

WHAT THE UNIVERSITIES HAVE DONE TO INSTILL ETHICS IN PUBLIC SERVICE

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I would like to begin this talk with the premise that every university that is worth the name is basically *a public service*. An authentic university today is one that incorporates Newman's notion of the British university as primarily a teaching institution, the Germany university model which emphasizes research, and the modern idea of a university as one that reaches out to surrounding communities, whether at the local, national, or international levels. In performing this three-fold task of teaching, research, and community building, the university's ultimate beneficiary is supposed to be the public (*publicus*, a substantive synonymous with *populus*, people).

With that as a premise, I would like to develop the topic of this paper on three levels: at the level of the university itself; at the level of the university's immediate public – the students; and at the level of the society which is the university's larger public.

A. AT THE LEVEL OF THE UNIVERSITY

At the first level, it is quite logical to expect that, for a university to instill ethics in public service, it must first be the embodiment of ethical public service. Teaching by example remains the best way to impart values. We can therefore ask the question: What have the Philippine universities done to embody ethical public service? Can they be considered the exemplars or models which other agencies devoted to public service, like government, can emulate? Quite defensively, I can enumerate the achievements of my university in the field of public service. But I will not do that because I believe that this discussion, to be truly fruitful, must not only be a forum for self-congratulations, but an occasion for reflection, a moment to accept our failures in order to pave the way towards self-renewal.

During the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines, a severe criticism was leveled against the failure of many universities to act as a leaven in Philippine society. Although the Council addressed itself to Catholic Universities, it is worth considering here what the Council laid down as the causes of such a failure, namely:

unhealthy competition, elitism, and the influences of consumerism. Let us take these one by one:

1. The existing contest as to which university has the best graduates, faculty, and facilities, leads some universities to the reprehensible practice of "personnel piracy". Many a time a university would spend a sizable amount of its finances to develop its faculty, only to have them pirated by other universities which offer higher salaries and benefits. This practice not only discourages schools to develop its own staff, but can generate in the personnel a mercenary attitude. Also, unhealthy competition hinders the sharing of resources among different universities.

2. Many affluent Filipinos have a cultural fixation towards elitism in education. One tragic effect of this is the equation of low standard of education with low tuition fee; high standard of education with high tuition fee. Such elitism not only waters down education to a status symbol, but tends to produce in well-to-do students the feeling that they are a people apart, and their education, a tool to advance their social class. One thing is to cultivate high standards, and quite another thing is to cultivate an elitist complex on a "better than thou" exclusivistic attitude among students and faculty.

Because high standards of education require high financial support, education as a public service to the poor and the needy becomes difficult, it not impossible, for struggling private universities that depend only on tuition fees for their subsistence. Thus, while subsidies flow to universities favored by the State and other funding agencies, other universities content themselves with income generated through ways which jeopardize academic standards.

Many Filipinos lament the co-existence of the backwardness and the high literacy rate of the people. Perhaps, one cause of such a paradox is the pursuance of elitism under the guise of academic excellence. Elitism breeds individual smugness and social indifferentism, which are disastrous attitudes for social development and nation building. The Second Plenary Council exhorts universities which encourage elitism in education to wake up from the lethargy of self-complacency and self-incensation. They are being asked to educate primarily genuine Filipinos, who will be in love with their country and will be willing to build it up, rather than be mere projections of their alma mater, or their elite clan.

3. Recent thrusts in educational planning reveal that the highest priority is often given to courses that foster consumerist attitudes. Courses leading to the development of techniques and skills towards industrialization are highly encouraged. Very little incentive is given to students to pursue a teaching career because, in terms of salaries and economic benefits, teachers are no match for other professionals in the technological fields. Also, work has gradually been seen as a commodity, rather than a service. With such an outlook, the dignity of labor becomes equated with high income, and universities begin to look at themselves as "manufacturers" of cheap labor that can be utilized by local industries or be exported abroad.

To sum up: the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines, although addressing itself chiefly to Catholic Universities, can provide us today with guidelines for our communal reflection on the role of universities, especially in public service. It reminds us that if universities maintain unhealthy competition among themselves, encourage elitism, and give higher emphasis on consumerist influences on education, it would be quite difficult for them to become embodiments of ethical public service.

