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THE VALUE OF OUR LIBERAL ARTS PROGRAM

A Perennial Light for the New Dark Ages

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Nowadays the devil has made such a mess of everything in the system of life on earth that the world will presently become uninhabitable for anybody but Saints. The rest will drag their lives out in despair or fall below the level of man. The antinomies of human life are too exasperated, the burden of matter too oppressive; merely to exist, one has to expose oneself to many snares. Christian heroism will one day become the sole solution for the problems of life.

Jacques Maritain

The New Dark Ages

TI bet it never crossed the minds of many living during the Dark Ages that they were particularly dark, or of those living during the decline and fall of the Roman Empire that it was speedily declining, let alone falling. They surely understood neither the glory from which they were falling nor the shadows into which they were descending, for reasonable men try to save valuable things from destruction. Because the Owl of Minerva flies at dusk, and hindsight is 20/20, it appears to be an inexorable law of both history and human nature that men recognize the signs of the times only after they have passed, when the possibility of salutary action to improve those times or prevent their obsolescence has disappeared.

However, this apparently intractable law of blindness has one notable exception—the Catholic Church. Because



the Church is both in and above history, possessing both a human and divine character, it is she—ininitely wiser than any owl of the gods and having perfect spiritual eyesight—who enables myopic men to comprehend

the signs of the times and act in accordance with them for the good of their individual souls and their civilization.

The foremost “sign reader” of the Church is the Pope. Benedict XVI made this startling observation in April 2005, when still a Cardinal, in his homily during Mass prior to the conclave that would elect him Pope: “We are moving toward a dictatorship of relativism which does not recognize anything as for certain and which has as its highest goals one’s own ego and one’s own desires.” To use less philosophical terms, the Holy Father is telling us that western culture is descending into *barbarism*.

Civility is the attribute of individuals and society that recognizes that others have the right to courtesy, dignity, and respect even when we do not want to treat them that way—and “others” includes both other human beings and the supreme Other, God. Human society can be called *civilization*, then, as opposed to barbarism, insofar as others, particularly God, are held in high regard and treated well by the members of that society.

We tend to associate barbarism with images of primitive savages looting and pillaging villages, razing the walls of cities, and enslaving women and children. However, the Holy Father suggests an entirely new kind of barbarism, one with a distinctly spiritual character. Fr. John Courtney Murray observed:





The barbarian need not appear in bearskins with a club in hand. He may wear a Brooks Brothers suit and carry a ball-point pen with which to write his advertising copy. In fact, even beneath the academic gown there may lurk a child of the wilderness, untutored in the high tradition of civility, who goes busily and happily about his work, a domesticated and law-abiding man, engaged in the construction of a philosophy to put an end to all philosophy, and thus put an end to the possibility of a vital consensus and to civility itself.

The philosophical barbarians of today are not only the relatively few fanatical atheists and dogmatic relativists in academe, the judiciary, the government, and the media, but also the more prevalent and ordinary “practically minded” sort in society at large. The Brooks Brothers barbarian does not deny the intrinsic worth of other people, but he lives as if others didn’t exist or had little worth beyond how they benefit him. He neither despises virtue nor clings to vice, for neither the glory of holiness nor the pseudo-excitement of vice interests him. He does not avow that God does not exist, or that the true, the good and the beautiful are illusions; he just does not care.

The dogmatic—and vociferous—ideologues in positions of influence at least

believe in *something*, though something profoundly sad and shrunken. The death of the soul is exemplified not so much in the rigorous profession of false beliefs, but in professing no beliefs at all, in believing in literally *nothing*. David Bentley Hart, an Eastern Orthodox theologian wrote:

As modern men and women—to the degree that we are modern—we believe in nothing. . . . It is this in which we place our trust, upon which we venture our souls, and onto which we project the values by which we measure the meaningfulness of our lives. Or, to phrase the matter more simply and starkly, our religion is one of *very comfortable nihilism*.

Feeding the Hungry— Instructing the Ignorant

The philosophical barbarian does not wish to conform his mind to reality; he desires instead that reality conform to his presuppositions, prejudices, and plans. However, the less there is to know, the less there is to love, and the barbaric state of soul inescapably sinks into perpetual, relentless boredom, the antithesis to the enthralling adventure of Christian holiness. Michael Hanby wrote:

A world that is “beyond good and evil,” in which nothing is either genuinely good or genuinely bad, and no truth, goodness, or beauty are revealed, is a world in which nothing is either intrinsically desirable or detestable. Such a world affords no possibility of seeing and using things as holy, which means to some degree letting them *be*, because in such a world there can be no holy things. Boredom is therefore the defining condition of a people uniquely in danger of losing their capacity to love, that is, a people uniquely in danger of failing to grasp “the mystery of its own being” and losing its very humanity.

