

BENEDICTUS

MATTERS OF PRINCIPLE

June 2011

Benedictus differs radically from existing universities in the United Kingdom.

Our aim is to re-establish in this country a single, integrated course of learning at foundation and undergraduate level. We offer a course in the traditional liberal arts, the uniqueness of which is the additional study of the history, arts, languages and culture of Europe. The governing principle of *Benedictus* is that the aim of all learning, indeed the aim of the intellectual life is wisdom and that its attainment constitutes true human freedom.

I wished, and understanding was given me; and I called, and the spirit of wisdom came upon me; and I preferred her before kingdoms and thrones, and esteemed riches nothing in comparison of her. Neither did I compare unto her any precious stone, for all gold in comparison of her is as a little sand, and silver in respect to her shall be counted as clay. I loved her above health and beauty, and chose to have her instead of light, for her light cannot be put out. Now all good things came to me together with her, and innumerable riches through her hands. And I rejoiced in them all: for this wisdom went before me, and I knew not that she was the mother of them all.

From the Book of Wisdom, for the feast of St Thomas Aquinas.

Mindful of the central position of Christianity in the development of Western Civilisation, *Benedictus* offers an education faithful to the teachings of the Catholic Church, yet open to students from all backgrounds.

The Character Of Liberal Education

In his book, *The Idea of a University*, Bl. John Henry Cardinal Newman asserts that the primary purpose of a university should be to teach theoretical knowledge, following the distinction made by Aristotle in the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* between moral and intellectual virtues; the moral life concerned with practical knowledge and the intellectual life primarily concerned with theoretical knowledge - that is, 'knowledge for the sake of itself'. This principle underlies the single, integrated programme of studies at *Benedictus*; its breadth and rigour will reconnect all the disciplines with what Mgr. Ronald Knox referred to as the 'Hidden Stream', the Christian basis of European culture and tradition. As the student grows in wisdom through a true liberal education, the institution is enriched, to the great benefit of society at large. Newman wrote:

...a University, taken in its bare idea ... has this object and this mission; it contemplates neither moral impression nor mechanical production; it professes to exercise the mind neither in art nor in duty; its function is intellectual culture; ... it educates the intellect to reason well in all matters, to reach out towards truth, and to grasp it. (The Idea of a University, Discourse VI, I)

The liberal arts integrates and orders the activities of learning; forming the intellect of the student within the broader context of the diversity of knowledge. As mentioned above, this education has as its aim, wisdom, the attainment of which brings freedom. We all value freedom but do not always agree about what it is. 'Liberal arts' implies an education for freedom - freedom that is specifically gained through knowledge. The Catholic Church teaches that freedom is not attained by the removal of whatever stands in the way of human will or its creative expressions but by inward re-birth through the grace of God: 'where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom' (II Cor. 3, 15-18). St. Paul is speaking here of supernatural freedom, however the lesson concerns a reform of the notion of freedom in general - the transformation of the inner person by true principles of thought and action. Mankind attains the truth not by exercising freedom but by finding, or being found by, the Truth and abiding in it: 'the Truth will set you free'. (John, 8:32)

In keeping with a tradition of scholarship stretching back over two thousand years, we propose a course of studies designed to develop the competence of the student within each discipline, achieved through personal practice so that the principles and methods of procedure proper to each will be grasped. Possessed of these skills, the students will become free and informed judges - able to assess, to criticise and to learn how to think for themselves.

Authentic learning requires that the arts and sciences be recognised and read as parts of one coherent whole. 'For it is the mark of the educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits.' (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 1. 3. 24)

The disparate elements of liberal education form a community of unequals. The search for wisdom, both divine and human, is of primary concern, while other studies are secondary. But all these studies must be in harmony; the lesser sciences preparing the student for the greater and more challenging work of philosophy and theology, acting as means of illumination and clarification of their complexities. This inter-relationship between the disciplines reflects the intrinsic value that true education can have, worthy of attainment for its own sake.

At *Benedictus*, the greatest minds in Western civilization are to be read, analysed and discussed not only for historical and cultural reasons but because they represent the best attempts to understand things in themselves (based on our shared experience) as well as most direct path towards attainment of the intellectual virtues. The finest works of human genius were considered to be of worth not because of their novelty, but because they touched the truth. Indeed, intelligence and education are in themselves hollow concepts unless this basic orientation to truth be recognized and retained; the teacher must lead the student, to use Newman's phrase, *ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem* - out of shadows and images into truth.

The Liberal Arts Curriculum

The liberal arts, as understood in medieval Europe, were seven disciplines comprising logic, grammar, rhetoric, (pertaining to the mind) music, astronomy, arithmetic and geometry (pertaining to things). These were considered the foundation of all learning and introductions to the study of philosophy; they concerned both the methods and the categories into which knowledge is divided, a system founded on the unity of knowledge.