B. AT THE LEVEL OF STUDENTS

At the level of its immediate public, we can ask the question: What have Universities done to instill ethics in its students who are the future public servants? The answer is quite simple: By the teaching of ethics. It is important here to make a distinction between ethics and morals.

Ethics refers to a task of careful reflection several steps removed from the actual conduct of men. It is a theoretical task which reflects on the various ways in which moral action occurs, the assumptions and presupposition of moral life. Thus, at the level of ethics, one seeks answers to the questions: "What fundamental principles are involved in determining an answer to moral questions?" "What is the nature of good and evil?" "What is the nature of right and obligation?"

On the other hand, morals or morality refers to the actual conduct of men. It is a practical task: giving directions to human behavior in the light of what one believes to be right or good. Therefore, at the level of morals one seeks answers to questions like, "What should I do in this situation?" "Do I have the right to do this?" "What is my obligation regarding this particular task at hand?" In daily life, every person is confronted with the task of clarifying the fundamental principles that guide his human behavior (ethics); as well as the task of interpreting and actualizing such principles in the light of his present situation (morals).

Every university aspires to teach its students not only ethics but morals as well. And yet we have to accept that at the outset, in whatever it teaches, a university deals directly with cognitive processes. Thus, it can teach ethics, but it cannot guarantee a moral life. The grade that a student gets in a course in ethics is by no means to be considered as an assessment of his actual and future moral behavior. It is merely a judgment about his present knowledge of ethics, not his practice. But the important thing here is that the students come to realize that knowledge of ethics matters, that it is at the very core of their human life, and hopefully, through such knowledge, they could develop a moral sensitivity notably in the socio-economic-political field.

The teaching of ethics in the University of Santo Tomas (UST) draws its inspiration from its Patron, St. Thomas Aquinas.

For St. Thomas, the end of education is "to produce an independent and autonomous man, that is, a man capable of deciding rightly what to do and what to avoid". An educated man, is a free man, a righteous man, a virtuous man. This

means that an educated man is the master of himself; a man sufficiently in control of his powers and actions; a man who directs the course of his life according to what is right; a man who is a model of a virtuous life.

Furthermore, as a Catholic University, the UST draws guidance for teaching of ethics from the recent Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Education by John Paul II, entitled "*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*" which stresses the ethical and moral dimensions of instruction, research, and professional practice in Catholic universities. Echoing the Vatican Council II declaration on Catholic Education, *Gravissimum Educationis*, the Apostolic Constitution states: "It is essential that in all scientific activities we be convinced of the priority of the ethical over the technical, of the primary of persons over things, of the superiority of the spirit over matter. The cause of the human person will only be served if knowledge is joined to *conscience*."

These are lucid principles for the ethical formation of university students. But as I have mentioned earlier, a university can only go so far in imparting such principles. The transmission and absorption of ethical norms and moral values take place within a much broader conceptual range of education that goes beyond university instruction. We have to look beyond the university to society for proofs that ethical principles learned in school are indeed actualized in daily life.

C. AT THE LEVEL OF THE FILIPINO SOCIETY

What have universities done to instill ethics at the level of their wider public – the Filipino society? To answer this question, we have to recognize first that whatever ethics is being taught in universities does not immediately find general acceptance in society. In fact, students often realize that the ethics they learn in school have to compete with other ethics prevalent in society.

Universities would teach ethics that extols the value of sacrifice, discipline, and self-denial for the sake of long term goals. But television preaches through its drip-drip-drip method of endless repetition an ethics that enshrines immediate gratification. In school, students are taught the value of long hours of study as a means to social change and improvement. Television provides an artificial substitute for intellectual stimulation, and brainwashes its viewers into believing that the way we are is the only way to be. In the universities, students and faculty work for extended periods of time in research and other in-depth studies before they can come up with respectable results. But television can present all achievements of the past as a stitched-together collage minus the element of time and effort expended for such achievements. It is hardly surprising that viewers develop an attachment to surfaces rather than roots, to collage rather than in-depth work, to a collapsed sense of time and space rather than a true appreciation of history and geography.