Boredom is the telltale sign of a soul starving for three staple soul-foods: knowledge, sanctity, and community. Modern secular culture feeds its denizens plenty of “knowledge” in the form of technological know-how, scientific facts, ephemeral trivia, and politically correct aphorisms. Many people gobble it up, like malnourished children who grasp at candy and reject sound nutrition. People could have a sumptuous banquet of truth if they only recognized their hunger for it: they desire knowledge of their souls, not of material things; they pine for the meaning of things, not just for facts. Would that they had been encouraged to partake in the complex and elegant conversation with “the best that has been thought and said” that we call the Great Books, rather than politicized and pre-digested cant! As Walter Lippmann once remarked,

[D]eprived of their cultural tradition, the newly educated Western men no longer possess in the form and substance of their own minds and spirits and ideas, the premises, the rationale, the logic, the method, the values of the deposited wisdom which are the genius of the development of Western civilization; . . . the prevailing education is destined, if it continues, to destroy Western civilization and is in fact destroying it.

They have all but lost the art of reading, thinking, and conversation due largely to an overexposure to flashing images, meandering chatrooms, and Facebook friendships. They have become, to use T.S. Eliot’s stark phrase, “hollow men,” people who are immersed in the digitized echoes of iPods but not the music of birds, in the virtual vertigoes of video games but not majestic mountain tops. Compared to the visceral, toes-in-the-dirt, exhilarating experience of immersing one’s five senses in the splendor of reality, the abstract, vicarious, two-dimensional documentary, regardless of its cinematic



quality, is like trying to touch a ghost.

These “hollow men,” these practical barbarians, are starving also for friendship, for intimacy, for *communio*. Many have grown up as orphans in their own homes, in neighborhoods where few people know each other, in

and Christian civilization—and the emergence of a sophisticated, sinister spiritual barbarism. Is it too late to save civilized society? We are certainly far past preventive measures, for our society (we can barely call it a culture) is already in the late stages of a critical

Wyoming Catholic College: A New St. Benedict for a New Dark Age

Alasdair MacIntyre ends his penetrating analysis of modern culture, *After Virtue*, by calling for a new St. Benedict to plant the seeds for a new Christendom and lead the barbarians out of the spiritual desert of secular society. “To lead out” in Latin is *ex ducere*, from which we get “to educate.” Education is the key. That is why I firmly believe that Wyoming Catholic College is one of these new St. Benedicts.

Our civilization needs zealous and dedicated young men and women to convert the barbarians. However, because the barbaric culture is pervasive, we are all barbarians now to a certain extent, and thus, we must first civilize our own souls. Wyoming Catholic College is the ideal place for this civilizing education. WCC offers a robust classical, liberal-arts curriculum ordered by and to the Word of God and imbued with the Great Books of civilization. Through grammar, logic, and rhetoric, WCC students come to know the Word, the Bread of Life, as He manifests Himself in the very structure of language, thought, and speech. Through Euclidean geometry, astronomy, and sacred music, as well as field biology and philosophical physics, they come to know the Word as manifested in the mathematical order of space, motion, and harmony,



We all know such “hollow men,” people who are immersed in the digitized echoes of iPods but not the music of birds, in the virtual vertigoes of video games but not majestic mountain tops.

rootless communities with perpetual turnover of residents, and in cities and suburbs where the empty blandishments of consumerism and mall shopping substitute for community celebrations. Authentic friendship—to know and be known—has become all but impossible.

Nevertheless, they are accustomed to the intellectual junk-food that pop-culture and mainstream education has been feeding them since their youth. Josef Pieper suggested that they have made their peace with illusions:

For the general public is being reduced to a state where people not only are unable to find out about the truth but also become unable to *search* for the truth because they are satisfied with deception and trickery that have determined their convictions, satisfied with a fictitious reality created by design through the abuse of language.

