem is the concentration of wealth, power, and access to quality

3. Report on Liberal Arts Education, FAPE, May 1978.

education and public services within one small segment of the population, while the vast majority are deprived of the material and spiritual sources necessary for human development.

The problem of our dual economy, as E. F. Schumacher puts it, is not so much that some are rich and the vast majority are poor, as that the two cultures (rich and poor) are separate and discontinuous. There are several ways of measuring and understanding this separation and discontinuity.

There is an exercise I have often gone through with students and colleagues. It is to take leaders and the people and write down on the board aspects of their culture.

Language: English/Spanish vs. vernacular/Tagalog

Education: University (top ones here or abroad) vs. primary or secondary (often at substandard schools)

Entertainment: English movies/Cultural Center vs. Tagalog movies/radio soap operas.

And so forth. One finds after this exercise that our cultural worlds are completely disjointed. This holds true even for religious worship (one has only to compare the congregation at the 6:00 A.M. Sunday Mass at the Ateneo College Chapel with the Sunday noon Mass). There is no place where leaders and people meet except as master to servant. The problem then that faces a school seeking to train leaders is to ask whether these leaders are being trained to play a part within the body politic, a different function but toward the same common good, or whether we are training foreign bodies which do not fit into, or worse, parasites which prey upon, national society.

A second way of measuring this separation of cultures is to look at the history of Ateneo Sarilikha volunteers. What we saw in them, since the organization began in 1972, was a process of transformation.

First, there is a physical change: they begin to wear different clothes because of their work among the urban poor or in the barrios. Secondly, a change occurs in their social circle (barkada, significant others): in the beginning, they try to blend both worlds, their disco barkada on a Friday night and their barrio group on Saturday or Sunday. But after a while, the tension becomes unbearable and they choose (for those who continue the process) their barrio group. Thirdly, and most difficult, comes a personal change: with regard to boyfriend-girlfriend relations (either the

other partner accepts and occasionally joins their work or they break up); involving relations with parents (in the beginning, disagreements are simply time priorities: not being able to join the family for get-togethers or outings, coming home late at night; later, substantial disagreements come on lifegoals), and including tension between one's academic obligations and obligations to the field or, after graduation, tension in career goals.

What one sees are numerous crossroads of decision and a profound transformation in the individual, because through these often difficult choices they have opted for the road less travelled. In the presence of these young men and women (before and after graduation) one knows that one is in the midst of a counter-culture and a measure, perhaps, of the gulf between our two cultures is the distance they have travelled and the sense of "being-other" (of alienation) that they experience.

A third reflection on the separation of cultures in our country comes from recent discussions with several freshman classes. I talked with them on the tension and yet need of integration between their career goals and service to others. It was remarkable how unanimous the reactions were: optimism about their own personal future — they expect to do well in their careers, financially and otherwise. But as to the future of the larger society (the precise question I asked was: Where do you think the country will be in the year 2000: better, same, or worse?), they were almost unanimously pessimistic. They expected it to be worse (because of population increase, corruption, and so forth). As to their own roles or responsibilities, the answers divided into two: the problem is so overwhelming that even if they would like to help they do not know what to do; they will mainly work on their careers (becoming financially successful) and then perhaps they could help the poor (as several put it, charity begins at home).

It was with the awareness of this separation of cultures that various efforts were launched in the past to help the Ateneo bridge the gap. These efforts were seen as part of a process,

Awareness —————> Reflection/Analysis —————> Decision/Involvement

that would break through the student's cultural barriers and enable him to truly reach out to others. Now, several years later, we see that the result is not so much the change of values that

we often speak of. It is nothing as abstract as that. It is, rather, a profound change — physical, psychological, intellectual, a *kenosis*, if one may be presumptuous enough to use this term. Even more than the individual transformation, what we have seen is the formation of a community, a counter-culture, bound together by a shared experience and common beliefs. The task of contextualization has become sharpened. It is the task of the formation of young men-and-women-for-others and of building communities that are the proverbial mustard seed for a new society. For many of us, who have been working at this task for the last several years, this is a new understanding. It has raised new questions and new tasks. But in retrospect, it is not really surprising. There is probably something normative in the experience of the Gospels: what began as the preaching of the Kingdom became a process of formation of a community of apostles and disciples. It was from this “remnant” that the Church, the new creation, was born.

