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Marcia L. Colish

Marianist Award Lecture/2000

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CATHOLIC AND INTELLECTUAL: CONJUNCTION OR DISJUNCTION

by MARCIA L. COLISH

Marianist Award Lecture
2000

THE UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

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MARCIA L. COLISH was born in Brooklyn, New York. She is a graduate of Smith College and received her doctoral degree from Yale University.

She has been a Visiting Scholar at Harvard University and Weston School of Theology. Dr. Colish was a Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center from 1994 to 1995. She received the Haskins Medal from the Medieval Academy of American in 1998. Since 1963, she has been a professor at Oberlin College in the department of History.

Dr. Colish's publications include:

Medieval Foundations of the Western Intellectual Tradition, 400– 1400. 1999

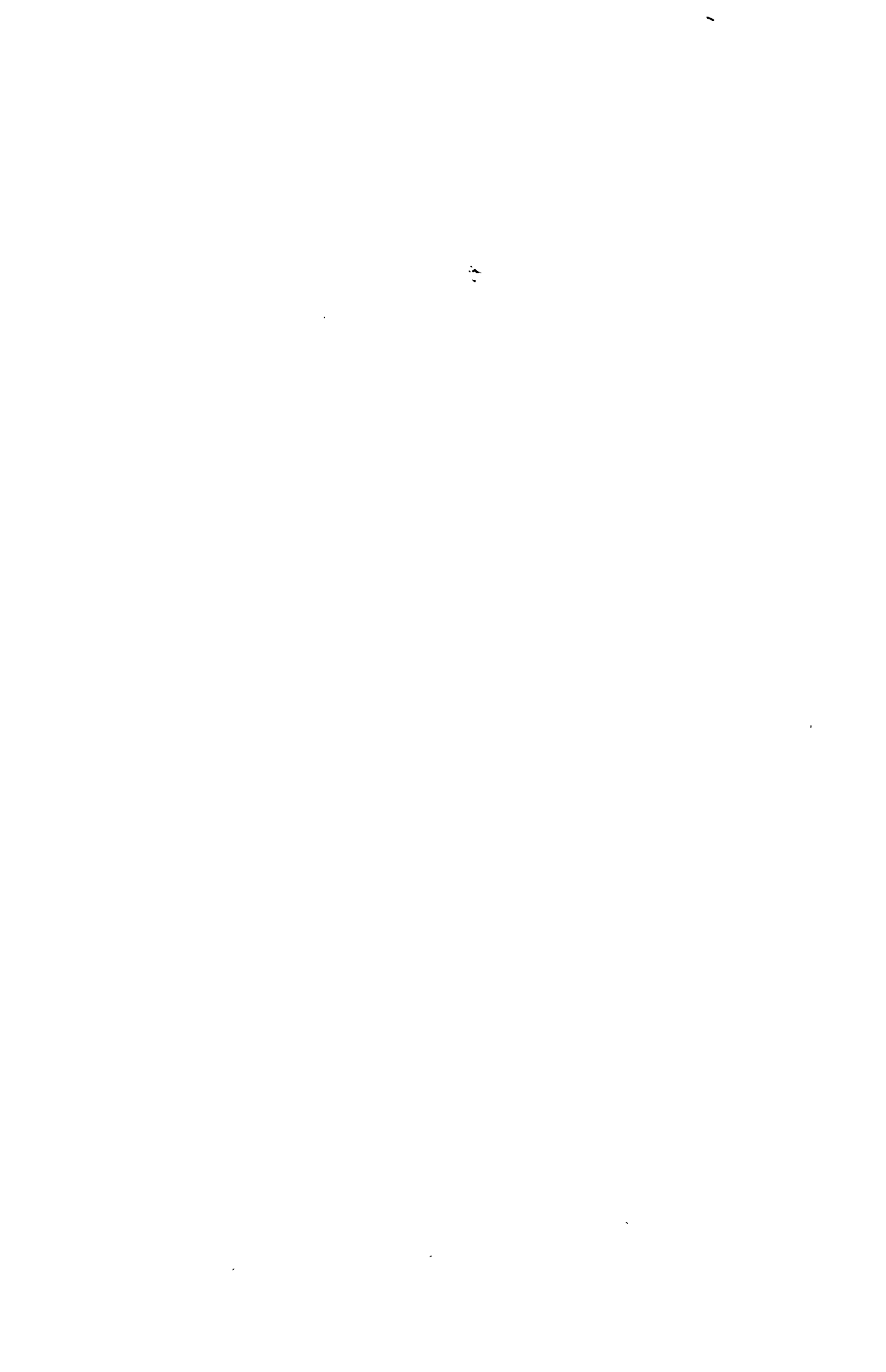
Peter Lombard. 1994 (ed.)

