

## **Introduction**

I'm here to talk about a new initiative that we've started at Villanova University – the Department of Humanities and Augustinian Traditions. I'll speak about the origin of the department, the principles we've settled on to guide our common life, and some of the challenges we face.

## **Origins**

I think it's fair to say that the new Department arose from a sense of crisis about Catholic liberal education at Villanova. This crisis is related to larger trends in today's academy. By and large, the academy has given up the idea that it is appropriate to help our students reach out for an integrated understanding of the order of things. Many Villanova faculty have abandoned the notion that human reason aided by faith can reach such an understanding. Moreover the sheer volume of things to be known as well as the pace of technological and social change makes it difficult for teachers to discern what is worth passing on and what is not. Careerism plays a role in all this as well. By and large faculty seek specialized knowledge as the easiest path to tenure and promotion. Most of the younger faculty that we've hired don't have much incentive to engage in the kind of work an integrated understanding of the order of things requires. In short, the academy is fragmented into various disciplines populated by various specialists increasingly unable to talk to each other.

Also, the problems we've confronted with hiring contributed to the sense of crisis. Many faculty members at Villanova are indifferent or hostile to hiring for mission. I think hiring well is a variation of the chicken-egg problem. Putting it very simply, to hatch a good egg one needs good chickens. We all know that even good chickens can hire badly. We can all lay an egg. But as a general rule, if you have chickens indifferent or hostile to hatching

faculty interested in seeking an integrated understanding of the order of things they will lay eggs like themselves. In short, the new Department was a way of starting with new chickens to get different kinds of eggs.

So in sum, the University decided to pour a lot of resources into a completely new Department that hired well for mission, and that acted as a kind of leaven for Catholic liberal education at Villanova.

### **Ethos and Purpose of Humanities**

So that's the origin of the Department. Now allow me lay out four principles I've developed to help us create the kind of Department we want to have.

#### **1. The First Principle: Place Faith Seeking Understanding At The Center.**

The Department takes seriously the claim that faith is not merely assent to particular propositions. More importantly, it is a way of seeing; a way of walking though life and a way of becoming transformed by that vision and that pilgrimage. It follows that a Catholic university has to infuse the disciplines with the notion that each is a way toward faith seeking understanding. We want to pose these kinds of questions: What difference would it make to our understanding of politics, of economics, of modern science, or of literature, if faculty in these disciplines took Catholic claims about reality seriously? How might those disciplines be transformed by employing the lens of faith? How might this lens enable us to ask and answer in a deeper way the most pressing contemporary questions that arise in the various disciplines? We wanted to put those questions at the center of our intellectual lives.

If faculty in a Catholic university aren't suffused with the sense that faith makes sense – if we aren't convinced that the only reason for belief is that it allows us to see better; to ask and answer questions in a fuller, richer way as intellectuals – if Catholic education

doesn't have this, it is lacking something intrinsic and fundamental. The Catholic viewpoint may persist in such places, but it will be robbed of its proper ambitions.

## **2. The Second Principle: To Overcome The Fragmentation In The Academy One Has To Strengthen The Disciplines, Not Weaken Them.**

I think that if you are going to start an interdisciplinary conversation you have to begin from the realization that the disciplines are in various crises of self-understanding. The methodological assumptions are so diverse, the work is so specialized, the assumptions about first principles and thus starting points are so different that people in Political Science, Theology, or History, or Sociology, increasingly are unwilling or unable to read their colleagues' research. Further, many of these disciplines were crystallized around Enlightenment conceptions of human reason and human nature that are no longer tenable.

Perhaps the most intuitive way out of this problem is to say that the disciplines are the problem and that they need to be overcome. After all, it looks like the reason the academy is fragmented is that everyone has retreated into their own disciplinary specialty. And if this is the real problem, the solution seems to be to engage in an inquiry that transcends the disciplines.

This is the way at least some of the academy is going; at Villanova, for example, we have more and more institutes and concentrations that proceed on the basis of this assumption. The procedure is simple enough – one chooses to study a theme or area that invites work across disciplines. So at Villanova we have various concentrations in Ethics or Latin American or East Asian Studies; we have an interdisciplinary Honors Program, Women's Studies and Africana Studies Programs, and so on. I've taught some of these classes myself, and have been enriched by them. But I think these programs cannot resolve the problem of fragmentation.

