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Robert J. Parmach

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Eloquentia Perfecta

A Way of Proceeding

By Robert J. Parmach

In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine of Hippo remarks that “young people go forth to marvel at the mountaintops, huge waves of the sea, sands on the shore, and stars in the sky, but themselves they pass by.” In simpler words, while on the great climb to glory youth do not spend time examining the metaphysical self – desires, challenges, shortcomings, intellect, moral stirrings, spirituality, and a sense of who they are and should be. Many of my students (freshmen to seniors) consider this allegation an unfair generalization, and perhaps it is. Yet, there is a link between Augustine’s message and Jesuit education today – reading, thinking, and writing ourselves into greater clarity of mind, heart, and vision. *Eloquentia perfecta*, which *Conversations* discussed in #43 (2013), is a way of proceeding. It refers to a Jesuit school’s commitment to provide its students with a curriculum that stresses critical reading, writing, and speaking components in small classes to increase student-to-professor interaction and foster intellectual and ethical development. It is an outward manifestation of the inward (metaphysical) self. It is ethical education, not simply regurgitating data in a blue book. In this way, students and professors have more one-on-one interaction to facilitate a critical and sustainable dialectic in which all earn their keep.

In an age of assessment-heavy verbiage at Jesuit schools, let us not forget *self*-assessment. At the heart of St.

Ignatius’s Spiritual Exercises, self-inventory helps our students and faculty develop into more complete beings of integrity (*integritas*: “wholeness”). By caring for the whole person, we examine and reflect upon how God’s grace and our foul-ups interlace. Using the skills of *eloquentia perfecta* in our daily thinking, reading, writing, and praying helps us look not only beyond ourselves, humbly recognizing it is not just about me, but also within ourselves to embrace what we are called to be in the true sense of vocation. Like the student revising a term paper after visiting a professor’s office hours, we learn more about the potency of our voice and argumentative stance upon patient unraveling and rethinking. Thoughts and words **do** matter. Sloppy thinking, writing, and speaking cause problems. (Watch the evening news or a political debate.) Being vague, verbose, incoherent, dismissive, or adoptive without reason and indiscriminate with diction and misrepresenting others’ viewpoints stunt our metaphysical development. We see that its troubling effects lead us to poor decisions of the head, heart, and hands. They are judgments that condemn rather than clarify and transform. They promote miscommunication, idle chatter, and grief for all involved.

Recall Aristotle’s maxim: “seldom deny, rarely affirm, always distinguish.” It is a prudent prescription to follow in and out of the academic classroom. It does not mean apathy or a filibuster with an uncommitted stance. Rather, it

is clarifying that what we write and speak is the result of informed thinking. Say what you mean, and mean what you say. For example, consider a time when you judged a matter prejudicially, that is prejudged before knowing and thinking through the facts and possible outcomes of your decision. Pretty messy, right? Just ask your girlfriend. Or, more precisely, ask her new boyfriend. As I said, *eloquentia perfecta* is the outward view of my inner self. The hope is that we do practice what we preach...literally.

The ancient Greek historian (and big fan of *eloquentia perfecta*) Thucydides concluded that “what is just is arrived at in human argument, such that the strong assert what they can, while the weak yield what they must.” When we better understand ourselves, we own our words and recognize their lasting impression on others and, for Augustine and Ignatius, ourselves. So, be mindful of the *ummmms* and *likes* in your thoughts – spoken and unspoken. *Eloquentia perfecta*. It is not simply a buzz word on the syllabus. It is a way of proceeding to clarify our unified vision of heart and mind in the transformative work that is Jesuit education. Plus, it will make your mother happy. ■

Robert J. Parmach is freshman dean of Fordham College at Rose Hill and director of the Manresa Scholars Program, and he teaches philosophy and theology.