

Benedictus Academic Forum 2015

Closing Remarks by Jean Pierre Casey, Trustee

On the eve of the fall of the Roman Empire, when Europe plunged headlong into an age of darkness and chaos, Attila the Hun once boasted “There, where I have passed, the grass will never grow again.” How many Attilas has the world since suffered, who sought to trample over human rights by their blatant disregard for the sanctity of human life ; how many Attilas over centuries past and in our present time have sought to stamp out virtue by promulgating errors; snuff out the promethean spark of life by advocating philosophies of despair and hopelessness? Like Attila the Hun, the inheritance of these legions of subsequent cultural, moral and spiritual vandals is the barren and desolate wasteland our society and culture have become, and to borrow from T.S. Eliot’s allegorical poem *The Wasteland*:

*Here is no water but only rock
Rock and no water and the sandy road
The road winding above among the mountains
Which are mountains of rock without water
If there were water we should stop and drink
Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think*

With mankind on the verge of total self-destruction, it would seem this legion of Attilas has collectively managed to fulfil the promise of the first.

Yet when Attila the Hun was ravaging Europe, when the rule of law was extinct and barbarism held sway, one formidable opponent, equipped with supernatural grace, managed to preserve the promethean fire that animates the mind and soul – that fire being the combination of faith and knowledge. This formidable opponent was of course St Benedict and his followers, who established the monastic tradition. Was it an accident of history that they sprang up and thrived when they did? I don’t believe so.

In more than a few ways, Benedictus is their 21st century equivalent. It is not accidental it bears such a name. It is not accidental that it is at this point in history that Clare Hornsby, the Founding Director, responding to a strong inner calling with passion, courage and determination, has set out on a bold adventure to create the first liberal arts university in the U.K., founded in the Catholic intellectual tradition, since the Reformation.

Among the barrenness, amid the arid wasteland of our culture, when national education ministries are neutering syllabi, emasculating curricula, eradicating the collective memory, paving over the wetlands of children’s vulnerable minds with political correctness, denying our civilisation’s Judeo-

Christian heritage, Benedictus aims, like medieval monasteries, to protect and preserve the promethean fire for future generations, and thus to be a tabernacle of culture, a beacon of hope. Given that, according to St John Paul II, the tears of the 20th century have prepared the ground for a new springtime of the human spirit, Benedictus is also one of the few fountains of genuine knowledge, animated by a quest for truth, that will irrigate this Second Spring, to use a term our dear friend and friend of Benedictus the late Stratford Caldecott was fond of :

*Here is no rock but only water
Water and no rock and the grassy knoll*

With a small tweak to Eliot's poem, such is the promise of Benedictus, to fulfil that promise Dostoyevsky made, that "beauty will save the world."

The intellectual tradition Benedictus aims to preserve is the same one which gave us great scholars such as St Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas, or Erasmus of Rotterdam. The inspiration behind Benedictus is that it is this same, felicitous marriage of Christian and Classical traditions, which spawned an unrivalled richness in culture across all disciplines, giving birth to those literary giants who produced timeless classics such as Petrarch, Dante Alighieri, Machiavelli, Manzoni, musical geniuses like Palestrina and Monteverdi, Vivaldi, or those who created architectural masterpieces such as Brunelleschi, Michelangelo and Christopher Wren, or great painters like Giotto, Fra' Angelico, Raphael, Canaletto, and great sculptors like Bernini and Donatello. It is this western culture built upon the foundations of Jerusalem, Athens and Rome, which, closer to our era, produced the likes of John Henry Newman, Chesterton, Tolkien and Lewis.

Benedictus will draw heavily upon that rich Christian-Classical tradition, which is still very much present – however much certain parties wish it weren't – throughout the fabric of our society, whether in art, music, literature, law, politics, established ethical norms, or the social contract. Sadly, our contemporary culture seems to reject, with an ever more fervently nihilistic vigour, not only its incontestably Judeo-Christian roots, but also anything associated with the good and the true, the noble, and the beautiful. If a society is judged by its cultural outputs, the excitement generated by so called artists whose glaring lack of talent is compensated for by the systematic removal of clothing, pyrotechnics, obscenity, kitsch, absurdity or outrageous behaviour, is the firmest condemnation of our society I could possibly think of. The quality of education is weakened, and universities today increasingly seem to see their sole mission as the production of those small cogs in the gears of global capitalism and consumerism that are mindless technocrats, robotically aiming to engineer the maximisation of profits. Learning for its own sake, a pillar of Classical and Renaissance education, is a concept largely reminiscent of a bygone era – yet learning for its own sake is one of the core tenets of the Benedictus method and one of the *raison d'être* of Benedictus, the very 'idea of the university', to borrow from Blessed John Henry Newman.

