

WAGNER COLLEGE

BACCALAUREATE SERMON

On Faith and a Liberal Education

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Cardinal John Henry Newman, the founder of the idea of a liberal arts education, argued that the kind of education you, our Seniors, have received here at Wagner College, should be “almost prophetic from its knowledge of history; ... almost heart-searching from its knowledge of human nature; ... freedom from littleness and prejudice; ... almost the repose of faith, because nothing can startle it; ... almost the beauty and harmony of heavenly contemplation”. Education, for this early advocate of the kind of higher education Americans now take for granted, with its requirement that students gain exposure to numerous subjects and develop substantial research skills, is ultimately more a state of mind than a specific expertise; it offers a perspective that allows for contemplation and reasoned discourse about the features of the world in which we live. In so doing, a liberal arts education creates a society of temperate individuals able to think through – as scholar citizens – the elements of Creation, not with zealotry for any particular school of thought, but with a calm, and calming, respect for any theory that seeks to accumulate some wisdom about the human condition. Newman’s educational vision is, to be sure, a contemplative approach, missing a practical application bemoaned by the great living moral philosopher Alasdair Macintyre, so we have in turn enriched Newman’s concept here at Wagner College with our service-driven curriculum called “The Wagner Plan”, but its founding idea remains constant: that the habit of mind nurtured by a liberal education is one of civility, intellectual curiosity, and ultimately, a stake in a common moral citizenship through the shared human quest for knowledge.

That idea of a shared moral citizenship, which we have tried to impart during your residency at Wagner College, is under attack today, and it is under attack from all sides. There is no one faction, to borrow a term from our Founding Fathers in the Federalist Papers explaining the United States Constitution, that has any claim on absolute truth, but we are experiencing a historical period in which absolutism, and its concurrent presumption of dogmatism, however

manifested in its particularities, seems to be the order of the day. Just think of what has happened to journalism – it is now a distinctly partisan affair.

It may seem a bit counter-intuitive to presume that somehow, faith, meaning the rubric of a religious value system, might offer some degree of antidote to the divisive culture you are entering as adults armed with a liberal arts training. But it was, after all, a religious thinker who was the pioneer of the kind of education you have received here at Wagner College. How could this be? What does faith have to do with a seemingly total immersion in the postmodern world and research-based acquisition of secular knowledge with which your faculty and you have been engaged while on this campus?

It is because, as most any tradition's Scripture indicates, faith not only presumes a conviction that the world and its sources are worth trying to understand. Faith intuited that intellectualization of Creation is not quite enough to formulate this community of shared moral citizenship to which it first aspired and gave to civilization. Faith underpins its quest for knowledge with two values that are especially prevalent in your experience of the Wagner Plan, our college curriculum combining rigorous theoretical study with fieldwork in public service and the workplace.

The first value that faith offers towards adding a dimension of meaningful citizenship to a liberal education is the prophetically rooted belief that an individual can change the world. The second value is an unswerving conviction in community. My own children, in middle school, have articulated this to me in their experience of formative religious training, and I imagine that, underneath the textured tapestry of each of our cultural and perhaps specifically religious socializations, we have all internalized those values somewhere in our characters. Religion, at its best, seeks to transform the world, whether through a voice such as Lutheran thinker Paul Tillich, or Hindu activist Mahatma Gandhi. The resonant message of faith is that we are all members of a shared moral citizenry. Faith makes real that contribution of transformative social change, and allows us to supersede today's narrow discourses of dogma, no matter the ideological stream.

And finally, we come to community, which we at Wagner College know something about. You started here as members of a first year learning community, and continued through your intermediate and Senior academic tour as members of incrementally advancing learning communities. Your scholarship has been acquired in concert with your peers, and you go forth together as members of a community of alumni of this experiential liberal arts curriculum. The most practical and impactful form of human organization is through the vehicle of community - in its most elegant form as conceived by Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas - through a responsibility of being with the other, and of being there for the other. Religion thinks that

formulation of human reciprocity manifests godliness. This idea can be secularized into the commonweal of democracy, but it stems from a spiritual inclination towards seeing the wonder of Creation in each human face, and in a dedication to a shared moral citizenship with others, because each person reflects the bounty of potential embedded in this world, filled with knowledge awaiting full revelation. Faith sets the stage for the reach of liberal inquiry.

Your task then is clear as the fortunate recipients of a liberal education: learn more, do more, and strengthen the shared moral citizenship that has been transmitted to you through a body of learning that is both scholarly and active. Especially now, in these tenuous times, you are needed.