The Stoic tradition from Antiquity of the Early Middle Ages, II: Stoicism in Latin Christian thought through the Sixth Century. 1990

The Stoic Tradition from Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages, I: Stoicism in classical Latin Literature. 1985

The Mirror of Language: A Study in the Medieval Theory of Knowledge. 1983

In addition to these publications, Dr. Colish has authored numerous articles in scholarly journals.



The following lecture was given at the University of Dayton on the occasion of the presentation of the Marianist Award to Marcia L. Colish, February, 17, 2000.

Catholic and Intellectual: Conjunction or Disjunction?

My title, "Catholic and Intellectual: Conjunction or Disjunction?" directs attention to the copula, "and." Does this word bind "Catholic" and "Intellectual" in a harmonious and mutually supportive union? Or, does it place these terms in an either/or, contrasting, or even confrontational stance? To be sure, some non-Catholics opt for the second interpretation. As they see it, if one is a Catholic, one has to cash in one's brains. In particular, if one is a Catholic theologian, one is constrained to play Charlie McCarthy to the Edgar Bergen of whoever occupies the throne of Peter, or his self-appointed scriptwriter. Oddly enough, this same attitude can also be found in some Catholic circles, on the part of some would-be ventriloquists and those they have managed to convince. Proponents of this view also seek to obfuscate the distinction between the creeds of the Church and the handful of infallible papal rulings made since 1870 and the large number of other doctrines which Catholic theologians may legitimately debate and on which they, and the rest of the faithful, may hold their own positions.

How should Catholic academics who want to dissociate themselves from intra-confessional, anti-intellectualism go about it? In reflecting on these matters, it occurred to me that my own academic specialty, medieval intellectual history, provides some valuable insights and rationales. At the same time, it occurred to me that it would be worth considering how more recent thinkers had addressed this, and related, themes. So I decided to consult two previous commentators on the university and the church-related university, John Henry Newman and Jaroslav Pelikan. Newman published his *The Idea of a University* in 1855 and Pelikan published his reflections on that book, *The Idea of a University: A Reexamination*, in 1992. Although separated by the Atlantic and by almost 150 years, these authors, I found, had much to say of interest on this topic and

to this audience, and much that I could use as the springboard for my own reflections on the subject.

First, Newman. Particular historical circumstances inspired him to write *The Idea of a University*. In the 1850s, in England, one had to be a communicant of the Anglican church in order to study and teach at a university. Indeed, Newman's conversion to Catholicism forced him to resign his fellowship at Oriel College, Oxford. In response to this situation, which effectively barred non-Anglicans from the learned professions unless they had studied abroad, the decision was made by the Irish hierarchy to found a Catholic university in that part of the British Isles. Newman served as its first rector. It was in connection with this assignment that he outlined what we would call today the "mission statement" of the Irish Catholic University, in the lectures and occasional pieces published as *The Idea of a University*. In short, rather than projecting a Platonic ideal of a university, Newman aimed at explaining the policies he actually intended to implement in this newly launched institution.