The value of applying the principles of this system in the modern educational context is that of offering intellectual coherence; integrating the scholarly disciplines with philosophy, orienting them to wisdom - an antidote to partial and fragmented study systems which undermine the natural desire of the human intellect for wholeness.

As we have seen above, the aim of the university is primarily knowledge for the sake of itself and not for the sake of some action. Since the free person is most concerned with that which has intrinsic value, his or her education is best based on theoretical knowledge. The natural objects of interest to the student are the things which perfect the intellect, a knowledge of things superior to Man. Therefore the study of theology is central to the curriculum; it teaches us that there is a knowledge of God and divine things which proceeds in the natural light of human reason, a knowledge traditionally named metaphysics. Our intellectual patrimony in the sciences is built on common experience; notions such as change and contingency are shared by all the sciences and their examination in mathematics provides a doorway to the study of metaphysics. The science of mathematics is particularly accessible to the human intellect, concerned with the quantitative order discernible in nature. This order of number and magnitude is measured and understood with the study of arithmetic and geometry, disciplines which - beyond their indispensable contribution to the natural sciences - are both highly effective in introducing the student to the scientific method.

There is some practical knowledge appropriate to liberal education; this concerns the purpose of human life, traditionally called ethics and political philosophy. Although the free person and the good person are one and the same, it does not follow that a person can become good just by studying ethics - since good ideas employed badly do much damage. The aim is that the student will come to know the true purpose of his or her life with some degree of clarity, learning the right place for every thing within it, while working towards that understanding.

Since a true liberal education encompasses the works of the greatest thinkers, artists and scientists, it is incomplete without a consideration of the historical context which made such expressions possible. The origins of historical change lie in the individual and his motivations:

Individuals show the way, set the patterns. The rivalry of the patterns is the history of the world.
(William James)

The teaching of the history of Christian culture and ideas lies at the heart of a modern liberal education, as a 'means of integration and unity', intrinsic to all the disciplines across the curriculum (Christopher Dawson, *The Crisis of Western Education*). History - cultural, artistic, political - forms a web that binds us and our activities across the centuries. It also provides the student with the training ground through which the analytical approach can be developed and refined.

A study of the arts is vital for understanding our traditions and our heritage and is a natural complement to any course of learning which is concerned with European history. Art refines the sensibilities and enables a person to become fully civilised. By examining the great works of art, architecture, music and literature and researching the role of art in society we enrich our world and enhance our sense of beauty. Many works were created as part of the individual's search for life's meaning and truth, and specifically in the Christian context, art was made in the service of God: *ad majorem Dei gloriam*. The serious study of art therefore, is central to any fully comprehensive programme of study such as that proposed here. 'Truth has two attributes - beauty and power; and while Useful Knowledge is the possession of truth as powerful, Liberal Knowledge is the apprehension of it as beautiful.' (Newman, *Idea*, Discourse IX, 2)

The location of the proposed college in England does not mean we limit ourselves to the use of English, the contemporary global vernacular. The study of Latin and modern European languages performs a key function within education and reveals the connection between nations, underlining our common European heritage. Viewed both historically and in the contemporary context, a knowledge of foreign languages is a mark of culture and distinction.

The New Proposal within the Contemporary Context

There is at present no tertiary institution offering an integrated course in the traditional liberal arts in England. The syllabus delivered today in most of our secondary schools is markedly deficient. It rarely addresses the fundamental questions of the true identity of the human being, his or her nature and purpose, dignity and worth as a child of God. Neither does it attempt to integrate the teaching of arts and sciences in a cultural context, preferring to create artificial divisions in learning, replacing real intellectual challenges with 'teaching to the exam'.

Consequently, at undergraduate level, in the race for professionalism, students specialise early; following a dogma which states that education is successful in direct proportion to its compliance with the interests of the student, often assumed to be fully formed before the course is begun!

We propose a return to true education; one which requires the acceptance of certain fundamental distinctions and a recognition of the order among the objects of thought: some are of faith, others of reason; some certain, others doubtful; some self-evident, others not; some demonstrable, others not; some subject to criticism, others not. This distinction between the primary and the secondary in human knowledge, between the unquestionable and questionable, makes true freedom of inquiry possible and gives reasonable direction to every intellectual search.

For the Catholic, the intellectual life proposed here stands at the beginning and the end of our endeavours. At the beginning - to guide the intelligence in its activities; at the end because those endeavours are undertaken so that Catholic teaching may be more profoundly understood. In general, we can see that if it is possible to attain wisdom, it will be only as the result of considerable care and effort. Through this challenging work, our whole lives and any special disciplines we might pursue will rightly be named 'philosophy' - the love of wisdom. If we strive to live for wisdom, our whole lives may be free. There can be no worthier aim for an educational institution.

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