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The Very Fabric of our Society

Liberal Arts and the Jesuit University

By Michael Madrinkian

In our rapidly changing world, we are witnessing the decline of the long-established tradition of liberal arts in the university. In our increasingly competitive workplace environment, student desire to attend the university for its own sake is becoming obsolete. Most often, when I ask university students why they are in school they say, “to get a degree” or “to get a job.” This career-minded outlook, moreover, is reflected by the culture at large, and is even beginning to affect the focuses of our universities. At many of the major public universities, it is becoming increasingly out of fashion to teach something like Shakespeare simply to appreciate its literary merit, let alone for personal betterment.

Because I am not a Catholic, I am able to look at Jesuit universities from an outside perspective. It was when I first came to Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles that I began to understand the merits of a Jesuit institution. This lies in the Jesuit ideal of “educating the whole person,” using university education to foster intellectual and spiritual life. Rather than being career-driven, I was able to foster an appreciation for the university itself. Moreover, through the presence of interdisciplinarity, I was able to experience a wealth of knowledge that will likely never help me get a better job, but has made me a better individual. I have read, and been influenced by, texts across disciplines, from Plato and



Zhuangzi to Aquinas and Eckhart to Chaucer and Shakespeare. As a student, I also worked for the Marymount Institute Press, which focuses of faith, culture, and the arts, and is committed to printing for the betterment of humanity rather than the greatest profit. This qualitative focus that surrounded me made me more passionate about being a student, and drove me to excel merely out of a love for knowledge.

What has struck me most deeply about the Jesuit university tradition is seeing faith in conversation with learning. Regardless of my own, or anyone else’s religious affiliations, it is faith that binds us and gives the university life. As a medievalist in English literature, I have researched an anonymous religious manuscript, which exemplifies the Jesuit liberal arts ideal. The manu-

script rearranges the verses of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes to form a kind of poetic concatenation. It thus uses the biblical passages as the basis for a kind of art form, using Christian tradition to create an entirely new and original level of meaning. It is this relation between faith and art that is so essential to the Jesuit university tradition. Because of its very religiosity, the liberal arts naturally and organically arise, and are thus inextricably bound up with any Jesuit institution.

The Catholic tradition, however, is rapidly washing out of many modern institutions. Although I certainly do not advocate for the church to intercede in all education, I hope that the impact of the Jesuit example, will, in the future, make secular institutions strive to make their students whole people. As I begin to pursue my doctorate in medieval English literature at Oxford University, I often reflect upon the long history of this liberal arts tradition. During the Middle Ages, Oxford upheld the medieval notion of the seven liberal arts, and its focus has remained on the love of learning for centuries, despite the modern vocational prevalence. Oxford shows that institutions need not be directly associated with the church to absorb a liberal arts focus. Yet, it is the responsibility of faith-based institutions to lead the way in reclaiming that which we have lost, providing an exemplar for others to follow in the future.

As our universities, and even society, move towards a myopic vocationalism, I urge Jesuit universities of the world to remain true to their mission, using education to create whole people. Perhaps in the future, if Jesuit institutions can remain a bastion of the liberal arts, we will begin to show society at large that there is more to education than a degree. We must show the world that without the liberal arts, the very fabric of our society will unravel, as it is the beautiful things in life that sustain our humanity. ■

Michael Madrinkian, a 2012 graduate of Loyola Marymount University is now at graduate student at Oxford University.