There are a number of key themes Newman emphasizes in describing the educational objectives of the new university, many of which still merit our consideration. The Irish Catholic University, he notes, teaches the liberal arts and also has faculties for specialized post-graduate study in the sciences, medicine, and law, equipping degree recipients to enter the learned professions. The university teaches theology as well, not only as a post-graduate discipline but also as a branch of liberal studies. Newman stresses the idea that theology should be taught as a university discipline; he does not want to see it ghettoized in seminaries or monasteries, aimed exclusively at the vocational formation of clergy-in-training. In this connection, Newman looks back to theology as a university discipline in medieval scholasticism, while at the same time he anticipates religious studies as a branch of the humanities, themes to which I will return.

While he certainly pays attention to the learned disciplines that lead to professional accreditation, Newman's primary concern is the BA curriculum, the liberal arts, and the qualities of mind they

should impart, whether or not students go on to post-graduate work. In the academic jargon of today, Newman is interested in "outcomes assessment," that is, what undergraduates actually retain after commencement day. His term for this is Liberal Knowledge. Liberal Knowledge, as Newman defines it, has two critical aspects. First, it produces the habits of mind and modes of behavior that characterize the gentleman—a term both gender-specific and class-specific in Newman's historical context. If we want to subscribe to this notion we will also certainly want to qualify Newman's concept, making it more inclusive. Second, desirable as these attainments may be, Newman argues that intellectual virtue should not be confused with moral virtue. To be sure, intellectual virtue can, and should, be put to the service of moral ends. But, in and of itself, it is morally neutral. It may also be put to the service of greed, destructiveness, and the *libido dominandi*. By itself, intellectual virtue does not add one jot or tittle to the moral stature of its possessor. Nor is it proof against the passions and sinful impulses that incline fallen humanity to folly and vice.

For Newman, then, a church-related university is not, automatically, a school for virtue. Nor should it be envisioned as such. I'd like to read a fairly lengthy quotation from *The Idea of a University* in which Newman lays this point on the line:

> Knowledge is one thing, virtue is another; good sense is not conscience, refinement is not humility, nor is largeness and justice of view faith. Philosophy, however enlightened, however profound, gives no command over the passions, no influential motives, no vivifying principles.... It is well to have a cultivated intellect, a delicate taste, a candid, equitable, dispassionate mind, a noble and courteous bearing in the conduct of life; these are the connatural 'ualities of a large knowledge; they are the objects of a University; ... but... they are no guarantee for sanctity or even for conscientiousness.... Their admirers persist in arrogating for them a praise to which they have no claim. Quarry the granite rock with razors, or moor the vessel with a thread of silk; then may you hope with such keen and delicate instruments as human knowledge and reason to contend against those giants, the passions and the pride of man.... To open the mind, to correct it, to refine it, to

> enable it to know, to digest, master, rule, and use the knowledge, to give it power over its own faculties, application, flexibility, method, and critical exactness, sagacity, resource, address, eloquent expression, is an object as intelligible as the cultivation of virtue, while, at the same time, it is absolutely distinct from it.[1]

While agreeing that Liberal Knowledge can serve morality and religion, then, Newman also notes that it can be used by scoffers and critics of morality and religion. With respect to the Christian tradition, he concludes, Liberal Knowledge "proves, in the event, sometimes its serviceable ally, sometimes... an insidious and dangerous foe."[2]

Having thus crisply dissociated himself from the ancient Greek philosophical maxim, "to virtue, knowledge," Newman turns to another of his central concerns, what he calls the duties of the church toward knowledge, in a church-related university. In this connection, his prescriptions have a strikingly modern look and are fully applicable today. Newman begins by observing that all the arts and sciences, be they secular or theological, have their own proper methods and criteria, their own scope and legitimacy in their own spheres. He is vigorously opposed to reductionism of any kind, from whatever quarter. Practitioners in all fields, he argues, must recognize, and respect, the norms and procedures followed in other fields. It follows, from this principle, that the university does not delimit or censor what is studied or what books are to be read. It is interesting to note, here, that Newman sees the greatest challenge to Christianity as coming from the arts and humanities, not from the natural sciences. In digesting that fact, it is worth keeping in mind that Newman wrote before the Darwinian revolution. And, he is a throwback to the view that Aristotle is the "master of those who know" in the sciences, Galileo, Newton, and others to the contrary notwithstanding. In addressing the challenge of literature and the arts to the church, Newman points out that the sources of these disciplines are diverse. They record and display the human condition, in its depravity as well as in its grandeur. This fact, he emphasizes, goes with the territory of Liberal Knowledge. Accept it as such, he counsels. Do not teach expurgated texts or put mental

fig-leaves on the nudes. Regarding literature, he advises, "Put up with it, as it is, or do not pretend to cultivate it. Take things as they are, not as you would wish them."[3] The church-related university, in sum, fears no form of knowledge. It represses no element of our nature. Rather, it "cultivates the whole."[4] "Right-on!" we might agree, today.