Thus, Benedictus is at the vanguard of a movement spearheading radical cultural change. We live in a deeply wounded culture, a deeply wounded world, we have lost our direction, our sense of purpose. Benedictus offers a window into meaningfulness, by exposing its students to a kaleidoscope of beauty across so many

spectra, whether in art history, philosophy, sculpture, painting, poetry, literature, astronomy, oratory. Prof. Scruton yesterday spoke about finding our subject through the object, of amplifying our ways of 'reaching through'. Benedictus enables students to 'reach through.'

My great aunt, Alice von Hildebrand, about a decade ago, wrote a wonderful essay contrasting the aesthetic visions of two great 20th century philosophers and devotees of art, Jacques Maritain and my great-uncle, Dietrich von Hildebrand. Maritain distinguishes transcendental beauty from aesthetic beauty. My great uncle introduced a notion of "metaphysical beauty", different from Maritain's transcendental beauty, in the sense that it was not dependent upon *being*, in the way Maritain's was, but rather recognised an ontological value – "*whereas the beauty of a painting or of music is perceived through the senses, the message metaphysical beauty delivers totally transcends the world of matter.*" It ascribes an ontological value to the human condition –recognising the dignity of each person as made in God's image and likeness. It is this aesthetic, the only true aesthetic, the one which points us to the fullness of meaning, to the Alpha and Omega, which can fulfil us.

Why is this relevant? It is relevant, because the vocation of Benedictus, as I see it, is to awaken in its students an awareness of both that transcendental beauty and that aesthetic beauty, pointing to a metaphysical beauty. The direction of causality, is, in my view, absolutely irrelevant. For, where there exists a genuine thirst for transcendental beauty, an ordered sense of aesthetic beauty should naturally follow. Likewise, a true desire to seek the good and noble, the true and beautiful through the prism of aesthetic beauty should naturally lead, through a sense of wonder and awe to first a recognition of transcendence, and subsequently an appreciation of, transcendental beauty. My great uncle would have been very proud of Benedictus and everything it stands for.

It is all well and good to sit and lament about the sad state of current affairs, to be trampled underfoot by the hordes of literary, artistic, and scientific-technocratic barbarians who desecrate our culture, robbing us of our cultural inheritance. Yet we must remember Edmund Burke's admonition that "the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

Enough with the desacralisation of art, culture, and liturgy! Art, culture, liturgy must all be re-sacralised. Professor Scruton defined culture yesterday as that "sphere of artefacts" linked to our aspirations and ideals. If this is indeed the case, then it is imperative to develop and nurture aspirations and ideals that truly reflect the high calling, the vocation of man, that orient culture to its true purpose. And Benedictus is a conduit through which this cultural revolution can be channelled. It is a shining beacon of faith, beauty, culture and truth, in a world which has completely lost all sense of the good, the true and the beauty. Wholesale cultural renewal can only spring from hearts that are willing and minds that are formed. Hardened hearts can be opened through an inquisitive mind. Closed minds can be opened through generous hearts. We need to expose these hardened hearts and closed minds to the Benedictus method.

I am sure you will agree that something fundamental has been lost in the Occident, requiring a wholesale cultural renewal. As the Founding Director of

Benedictus, Clare's mission is precisely that, by forming young people of character and conviction, who can think critically, and who have culture. In the face of great adversity and with very few resources, Clare has accomplished many remarkable things over the past couple of years, for which we are very grateful and very proud, successfully launching : the Benedictus Summer School ; an acclaimed series of public lectures and cultural events ; and research seminars involving the growing list of illustrious academics who are now formally associated with Benedictus, for which we are very grateful. Thank you to all of you who have presented, chaired, and prepared this forum.

But it is not enough !

We cannot allow Benedictus to stagnate into a kind of cozy Diogenes club. That is not its purpose. That is not its mission. And ultimately, it would mean its failure. It is therefore incumbent upon each one of us to ensure Benedictus does not become stale, that it remains fecund. With that challenge, I would urge you, please, to go forth and spread the good news that Benedictus is awakening, radiate an infectious enthusiasm, become heralds of a Second Spring, of a new springtime in our universities, in our churches, in our culture, in our world.

We cannot keep the promethean fire for ourselves, for "no one lights a lamp and hides it in a clay jar or puts it under a bed. Instead, they put it on a stand, so that those who come in can see the light." That we live in a time marked by a profound moral and cultural crisis is undeniable. We owe it to the hard-working Benedictus team for the amazing achievements they have produced so far and for what we collectively seek to build. We owe it to our civilisation. We owe it to our children.

I am sure you are now experiencing an enlightenment after such a wonderful academic forum. During this forum, art historians, architects, philosophers, astronomers, theologians, historians and students mingled and shared fascinating and innovative insights, and we had the pleasure of welcoming Young Scholars for the presentation of their papers. You have just had a foretaste, through this forum, of what Benedictus can be, over a three-year period, for students, when it becomes a full-fledged degree course. Not *if* it becomes a full 3-year course – *when* it becomes a full 3-year course.

There will come a time – and the time is near - when Benedictus will flourish and when its effect will be felt all across Europe, heralding the advent of the Second Spring of Christian culture.

JPC

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