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Talking Back: Eloquentia Perfecta in the Digital Age

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For example, resources within the department could be committed to an ongoing oral history project. A relatively small amount of funding could incentivize a few students to reach out to various groups and communities in the Boston area to collect their stories and recollections as they pertain to historical events or developments. From a more strictly history-department point of view, this effort would yield a rich resource for future research (similar to the famed WPA slave narratives), and it would furthermore give graduate students an expanded opportunity to hone their skills in oral history collection. This would also challenge the ivory tower stereotype.

Additionally, such a project would encourage students to authentically engage with the surrounding community and hear the stories and lived experiences of individuals in ways

they might otherwise not have over the course of their studies. By creating new bonds and actively working to preserve the city's history, a commitment to local history would be an experience in service that would not only supplement historical training. This sort of project would also be a unique answer to the call for the promotion of justice and the formation of women and men for others that is so central to a Jesuit education.

As I hope to make these proposals concrete actions, it remains to be seen whether they will gain traction within my history world, and I am very prepared that these efforts may not bear any fruit. Either way, I am thankful for the opportunity to explore this tension between my graduate training and BC's Jesuit identity, as well as for the length of my training, which gives me time to think of other ideas should these not work! ■

Eloquentia Perfecta in the Digital Age

By Patrick L. Gilger, S.J.

For Jesuit basketball supporters, the madness is ending as I write. No longer will we contribute to the estimated loss of four million productive work hours by watching, for example, the Marquette men's basketball team—the last standing Jesuit school in the annual pit of productivity quicksand that is the NCAA tournament—on our work computers. Marquette just had the life crushed from them by the Orangemen of Syracuse. But after reading the last issue of *Conversations*, it's clear that the same cannot also be said of the liveliness of *eloquentia perfecta* in Jesuit universities.

In making a contemporary case for *eloquentia perfecta*, that issue pointed out that much of what was always true of good predigital rhetoric remains true of good digital rhetoric. Two points regarding this continuity are particularly impor-

tant. First, as Paul Lynch gracefully reminded us, rhetoric remains the tool for discerning the “available means of persuasion” in a given situation. While the available means and the problems to be overcome change, the demand that we evaluate our options with care in order to proceed with efficacy remains. Second, the tight bond between the cultivation of rhetorical skill and the cultivation of good character remains a goal of Jesuit rhetorical education. It was John O'Malley who noted that such character formation is shaped by the same perennial questions “of life and death, of virtue and vice.” And Stephen Mailloux noted that in classical rhetoric it is the good person who is able to speak well for the common good. Both of these traits remain the same.

But what has changed? We might hypothesize that if it's not the essence or the ends of rhetoric that have changed, then it must be the means. And this is partially true. Persuasion is certainly

accomplished through different means in the digital age: the constraints of the 6-second Vine video and 140-character Tweets are both new. But neither is fundamentally different from the constraints of, say, the sonnet. It seems to me that what has changed more substantially is not just the means themselves, but the increasingly small number of ways we are willing to allow ourselves to be open to persuasion. In other words, when considering the ideal of *eloquentia perfecta* for Jesuit educators in the digital age, we ought to consider not just how digital technology provides different conduits

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for interaction but also how those conduits have affected what it is that makes something persuasive or not. In a digital age, the way we receive information has itself changed what counts as persuasive.

For example, the “narrowcasting” of content, to use Diana Owen’s articulate descriptor, is unique not just because it targets audiences precisely, but because of what it reveals about the kind of content people (read: ourselves, our colleagues, our students) are willing to receive at all. Digital technology encourages the tendency to enter into echo chambers of the like-minded. But the bigger effect may be that it has raised our consciousness of being the targets of coercive attention. We filter out “rhetoric” (in the colloquial, pejorative sense) because we are increasingly immersed—all of us—in the kind of world where we are constantly barraged by attempts to persuade us. And the vast majority of these attempts at persuasion have absolutely nothing to do with forming us to be good persons who speak well for the common good. The task of Jesuit educators in a digital age is so difficult because, in order to function well in such a world, we have all turned our B/S filters up to 11. We have developed a practiced invulnerability when it comes to persuasion.

The brilliant (and much missed!) John Kavanaugh taught us that it is advertisers who have most effectively discerned the available means of persuasion in this environment. But since we have all become aware of their skill, advertisers must use increasingly nonsensical, self-aware, or sensational advertising to

grab our attention. The problem for Jesuit educators attempting to be persuasive is twofold: Advertisers are much better at this than we are; and we must persuade students to allow us through their “rhetoric” filters—or draw them out from behind them—to accomplish the character formation that Jesuit education, at its best, attempts.

A

ll this to say that we are immersed in a context that makes it very, very difficult to conceive of an *eloquentia* to which the adjective *perfecta* can even be applied—because the primary kind of “character formation” through persuasion we normally experience is actually manipulation. Our students and we ourselves as well don’t really think of ourselves being made better through exposure to rhetoric, because being made better means trusting that there is a true end, a good which is really good for us and toward which both

persuaders and persuadees ought to direct themselves.

So it will come as no surprise that I believe that our task as Ignatian educators ought to be to foster in our students the ability to imagine an end toward which their character can be formed and thus allow the difference between manipulation and persuasion to come to light once again. Whether this happens, as John O’Malley put it, through the classical technique of “introducing them to cultures not their own...and by thus giving them a sense of the wide possibilities of the human spirit” or through the liturgies and sacraments and theological thinking that also characterize our institutions is a discussion for another time. But, in my opinion, the ability to imagine the perfectibility of the human spirit and the difference between manipulation and persuasion which it reveals ought to be our task.

It is just this task that The Jesuit Post, a website staffed by Jesuits in formation around the country (of which I am a cofounder), is attempting to accomplish. We approach *eloquentia perfecta* in the digital age in typical Ignatian fashion, by pointing out how God is already at work even in the confusing and apparently God-barren stuff of our world—in pop culture, politics, sports, philosophy, and even advertising. It is our attempt to show that behind even the strongest rhetorical filter there is not only marketing manipulation but also reason for hope, a Spirit already eloquently pursuing our own perfection. ■



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