Secular culture proposes not only a shadow of knowledge, but also counterfeit virtues and vices, a stunted pseudo-holiness ordered to the narrow contours of this world, not to the vast vistas of heaven. Holiness, with its connotation of self-examination and radical change in the light of God’s love, has become an unintelligible idea for those to whom spirituality means nothing more than a feeling of well-being.

If our reading of the signs of these new Dark Ages is correct, then we are witnessing the fall of western classical

illness. But with the grace of God, it is not too late for a miraculous healing and full recovery—even a resurrection—if we take the right steps now. Alasdair MacIntyre, one of the preeminent philosophical doctors of our time, offered this example:

What they set themselves to achieve . . . was the construction of new forms of community within which the moral life could be sustained so that both morality and civility might survive the coming ages of barbarism and darkness. . . . What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us.

The “they” to whom MacIntyre refers are St. Benedict and his followers in the sixth century, men who had read the signs of their times, the *first* Dark Ages, and acted accordingly. They did all they could to preserve the precious Christian and classical civilization, the literature, history, philosophy, and spirituality that had formed the basis of civilized society up to then. Their efforts were the seeds that, due to the pure water of their piety and prayers, the luminous light of their labors, the heroic example of their holiness, and the rich soil of their studies, would send shoots throughout barbaric society and bear fruit as Christian civilization.



and in the beautiful variety and richness of living beings. In literature, history, and philosophy, they come to know the Word as manifested in the imagination of men, in the events of human history, and in man's struggle to grasp the truth about himself, the world, and God.

The one Great Book found in no monastic or university library is God's First Book, the created world. An indispensable part of the education of the whole person, WCC's intensive outdoor program includes a three-week

little can compare with the supernatural bonding effected through fellowship at the altar of sacrifice in the Breaking of the Bread. Students and faculty collaborate in the pursuit of truth, goodness, beauty, and sanctity through robust classroom discussion, works of fraternal charity, joyful conversation over meals, vigorous play, and fruitful leisure—all in the peace of the Holy Spirit.

In addition to Wyoming Catholic College is another "new Benedict," Pope Benedict XVI, an expert reader of the

Have You been Chosen?

The great Jewish sociologist Philip Rieff has written:

There is no feeling more desperate than that of being free to choose, and yet without the specific compulsion of being chosen. After all, one does not really choose; one is chosen. This is one way of stating the difference between gods and men. Gods choose; men are chosen. What men lose when they become as free as gods is precisely that sense of being chosen, which encourages them, in their gratitude, to take their subsequent choices seriously.

Today's barbarians, with all their myriad choices, are in truth choiceless, because they refuse to see themselves as chosen in their heart of hearts. We have all, barbarian or not, been chosen to become saints, and it is the rejection of this truth that is the hallmark of barbarism. Yet accepting this truth carries a moral imperative: We must act. We must alert others to the call, but we must answer the call ourselves if we are to be taken seriously.

Let us answer our new Benedict's clarion-call to topple the dictatorship of relativism and help usher in a new civilization of love under the reign of Christ. You are chosen to be a saint. You have been chosen to be cultured and civilized in these uncivilized times. You have been *chosen* to be *holy*. At Wyoming Catholic College you can become one of the philosophical doctors and spiritual healers our dying culture desperately needs.



trek into the Wyoming wilderness and a week long excursion into the winter wilds in the freshman year, and weekends of horsepacking, rock climbing, or myriad other adventures throughout the four years.

In theology and the Catholic spiritual heritage, WCC students cultivate piety and virtue, coming to know the Word as manifested in the very structure of created being, in the ultimate meaning of the universe, in the revelation of the Second Person of the Most Holy Trinity, and in the Living Manna that came down from heaven.

Wyoming Catholic College also serves a banquet for the community-starved among its students. The powerful friendships forged and virtues gained in the freshman wilderness adventures are reinforced day by day through an authentically Catholic social environment. Because grace perfects nature,

signs of the times. It is no wonder that much of the world, in spite of its protestations of disbelief, looks to the Pope for spiritual guidance. In light of the Pope's words on education in his 2007 address to Rome's diocesan convention, Wyoming Catholic College is confident that our program is well ordered to the re-civilization of society:

It is up to us to seek to respond to the question of truth, fearlessly juxtaposing the proposal of faith with the reason of our time. In this way we will help young people to broaden the horizons of their intelligence, to open themselves to the mystery of God, in whom is found life's meaning and direction, and to overcome the conditioning of a rationality which trusts only what can be the object of experiment and calculation.



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