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John W. O'Malley

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“Not for Ourselves Alone”

Rhetorical Education in the Jesuit Mode With Five Bullet Points for Today

By John O'Malley, S.J.

For most people rhetoric means vapid, insincere, or manipulative speech, a prejudice that goes all the way back to Plato's critique of the Sophists in fifth-century Athens. Educators like ourselves, however, use the term neutrally to indicate forms of effective communication, especially verbal. There are a few of us, finally, who use rhetoric in the specific and technical sense that was developed by the great theoreticians of the “classical tradition”—Isocrates, Cicero, Quintilian, Erasmus, and many others, including Jesuits. That is how I will use it here in relating it to the educational enterprise we are engaged in today in Jesuit schools.

Jesuit education has traditionally had two aspects to it. The first is the strictly academic, technical, or scientific aspect, inspired by the training Ignatius and his first companions received at the University of Paris in the 1530s. It has intellectual problem-solving and the acquisition of professional skills leading to career advancement as its two goals. It took on its firm institutional form in the thirteenth century with the founding of universities, which to this day have retained those same goals as the very definition of what they are about.

The second aspect is student-centered. It looks to the physical, social, ethical, and emotional development of the student qua human person. That aspect originated in ancient Greece and Rome in the humanistic philosophy of education in which rhetoric was the determining discipline. It did not get its institutional form until the Renaissance, that is, until two centuries after the universities were founded. As an institution it has been known by different names, such as Latin school, lyceum, academy, and, in the Jesuit system, college.

Although the Jesuit school began almost as a rival to the university, it soon developed into a partner—of sorts. From the beginning the Jesuits believed the two systems were compatible and that they complemented and completed each other. If, however, it had not been for the student-centered philosophy of the humanistic tradition, it is highly doubtful the Jesuits would ever have committed themselves to engage in formal schooling for lay students.

Literature as core

In this student-centered system as it developed historically, literature in all its forms, which included history, was the core of the curriculum. These “humane letters” were subjects not taught in the universities. The humanist educators of the Renaissance saw them as crucial to true education because they treated questions pertinent to human life—questions of life and death, of virtue and vice, of greed and redemption, and of the ambivalence in human decision-making. They dealt with such questions not so much through abstract principles as through stories, poetry, plays, and historical examples that illuminated moral alternatives and, supposedly, inspired students to want to make choices leading to a satisfying human life.

In this tradition a satisfying human life was seen not as self-enclosed and self-absorbed but as directed, at least in

John O'Malley, S.J., is a university professor at Georgetown University and author of several books on Jesuit history and What Happened at Vatican II.

some measure, to the common weal. That finality, which is what made the tradition appealing to the Jesuits, was imposed upon the system by rhetoric, the culminating and defining discipline in the curriculum. The *rhetor* was a certain kind of person.

For Renaissance educators, as for their forebears in antiquity such as Cicero and Quintilian, rhetoric meant the speech-act. Although it included effective communication in all forms, it primarily meant oratory. As speech-act it took place, therefore, in public space—the courtroom, the senate, assemblies of various kinds where the goal was to persuade to a specific course of action. In such situations speakers' whole person and personality were on display and played into the effectiveness of the words they uttered. As the old saying goes, what you are thunders so loud I can't hear what you say.

The discipline of rhetoric, we must remember, first got codified in the grass-roots democracy of fifth-century Athens. Citizens had to be able to speak well to make their voices heard. They had to speak well if they wanted to play an effective role in ensuring the well-being of their city. In time, therefore, rhetoric became known, aptly, as “the civic discipline.” It looked beyond one's personal advantage to the good of others. No one put this aspect of the rhetorical tradition more forcefully than Cicero:

We are not born for ourselves alone...We as human beings are born for the sake of other human beings, that we might be able mutually to help one another. We ought therefore to contribute to the common good of humankind ...There are some people who claim that all they need to do is tend to their own business, and thus they seem to themselves not to be doing any harm. But this means they become traitors to the life we must all live together in human society, for they contribute to it none of their interest, none of their effort, none of their means. (*De officiis*, 1.7.22 and 1.9.29)

After Plato's scathing criticism of the Sophists' indifference to ethical questions, theoreticians of rhetoric beginning with Isocrates, Plato's younger contemporary, have through the ages insisted that the good speaker, the good practitioner of rhetoric, the good leader had to be a good person. As Quintilian put it, *vir bonus, dicendi peritus*—“a good person, skilled in speaking.” Almost from its inception, therefore, the rhetorical tradition had a moral center. According to its best theorists, rhetoric was the very opposite of vapid and ethically unprincipled speech.

The program of student formation in this system

began, however, not with study of oratory but with other forms of literature. Until more recent times that literature consisted almost exclusively in the classics of Greek and Roman antiquity—Sophocles, for instance, and Thucydides, Virgil, and Livy. These authors were studied because they were assumed to be the “best,” whose style set the standard for all time, an assumption we certainly do not share today. But what such authors in fact did was stretch students' minds and imaginations by introducing them to cultures not their own—in this case, *pagan* cultures—and by thus giving them a sense of the wide possibilities of the human spirit.