If this task of individual formation and building of new communities is part of our work as a Jesuit college, then there are many new things that we must work out: the process of formation during college days (not just an occasional seminar or retreat “to impart values”, but an ongoing process); community-formation during college days (the structure of communities, support for them); continuing formation after graduation and the development of communities of young professionals. The ultimate rationale behind these tasks is the faith that a new vision and a new social order has first to be incarnated in the individuals and the communities that will give birth to the new creation.

BUILDING UP OF COMMUNITIES OF PRAYER AND FAITH

This has always been, of course, our Christian task: the building up of communities of prayer and faith. But what we have said above gives it a new urgency and new aspects. There is need for new responses today. Our communities must be able to provide our young people with the support and inner strength to participate in the crucial struggles of our time.

Our communities have to help each of us to overcome reluctance, fear, or apathy when confronted with the need to understand the social, eco-

conomic, and political problems of our locality, our country and the international community.⁴

This is because of the new challenges that confront us:

There is a new challenge to our apostolic mission in a world increasingly interdependent, yet tragically divided by injustice, injustice not only personal but institutionalized: built into economic, social and political structures that dominate the life of nations and the international community.⁵

There are millions of men and women in our world who are suffering from poverty, disease and hunger brought about by the unjust distribution of wealth and resources and by racial, social, and political discrimination. Not only the quality of human life, but human life itself is under constant threat. It is becoming more and more clear that despite the opportunities offered by an ever more serviceable technology, men and women are simply not willing to pay the price of a more just and more humane society.

At the same time, people today are somehow aware that their problems are not just social and technological, but personal and spiritual. They have a feeling that what is at stake here is the very meaning of man: his destiny, his future. Men are hungry: but hungry not just for bread, but for the word of God.⁶

The possibility of response to these challenges makes new demands:

1. *A more decisive contact with the world.* Too often we are insulated from any real contact with unbelief and with the hard, everyday consequences of injustice and oppression. As a result, we run the risk of not being able to hear the cry for the Gospel as it is addressed to us by the men and women of our time . . . Are we ready, with discernment and with reliance on a community which is alive and apostolic, to bear witness to the Gospel in situations from which we are not insulated, in which our belief is challenged by unbelief and our hope countered by injustice?
2. *Study and Research.* Are we prepared to undertake the difficult and demanding labor of study and research in theology, philosophy, and the human sciences without which we can hardly grasp, much less solve, the problems of our time?⁷

4. Decree 4, of the 32nd General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, *Our Mission Today*, no. 43. While this decree is addressed to Jesuits, its message applies as well to apostolic co-workers (faculty, students, alumni) and to Christians today.

5. Decree 4, no. 6.

6. Decree 4, nos. 20-21.

7. Decree 4, no. 35.

Our three tasks thus come together in this building up of a community of prayer and faith, a community dedicated to truth: to scholarship, yes, and to the truths that are the heritage of the human race and our nation, to the research and study that can help us grasp the solve the problems of our time; but, above all, to the TRUTH, to the Truth that is also the Way and the Life. We must build up a community that is one with all those with whom Christ identified himself: the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick and imprisoned.

We may seem to have come quite far afield from the initial (and for a university, more customary) task of building up of an intellectual tradition. We may even wonder about the wisdom of leaving the quiet groves of academe to venture into the turmoil of the world's struggles. But then even the founder of Academe had to drink hemlock for forming the Athenian youth to the truth. The pursuit of truth ultimately commits our being and our life. We can escape this commitment only by playing at truth, or by turning away from the bitter cup that is often the price of bearing witness to the truth.