If Newman were addressing my topic, "Catholic and Intellectual: Conjunction or Disjunction?," it is clear that his position would be "both/and" rather than one or the other. Well before the pessimism about reason, science, and technology brought on in the twentieth century by their blatant abuse by totalitarian despots and warmongers, Newman displays a keen sensitivity to the fact that Liberal Knowledge can be exploited, perverted, and applied to evil ends. The possession of Liberal Knowledge does not, in itself, make a person a better member of his or her faith community, a better person in God's sight. Thus, Newman posits a distinction between intellectual and moral virtue, insisting that they are not the same and that they do not automatically conduce to each other. At the same time, the church, and the church-related university committed to propagating Liberal Knowledge, must not fear, repress, censor, or subject to external criteria any of the arts or sciences. Such a university must cultivate all aspects of educational endeavor, acknowledging each discipline's distinctive ground-rules, in order to cultivate the whole. In that respect, the copula in "Catholic and Intellectual" would be, for Newman, a conjunction as well as a disjunction. And, the disjunction, where it exists for him, speaks less to the limits of human reason than to the distinction he draws between intellectual and moral virtue.

I'd now like to turn to Pelikan's reconsideration of Newman. He speaks both as a professor and as a former graduate school dean. Just as there are features of Newman's outlook that reflect his historical situation and personal proclivities, so there are features of Pelikan's outlook that bespeak his personal experience and the general situation of American universities in the late twentieth century. Thus, Pelikan treats some issues—boards of trustees and their proper relations with university administrators and faculty, the re-

sponsibility of university presidents for sound fiscal management, intercollegiate athletics as big business with all the temptations thereunto appertaining—that are remote from Newman's purview. I plan to ignore these dimensions of Pelikan's essay, focusing instead on the areas in which his position can best be compared with Newman's, and best serve as a backdrop for my own reflections.

First, and in sharp contrast with Newman's rigorous distinction between intellectual and moral virtue, Pelikan thinks that universities must subscribe to and inculcate virtues that are both intellectual and moral. He heads the list with freedom of inquiry and intellectual honesty. Next, he observes, scholars have a moral as well as a professional duty to publish the results of their research, in a form, and a forum, where they can be evaluated by peers. What is at issue here, for Pelikan, is not just the duty of the professoriate to advance knowledge in addition to imparting it to their students. Nor is he seeking merely to develop an ethical rationale for the "publish or perish" policy of the research university. Beyond that, Pelikan argues that the willingness to subject one's work to peer review is a control and a corrective against intellectual *hubris*, self-satisfaction, and complacency. On this topic, Pelikan indicates that he is as interested in the psychology of the professoriate, and the temptations confronting it, as much as he is in what a university education does for students. He makes a valid point, I think, in arguing that professors cannot be good role models for students unless they take intellectual risks and push the envelope themselves.

Thus, another intellectual virtue that is also a moral virtue for Pelikan is courage, the ability to stick to one's guns, if one is a revisionist, or swimming against the current, and also the willingness to modify or abandon one's position if it is proved wrong, however large an ego-investment one may have in one's older views. As with his point about submitting one's work to peer review, Pelikan's argument here stresses the humility and selflessness of the researcher in the quest for knowledge as a moral, and not just a professional, requirement. It also stresses the point that, in academia,

authority is not *ex officio*; it is possessed only when it is earned, in the eyes of those competent to judge.