For one thing, disciplines are important ways of knowing. Human beings can't know every aspect of creation intuitively. We have to separate the cosmos into different areas of inquiry. To know the whole one must also struggle to know the parts. If we abandon the disciplines, we risk losing the rigor that comes from disciplinary inquiry. The complexity of the world demands the integrity of disciplinary ways of knowing. So in sum, disciplines are necessary but not sufficient for understanding the complexity of the world.

In addition, an interdisciplinary conversation that eviscerates the disciplines never really allows the disciplines to ask the questions that are fundamental to them in a rigorous way. The disciplines are involved in a crisis of confidence, and one cannot resolve that crisis by abandoning their proper work. My own discipline is Politics, and I think that Plato and Aristotle were right that the guiding question for political life is, "What is justice?" I also think they were right that this question leads to the further question, "What is the human good?" But today's Political Scientists by and large think that these questions are unanswerable, and students rarely confront them except in a history of political theory course. The solution to that crisis is not to abandon the study of politics per se in favor of some interdisciplinary theme. Rather, the solution is to return the discipline of politics to its proper subject.

So if overcoming the disciplines doesn't work, what does? Paradoxically, I think one builds a foundation for an integrated understanding of the order of things not by undermining the disciplines but by strengthening them. Typical professors must begin to think that the discipline they fell in love with can be made well-suited to ask the most basic questions that arise in that discipline. English professors have to ask things like, "How does this use of language disclose reality?" Economics professors have to ask things like, "What is right making?" Politics professors have to ask things like, "What is justice?"

When we push these questions to their limits in our disciplines, we discover the limits of our disciplines. Then we need enough humility to go out and join a conversation with people from other disciplines who might be able to help us transcend the limits of our own. Seeking a vision of the integrated understanding of the order of things requires mutual help. But it also requires disciplinary rigor. So we're not hiring generalists in our Department. We're hiring people who have enough ambition to pursue the fundamental questions in their disciplines but enough humility to engage in common inquiry with people from other disciplines.

### **3. Third Principle. Philosophy And Theology Are The Two Integrating Disciplines**

I would argue that whenever two people from different disciplines come together and seek common ground, or seek to share the fruits of their work, or seek answers to questions that their disciplines ask but cannot solve on their own, they wind up doing philosophy or theology. Most of the time they don't recognize this. But that's to their disadvantage, because part of the trick in pursuing these conversations well is recognizing when one is engaging a properly philosophical or theological question, and insisting on the rigor and modes of arguments appropriate to those activities. In the absence of that common recognition, one simply doesn't know what standards to apply to the argument at hand.

I'll give an example. For the last two years I've participated in a workshop in which people from the hard sciences and people from the Humanities have come together to converse. It's been interesting to reflect on the obstacles to a productive conversation. The problem is that our conversations quickly take up really central problems like the nature of chance and necessity, the relationship of order to complexity, the meaning of randomness, the nature of divine providence and its relationship to natural causality and human freedom.

Scientists raise these questions as often as philosophers and theologians. Yet many of my scientific colleagues insist that when they think about these questions, they have to think about them as scientists, not as philosophers or theologians. The conversations quickly ended when the made this claim because there was no settled way of negotiating the disagreements we were experiencing.

By contrast, I would argue that these are properly philosophical or theological questions. Part of the trick of getting that conversation started again has been to get colleagues to see what a properly philosophical or theological question is, and then to get them to admit that these questions must be adjudicated on the basis of the standards in philosophy or theology. That's not an easy task.

In my view, there is no way around the centrality of philosophy and theology in integrating the discoveries of the various disciplines, especially in a Catholic University. The other disciplines are concerned with asking discrete questions about discrete areas of reality. Philosophy and Theology at their best seek something much more comprehensive – wisdom about God and the world. So in short, in a Catholic liberal education that seeks an integrated understanding of the order of things and yet takes seriously the integrity and importance of the disciplines, every faculty member must be able to do philosophy and theology, whatever else they do.

