

Honorary Doctorate Speech given at the Dominican University College convocation

October 29, 2006

The community of students, faculty, supporters and friars of the Dominican College has been exceedingly generous in your invitation to be with you at this convocation. The opportunity to be further associated with the Dominican family is a great privilege and honor for which I thank you.

One thinks of St. Dominic, St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Peter Martyr at times like this. Indeed, the images on the walls of the Spanish Chapel in the Florentine Basilica of Santa Maria Novella come into focus. In his “Triumph of Catholic Doctrine as personified in Saint Thomas”, Andrea di Bonaiuti provides us with the material for a timeless reflection on the true mission of philosophy and reason in the Catholic university of the 21st century.

Recall the image of St. Thomas holding against his chest, the book of knowledge in which is written:

*Optavi et datus est mihi sensus et invocavi et venit in me spiritus
sapientiae et praeposui illam requis et sedibus*

I implored and was granted prudence.

I prayed and the spirit of wisdom came into me

And I preferred it to Kingdoms and thrones

What, one might ask, can philosophy contribute in the world of the 21st century? Is the mind of the third millennium satisfied with the post-modern and commonplace knowledge of the world in which we live? Or, do the probing minds of today, as of yester-year, seek to penetrate the veil of phenomena and to grasp the reality of things? If the human person has an insatiable craving for knowledge, it is in part due to the desire to manage the forces of nature. Some philosophers see this desire of people to control the forces of nature, and as Celestine Bittle writes:

“the practical advantages resulting from such control furnish in most instances the original spur of knowledge; subsequently, however, knowledge for its own sake, for the mental satisfaction it affords, becomes a dominant factor in man’s incessant search for the realities which make the wheels of the world go round.”¹

One might rightly observe that the wheels of the world of today are both wobbly and not turning very smoothly. Reason has been challenged by the glorification of passion and acts of terrorism. The recent “*lectio magistralis*” delivered by Pope Benedict XVI in Regensburg is instructive.

Philosophers who are reflecting today on the nature of peace, justice and human rights in the international community are to be encouraged. The dialogue between civilizations must supplant the clashes among civilizations. It is here where philosophy can play a crucial role for humanity.

¹ Bittle, Celestine, “The Domain of Being – Ontology” Bruce, Milwaukee, 1939. p.3

The Westphalia model of inter-state and international relations has been helpful in the past in establishing an international rule of law and making possible the pioneering work of Henri Dunant in the field of international humanitarian law. However, the Westphalia paradigm might be wanting in the environment of the 21st Century where non-state actors have influence and control which negatively impact on the common good.

While a common justification or explanation of “the why” of peace, justice and human rights might not be the result of reflection by all the philosophers of the world, the survival of the global human community, with respect for the dignity and worth of the human person, is common ground amongst philosophers.

In the light of the history of philosophy, and being open to various orientations and civilizations the philosophers of today might well revisit Cicero and his *De Republica* where he wrote:

“There is a true law, right reason, agreeable to nature, known to all, constant and eternal, which calls us to duty, which commands and forbids... It is not lawful to amend this law, nor to take anything from it, nor can the Senate or the people alter this... It is not one law at Rome and another at Athens, one thing now and another afterward; but binds all peoples and at all times; it is eternal and immutable for it is God Who is the discoverer and maker of this.”

May philosophers of every school be encouraged to bring reason and insight to the essential dialogue of today. Let us not hesitate to be open in this dialogue to the relations of reason and faith and thereby inviting of the light of *logos*. It is my view that St. Dominic and the tradition of the “hounds of heaven” have a major leadership role to play in contemporary philosophical dialogue. Congratulations to the graduates and to all God’s Speed.