Pelikan certainly shares Newman's appreciation of the fact that different disciplines have their own procedures, methods, and criteria, and that members of a university must understand and respect that fact. But, once again, in addition to seeing this attitude as a moral no less than an intellectual virtue, Pelikan puts his own spin on the point. Unlike Newman, he does not focus on the responsibility to the disciplines of the university's administration, or its chartering body. Rather, he focuses on academic collegiality. It is professors and students who have the duty to recognize both the pluralistic and the universalistic dimensions of human nature and experience. They must be able to distinguish between ideas which they may feel a duty to attack and the persons who articulate those ideas. For Pelikan, a central feature of the university's mission is "to tolerate fundamental diversity of beliefs and values without sacrificing conviction.... What is needed is the skill and the art of holding views strongly and yet of respecting views that are diametrically opposed. This skill is one with which the university has had a rich experience. It involves a civility of discourse; ... the discourse that goes on within the university may serve as the most impressive exhibit available to prove that civility is in fact the best means that human reason has devised... for coping with fundamental differences."[5]

I daresay that Pelikan's insistence on the importance of civility can be contextualized when we recall the frequent trashing of that virtue, in the academy and in society at large, since the 1960s. Had he been able to read Pelikan's book, I think that Newman would have found this insistence on civility both surprising and shocking. But, apart from his general claim that there are moral as well as intellectual virtues specific to the university's mission, Pelikan makes this observation about civility because he sees the university as the last bastion of rationality and courtesy in a world intellectually diminished by ideological bickering, the latest fads in cultural criticism, and the dumbing down of public discourse.

Going beyond that, Pelikan maintains that the virtues he sees as central to the university's mission are an integral part of ethics in general. They set the operative standards for us as academics, in whatever faith community we stand and in whatever kind of university we teach. In that sense, although Pelikan is not writing specifically about or for church-related universities, he does see the academic virtues as religiously significant, whatever an academic's personal convictions may be. I think that Pelikan makes a valid point here. I would agree that the integrity with which we do our work has a moral dimension, for all academics, and that it also has a religious dimension for those of us who place our professional labors in the framework of a divine reality that is our ultimate source of meaning. Pelikan is also concerned with how universities address the failure of some academics to uphold the intellectual and moral virtues of the academy, how they enforce academic freedom, and its flip side, academic responsibility. Thus, unlike Newman, Pelikan treats university governance, the legislation of principles and guidelines, both substantive and procedural, and their application, without fear or favor, to those who fall short. I would add a point here that Pelikan omits. Even the most cursory review of the horror stories in the *AAUP Journal* indicates that supra-university watchdog agencies and pressure groups also need to exist, to guard the on-campus guardians of academic freedom and responsibility.

Finally, although Pelikan writes about universities in general and not, specifically, about church-related universities, he does consider the relationship of the church to the university. On this subject, he takes a far bolder line than Newman. Pelikan argues that the church needs the university more than the university needs the church. And why? So that the church can understand its own message, the development of its own teachings and practices, and the ways in which they have been enculturated (to use a sociological term) or incarnated (to use a theological term) in different times and places. This understanding, in turn, is essential if the church is going to find the best ways to preach the Gospel in the present and future. To this end, Pelikan continues, the church needs the help of many university disciplines. It needs linguistic and philological ex-

pertise, which enable it to reconstruct and interpret its foundation documents. It needs history, comparative religion, psychology, and the social sciences, which help the church understand the development of its theology in context. I would concur. For we are educating students to understand their own traditions, and all vital and durable traditions are complex, in their histories, and multiform, in their modes of *praxis*. We are also educating students to be citizens of a pluralistic society; thus they need to have a knowledge and understanding of other people's religious traditions. In the case of students who are Catholics, we need to prepare them to embrace the ecumenical imperatives of Vatican II. To return to Pelikan, he adds that the church also needs philosophy and the sciences, which give it a vocabulary enabling it to make its theology comprehensible and defensible in the intellectual community.