#### **4. Fourth Principle: Build A Common Inquiry Into The Curriculum**

Many of us in the academy are communitarians in spirit but libertarians in practice. We simply want to be left alone to do our work. There is nothing wrong with this impulse, of course. There are many times throughout a typical day when I wish people – especially administrators – would leave me alone. But still, an integrated understanding of the order of things requires a lively, ongoing, common inquiry. The problem is that most of the time we

don't build into our curricula opportunities where we're led to come together as fellow seekers of wisdom. We realized that if the Humanities Department was not going to replicate the fragmentation we were seeking to ameliorate, we would have to commit ourselves to a teaching series of classes together in which we learned from each other.

This quickly led to another question: What was to be the focus of this ongoing conversation? We settled on the human person as the object of common inquiry. The crisis in the disciplines flows in part from the relentless reductionism of the human person in our culture. We live in a time that reduces the person to economic functions, to biological drives, to mechanistic conceptions of physics, to inescapable cultural or historical forces of power, and so on. In turn, these reductionisms are enshrined in many of the disciplines. In face of this, we wanted our common inquiry to affirm the fullness of the person – our essential mystery and dignity. So we committed ourselves to co-teaching a series of four interdisciplinary courses to all our majors. We spent two years designing these courses together. They explore the person in relation to the four primary fields of being – God, world, society, ourselves. These four courses provide a space for our common intellectual life.

I could list more principles, like hire faculty you trust and then give them the freedom to teach what they love. But these four are at the heart of the Department, so I'll leave it at that.

### **Challenges for the Future**

I see many reasons for hope for this Department. Truthfully, I was worried about whether we could find people to hire. But I can say that I've been excited by the quality of young people on the job market. There is a vivid sense among our job candidates that we're doing something unique, interesting and profoundly necessary in the academy. I've learned

that there's real hunger especially among young Catholic faculty for this kind of thing. The faculty we've hired are really extraordinary. I couldn't be more proud of them.

The main challenge that I see to bringing this project to completion is the structure of incentives in place in the academy right now. I once overheard a well-published colleague giving advice to a senior undergraduate who was planning to go on to get a Ph.D. He said: "Do a senior thesis that you can turn into a Master's Thesis. Then turn your Master's Thesis into a dissertation. Then turn your dissertation into your first book. It will be much easier to get tenure that way." I imagined this student waking up one morning at 35 with tenure, and not knowing what to do next. Unfortunately, the kind of incentives we have in the academy supports this career path.

Part of the problem is our lack of patience with the intellectual life. The incentives that we have in the academy right now do not reflect the sense that wisdom is a lifelong pursuit and requires careful formation. If we tell our young professors to specialize early on so that they can get tenure and promotion, we will wind up with a profession of specialists who can't reach out for the kind of comprehensive wisdom that has been the traditional goal of liberal education. Alternatively, if we tell our new faculty that their vocation requires long, hard thought, broad reading, facility with languages and appreciation for different ways of approaching problems, eventually we will have colleagues who can read, write, and teach wisely. The problem with this approach is that it might get you fired.

As Chair, I'm partly responsible for the intellectual formation of my young faculty. I keep coming back to these question, "Are we encouraging faculty in their thirties and forties to do the kind of spade work that will allow them to write and teach as a mature, integrated scholar in their fifties and sixties?" I don't think so. The advice I keep giving to my faculty is this: Understand the requirements for rank and tenure. Do you best to fulfill them. But

understand that merely fulfilling these requirements may limit the scope of what you ought to want to achieve with your intellectual life. You need to push back against the rank and tenure process in certain ways if you hope to become a mature thinker.

When I think about the obstacles we would encounter if we made arguments that the rank and tenure standards ought to be substantially revised, I think I see the problem clearly enough. Many liberal arts universities, perhaps especially Catholic ones, have implicitly prioritized reputation over wisdom. Of course, this is nothing new. People have been doing that kind of thing since Adam. Yet if we want to be a genuine service to each other and the larger academy, Catholic Universities have to figure out a way through these problems.

One of the many reasons I'm excited to be here is I know the conversations we join over the next few days will help me think about these problems better. Thank you.