Bolt, not bug

This study was more immediately directed to developing in the students a high standard of excellence in written and oral expression, which was honed by paying attention to words and their effective use. It was directed, that is to say, to the cultivation of eloquence. Mark Twain once said that the difference between the right word and the almost right word was the difference between a lightning bolt and a lightning bug. Eloquence consists in knowing that difference and being able to choose the lightning bolt.

Furthermore, the theorists realized, at least implicitly, that thought and finding the right word to express it were not two acts but one. Without the right word one did not have thought but, instead, a musing or rumination. They believed that “ya know what I mean” meant you did not know what you meant. At the very headwaters of the rhetorical tradition Isocrates himself said, “The proper use of language is the surest index of sound understanding.”

That brings me, finally, to the Jesuits. Just eight years after the order was founded in 1540, they opened their first school in Messina in Sicily. That school was a humanistic school, engaging the same curriculum humanists like Erasmus had laid out and doing so with the same goals in mind. Most attractive to them was the rhetorical goal of helping form young men dedicated to the common good of church and society at large, a goal that well correlated with the evangelical precept to love and serve one's neighbor.

I call special attention to the fifteen goals for Jesuit schools that Juan Alfonso de Polanco, Saint Ignatius's brilliant secretary, produced for members of the Society of Jesus just a few years after the opening at Messina. The list could have been written by Erasmus himself. The last goal sums up the rest: “Those who are now only students will grow up to be pastors, civic officials, administrators of justice, and will fill other important posts to everybody's profit and advantage.”

What about today? The tradition has undergone and has needed to undergo many transformations. Nonetheless, I believe that its basic goals remain valid and in fact are central to what we are trying to achieve. Here are the five bullet points promised in my sub-title. I am sure they will not be unfamiliar to you:

1. *"The fly in the bottle."* I adopt the well-known metaphor of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. What the rhetorical tradition is meant to do is help the fly out of the bottle, that is, to help students escape the confines of their experience up to this point, to expand their thinking beyond the comfort zones of the assumptions with which they grew up, to expose them to other cultures and to other modes of thought, to lift them beyond the quotidian. To help them expand the areas in which they can dare to ask questions not only in the areas in which their trade or profession moves but about life itself.

2. *"Heritage and Perspective."* This goal or value is closely related to the first. It is based on the truth that we are the product of the past and that we cannot understand ourselves and the situations in which we find ourselves unless we have some idea of how we got to be where we are—as individuals and as a society. If we forget who our parents were, we don't know who we are. If we don't know who we are or where we are, how can we make our way and help others make their way? This goal also looks to the cultural enrichment of the student, to goad them, for instance, beyond considering texting the highest form of literary expression.

3. *"We are not born for ourselves alone."* Beginning in ancient Athens the imperative of directing one's skills and talents not only to one's own advancement but also to the benefit of one's neighbors and fellow citizens has been a central and consistent element in the rhetorical tradition. It means fostering in students a sense of agency.

In the 1970s Father Pedro Arrupe, then superior general of the Jesuits, asserted that turning out graduates who would be, in his expression, men and women for others had to be a fundamental aim for Jesuit schools. I am sure he did not realize how profoundly his words resonated

not only with the Jesuit tradition of spirituality but as well with the rhetorical philosophy of education.

4. *Eloquentia perfecta*, perfect eloquence. This expression took hold in the Jesuit tradition as capturing the most immediate goal of rhetorical training. The goal was achieved through the study of great literature in one's own language and in the languages of other cultures. Eloquence, a word sadly out of fashion in most quarters today, is the skill to say precisely what one means and to do so with grace and persuasive force. It is the fundamental skill needed by anyone in a leadership position, however humble. It is a skill, as well, that helps one "get ahead" out in the marketplace, and sometimes get farther ahead than those with nothing more than the technical skills of the trade.

5. *"The spirit of finesse."* Many decades ago Henri Marrou coined this term to describe what the rhetorical tradition tried to accomplish for the individual, and he distinguished it from the "geometric spirit." The spirit of finesse realizes, unlike the geometric spirit, that in the murky darkness of human interaction and motivation two plus two does not equal four. Humane letters when properly taught sharpen student's aesthetic sensibilities, but, more to the point, in their authentic depictions of characters and situations they mirror the ambiguities of our own life-experiences and invite reflection upon them. They weave

webs with words that reflect the webs we weave with our lives, which are not neat geometric patterns but broken in places and filled with knots and tangles.

The virtue the rhetorical tradition especially wants to inculcate is prudence, that is, good judgment, the wisdom that characterizes the ideal leaders and makes them sensitive in assessing the relative merits of competing probabilities in the conflict of human situations. It hopes to turn students into adults who make humane decisions for themselves and for any group they might be leading. It fosters a wise person, somebody, that is, whose judgment you respect and to whom you would go for personal advice, rather than to the technocrat, the bureaucrat, and the zealot. It tries to instill a secular version of what we in the tradition of the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius call discernment. ■



University of Detroit Mercy.