In making this point, Pelikan speaks to two historical facts which I would corroborate: First, for the most part, universities today no longer depend on churches as their sponsors. And, in the case of universities that do, they are on notice that the church-related university is not the only game in town. In order to hold up their heads with pride, such universities have to subscribe to the same intellectual values and, in Pelikan's case, virtues, that define the university as such. If not, their personnel will simply move elsewhere and make their pedagogy available in contexts not subject to ecclesiastical oversight. Second, ecclesiastical traditions have never been static or monolithic. They have always embraced multiple interpretations of authority and they have had to reinvent themselves repeatedly in order to "speak to" different cultures and mind-sets. Pelikan emphasizes the point that churches need what university education can supply since, as the vehicles of living traditions, they must undergo development lest they atrophy. In sum, Pelikan weaves into the theme of the church's need for the university a master pattern: Newman's own view of the development of doctrine.

I find that both Newman and Pelikan offer us much food for thought. If Newman is prophetic in his skepticism about the automatic application of Liberal Knowledge to good causes, Pelikan's

confidence that intellectual virtues are moral virtues also rings true, even though he wisely qualifies the point by recognizing that professors share the temptations of fallen humanity: they may be vain, proud, envious, manipulative, and selfish. In addition to acculturation, universities need to provide clear academic ground-rules in order to thwart these proclivities and, at worst, to penalize them. Both authors emerge as realists. Neither is suckered by the Enlightenment myth of the inevitable march of progress through reason and science. Both see a place for theology in the intellectual discourse of the university; both see the university as standing above and apart from theology as confessional drum-beating, masquerading as scholarship. Both treat theology as a humanistic discipline operating under the same academic ground-rules as other humanistic disciplines. Both consider the church in relation to the university. Newman sees the church-related university as having a *duty* to support Liberal Knowledge; Pelikan sees the church, whether in church-supported universities or not, as having a *need* for the university's support. As I see it, both perspectives have merit, and they do not contradict each other. Finally, both Newman and Pelikan are aware of the fact that the defense of academic freedom and the respect for the independence of the scholarly disciplines, values defining the modern university in whatever setting, derive from the medieval university. I agree with that idea but, as a medievalist, I would amplify it, arguing that the medieval university can best be understood as the culmination, for its time, of a longer historical tradition that goes back to the early church. Church-related universities are, historically, the primogenitary heirs of that tradition and should be its strongest defenders, however much some of them may try to ignore that legacy, and however much external influences may seek to induce memory-loss.

The medieval model begins in the patristic period. Initially, early Christians sent their children to the state-supported schools of liberal arts, rather than setting up a parallel educational system conveying literacy in Greek and Latin with bowdlerized versions of classical authors. As a product and exponent of the classical school, St. Augustine, considering the education men preparing to be bibli-

cal exegetes and preachers would need, included the entire classical curriculum, omitting astrology alone. With respect to these cultural riches, he advises his students to "spoil the Egyptians of their gold and silver" as they bring it into the Promised Land.[6] By the sixth century, the state-supported classical schools were gone in the wake of the Roman Empire. The locus of schooling in the liberal arts shifted to monasteries. The prevailing spirit of the new monastic schoolmasters is summed up well by Cassiodorus. Reflecting on the role of the classics in monastic education, he expresses the firm conviction that the preservation of liberal culture is a responsibility of Christian educators: "May the task of the ancients be our task,"[7] he exhorts his readers. Picking up on the same theme, the twelfth-century educator Hugh of St. Victor proposes, "Learn everything. You will see afterwards that nothing is superfluous. A skimpy knowledge is not a pleasing thing,"[8] in the model curriculum of arts and sciences he drafted for the neophyte biblical scholars of his own day.