Universities would teach the value of lasting relationships, traditions, religious and patriotic icons of devotion. The world of business, however, would emphasize the values and virtues of instantaneity (fast food, instant meals, ready-

to-wear dresses) and disposability (plastic cups, styrofoam plates, sanitary napkins). The result of such emphasis would be what Alvin Toffler dubbed as "throwaway mentality", which causes not only our monumental waste disposal problem, but the throwing away of values that entail long-term nurturance like life, stable relationships, and other traditions. The drive for instantaneity and disposability also threatens the once-perceived enduring values of marriage and family with instant obsolescence.

Universities would teach the achievement of excellence through painstaking effort and performance. But the movie world and corporate business enterprises might negate that by following Peter's Principle which states: "An ounce of image is worth a pound of performance". Image has become likewise a commodity. Corporations, governments, politicians, and statesmen all value a stable image as a part of their aura of authority and power. The mediatization of politics has become all pervasive.

One striking example of the possibilities of mediatized politics shaped by images along is the election of the ex-movie actor Ronald Reagan. His image, cultivated over many years of political practice, and then carefully mounted, crafted, and orchestrated with all the artifice that contemporary image production could command, built an aura of charismatic politics. He was later called the "teflon president" simply because no accusation thrown at him however true, ever seemed to stick. He could make mistake after mistake but was never called to account for these. His image could be deployed, unfailingly and instantaneously, to demolish any narrative of criticism that anyone cared to construct. His image has become an icon of belief. For sure, we find many Reagans in our own politics, in government, in the business world.

From the above, it is clear that at the level of society, the impact of universities would depend greatly on the kind of interaction they enjoy with their wider public. There was a time when all universities in the Philippines operated in conjunction with the church. Some considered this arrangement fortunate; while others bemoaned it. History would later show that such a conjunction of the church and universities would undergo a rupture. In Europe, in the years following the Reformation and especially the French revolution, the severance of ties appeared quite final. Philip Hughes, writing of this period said:

Another grave loss was the disappearance of the universities. They had been catholic, and often papal, foundations. In all of them there had been a faculty of theology, and round this mistress science their whole intellectual life had turned. Now they were gone, and when restored as State universities, (they became) academies, for the exploration and exposition of natural truths alone. Education, the formation of the catholic mind in the new catholic Europe, would later suffer immeasurably, and religious formation would be an extra to its intellectual development – something added on. There would be the further mischievous effect that henceforth, not universities but seminaries would set the tone of theological life . . . The effect of this destruction of the faculties of theology in the

universities of catholic Europe, the disappearance of the old Salamanca, Alcalá, Coimbra, Bologna, Louvain, and Paris, is a theme that still awaits its historian. Louvain was indeed restored in 1834, but the healthy interplay of the theological intellects of a half a score of Catholic Universities, the 19th century was never, alas, to know.

The University of Santo Tomas is a university established in the European model of a university. After years of transformation, and after surveying the threats of its existence, it now boasts of being the oldest university in Asia with a 384-year history to back its claim. Today, with almost 33,000 students distributed in 13 civil faculties and colleges; 150 seminarians boarding in its inter-diocesan seminary and enrolled in its three ecclesiastical faculties of theology, philosophy, and canon law; 1,300 faculty members; 650 non-academic employees; 200 doctors practising in its pay hospital and a bigger hospital for indigent patients; 33 priests ministering to the spiritual needs of students, academic, and non-academic staff, and more than 200,000 parishioners of the university parish; the university has evolved into something its founders never dreamt of. But despite its development, it remains faithful to its identity as a Catholic University. It has not severed its ties with the catholic church, and its teaching continues to be imbued with catholic principles. Does that make an impact on our present society? Has UST produced graduates with a social conscience, imbued with a commitment to ethical public service? I would like to believe that its alumni: some presidents of the Republic, some chief justices, some bishops, some heroes, and a few saints have made a difference. I hope they are the rule, not the exception.