The same century in which Hugh wrote saw the first emergence of the universities and of the scholastic method that flourished there. Notwithstanding the episcopal umbrella under which most early universities arose, by the early thirteenth century, if not before, they had acquired corporate liberties freeing them from the control of church and state alike. As autonomous corporations, universities, and their sub-corporations in individual faculties, determined their own curricula, the requirements for degrees, the ways of testing the competence of candidates for them, and the modes of policing their own ranks. On the few occasions when popes or princes tried to intervene and prescribe loyalty tests, the influence of these external authorities was generally nugatory; at most, it shifted the action, or some personnel, to other university centers. In practice, as in principle, universities defended and institutionalized the twelfth-century precept defining intellectual life: *diversi, sed non adversi.*[9] In all faculties, from the arts curriculum to the post-graduate fields of medicine, law, and theology, there were always several masters teaching the same subjects, each with his own interpretation of the material. It was acknowledged that unity did not require unifor-

mity; a plurality of positions could coexist within the orthodox consensus, even in the high-risk fields of theology and canon law. In working out their individual positions, scholastics in all fields developed a critical method, based on the consideration of reason and authority alike. They felt free, even obliged, to analyze the foundation documents within their disciplines, applying logical, historical, and philosophical criticism to bear on them, deciding which authorities remained pertinent and which needed to be contextualized, relativized, put on the shelf, or even rejected. Even while advocating rival solutions to the same problems, medieval academics could preserve collegiality, and a strong sense of their collective identity, despite the argumentative style that marked scholastic debate.

It is out of this tradition that we derive our treasured right of academic freedom and our commitment to intellectual courage and honesty, our respect for colleagues in different disciplines, as well as for the work of colleagues in our own fields with whom we disagree. These are values to which both Newman and Pelikan speak. It is out of this tradition, as well, that the concept of academic responsibility derives: our duty to uphold standards, our duty not to turn the power of the podium in our classrooms into a bully pulpit, our duty not to debase the teacher-student relationship into a relationship of guru and groupie. This is the legacy that we all inherit. The Catholic university and the Catholic professoriate inherit it in particular. We have the obligation to embody and defend it, whatever kinds of colleges and universities may employ us. Whatever our affiliations, we also have the obligation to be good citizens of our academic communities, recognizing that eternal vigilance is the price of liberty, academic and otherwise. This may mean that we have to remind our colleagues, our administrators, and the ecclesiastical bodies to which they report in some cases, that they, too, have a duty to be faithful to the tradition of the medieval university that is their own richest inheritance. If they are laggard in that duty, if they try to dismiss it as passé, we have the responsibility to recall them to it, to embarrass them for neglecting it, and even to hold their collective feet to the fire, if necessary. It is

to be hoped that drastic action of this sort will not be required. For if Catholic academics are clear about these values and solid in their willingness to promote them and to hold their leaders accountable to them, we can keep the flag aloft. After all, without us, neither the church nor the university can carry out its educational mission. For me, therefore, the motto which that flag proudly proclaims is: Catholic *and* Intellectual: Conjunction *not* Disjunction!

ENDNOTES

1. John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University*, ed. I. T. Ker (Oxford, 1976), pp. 110-12.
2. Ibid., p. 213.
3. Ibid., p. 197
4. Ibid., p. 198
5. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Idea of a University: A Reexamination* (New Haven, 1992), pp. 54-55.
6. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 2.40.60, trans. D. W. Robertson (Indianapolis, 1958), pp. 75-76, paraphrasing Exodus 3:22.
7. Cassiodorus, *Institutes* 1.27.2, trans. Leslie Webber Jones (New York, 1966), p. 127.
8. Hugh of St. Victor, *Didascalicon* 6.3, trans. Jerome Taylor (New York), p. 137.
9. On this principle, see Henri De Lubac, "A propos de la formule: *diversi sed non adversi*," *Mélanges Jules Lebreton=Recherches de science religieuse* 40 (1952): 27-40; Hubert Silvestre, "'Diversi sed non adversi'," *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 31 (1964): 24-32.

THE MARIANIST AWARD

Each year the University of Dayton presents the Marianist Award to a Roman Catholic distinguished for achievement in scholarship and the intellectual life.

Established in 1950, the award was originally presented to individuals who made outstanding contributions to Mariology. In 1967, the concept for the award was broadened to honor those people who had made outstanding contributions to humanity. The award, as currently given, was reactivated in 1986.

The Marianist Award is named for the founding religious order of the University of Dayton, the Society of Mary (Marianists). The award carries with it a stipend of $5,000.

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