

The Love of Learning and the Desire for God

Jeanne Knoerle, S.P.

I have titled this presentation, “The Love of Learning and the Desire for God,” which is the title of a classic work by the Benedictine scholar, Dom Jean Leclercq. His book takes up what he calls the “ancient theme of the opposition between knowledge and faith,” and focuses on the role of the monastery in shaping the conditions of that relationship during medieval times and beyond (Leclercq, 257). I have used that title because I want to ask two questions about the relationship between loving learning and desiring God in our time: Can one have a love of learning without a desire for God? And can one have a desire for God without a love of learning?

Now I think the answers to those two questions are manifestly clear and have become much clearer since the Enlightenment. Yes, one can have a love of learning without a desire for God. We see and have seen many scholars, with no belief in God, let alone a desire for God, who have spent their lives in research, in the development of new knowledge, in providing valuable information and insight into the workings of our universe, of our psyche, of our political system, etc. We have also seen many persons who have a desire for God and who do not have a love of learning. Each of us probably knows some very simple, good, pious persons whose love for God is something we wish we could imitate, but who seem totally uninterested in learning. Nonetheless, I would like to probe those answers, and perhaps enrich them somewhat, in the next few minutes.

We are all involved in religious higher education, I believe, because we are all Christians (or at least sympathetic with Christianity), we are all interested in the life of the mind, and we have a sense that these two vital aspects of our lives should interact with one another, and in fact, should inform one another. I suspect we believe we are most fully human when we are most fully in touch with each of these powerful forces—the force of knowledge which presents a rich panoply of facts, ideas and insights from which to choose, and the force of faith, which provides an energy to illuminate those choices and an end for which they are made.

Let’s look briefly at higher learning and especially at the constant theme which runs through its history of the tension between balancing our desire to know and our desire to grow in faith—of balancing the love of learning, with its constant stimulation of our mind, and the desire for God, with its desperate need for quiet in which to listen for His invitation. If we limit our focus to Christianity and return to its early beginnings, to the several centuries after the time in which Christ lived among His disciples, we can see the beginnings of that struggle illustrated very clearly in the place where Christianity was most intensely lived: in the monasteries of the time. The great monastic writings that have come to us—from Origen and Evagrius and Cassian and Benedict and Gregory and many others—clearly indicate that even the earliest Christians lived with that question—do I need knowledge in order to love God fully? Is knowledge a friend or foe of my faith?

On the other hand, I think the flip side of that question—do I need faith in order to acquire knowledge?—would have been considered irrelevant by the monks, and possibly a bit irreverent as

*Speaking to the
1996 Conference
of the
Lilly Fellows
Program, Knoerle
probed
ancient answers
for the questions
about
learning and faith,
and took
her hearers
toward new ones
as well.*

well. Of faith and knowledge, faith was the primary value in their lives of contemplation and desire for God, and knowledge was simply a necessary means to that goal.

However, it was a means which, if not watched over with care, could take control, could become bigger than the end, could, indeed become an end in itself. And so very early in the history of Christianity and higher learning in the West, the ancient fault lines appear and are repeated in every period since then, even to our own.

And yet there is never a time in early monastic history in which learning is not a primary focus for the monks. There is never a time when the intense focus on becoming men of prayer leads monastic leaders to dispense with learning as an absolute requirement for that. Those abbots (and abbesses, though alas we know so much less about them!) do not solve the problem of this relationship by removing the instruments of knowledge because of the possibility they may entangle the monks and nuns in temptation and sin or turn them away from their primary focus on prayer. No, they continue, and indeed increase the accessibility of knowledge to their subjects, as a way to feed their desire for and ability to love God. Clearly they believed that, under the best of circumstances, the love of learning increases their subjects' desire for God and they are willing to take the risks that it will be ill-used in order to reap the value it provides when it is well-used.

So I think we would have to say that the answer of the earliest Christian practitioners to the question—can you desire God without loving learning—is no, not if you intend to follow that desire to its fullest end. The earliest Christian *virtuosi* (a musical term that I just discovered has been borrowed by sociologists to describe those who more intensely than ordinary persons commit themselves to the practice of religion, like monks and nuns) clearly came down on the side of an inextricable link between learning and faith, especially the value of learning to faith, though also, less clearly enunciated but intrinsic, of the value of faith to learning, especially as a powerful motivating force for learning.

So what happened in the time between them and us? Has that link been permanently severed? Has it simply shifted in the relative values attributed to faith and learning? Or have we, in fact, distorted or suppressed any relationship? Let's take a quick look at the centuries that separate us from those earliest monks and the movements that have led us to where we are today. As I said, the early monasteries quickly learned that if their subjects were to desire and love God with the intensity required of them they needed to be educated, especially in those studies which made a person able to read and think and understand the Scriptures. Such a curriculum, which evolved over time into what we would call a liberal arts curriculum, focused on grammar as its fundamental building block. Grammar was considered absolutely necessary to reading and understanding literature, which was, of course, the gateway to all knowledge, since everything that did not deserve to pass into oblivion had, they believed, been entrusted to writing. And so the monasteries became places where monks were educated in grammar so that they could read the Holy Scriptures, the Fathers of the Church, and even classical literature, in order for their faith and desire for God to be enriched.

Because of this emphasis on learning, the monasteries became sites not only for prayer and contemplation (the religious work of the monastery) but for education. They became well-known as places which preserved and passed on the culture of the time, the meaning and value they found in their way of life. It was a rich culture because it possessed a twofold treasure: the Christian heritage, inseparably biblical and patristic, and the classical legacy.

And as a result of the increasing recognition of monasteries as places of education, and of monks as teachers and scholars, a new pressure was put upon the monastery—not only to educate those who would devote their lives within the monastery, but to reach out to local clerics and others who had need of an education but did not intend to become monks. Out of this a system of internal schools within the monastery and external schools outside the monastery began to emerge, both teaching the same liberal arts but in a very different environment and for very different ends.

As Dom Leclercq says, "In the schools [students] acquired a taste for intellectual pursuits, a certain aptitude for speculation. . . . In the cloisters, they participated in an atmosphere where spiritual pre-occupations received greater attention, and culture, for its own sake, could develop

more freely." (Leclercq, 310-11). As these separate *loci* for learning began to multiply, the ever present, indeed ancient, opposition between learning and faith began to widen.

Reflections on the value of learning were found frequently in the monastic literature of the time. St. Jerome says, "Holy simplicity is good, but holy knowledge is better." And St. Bernard claims that the spouse of the Lord should not be a simpleton. Yet there was a great deal of wariness, not about acquiring knowledge, the content of which was almost the same in the monasteries as in the schools, but about the ends for which that knowledge was sought and about the potential impact of knowledge in leading one away from growing in a fuller faith. Again, Leclercq:

The scholastic *lectio* takes the question of the *quaestio* and the *disputatio*. The reader puts questions to the text and then questions himself on the subject matter. The monastic *lectio* is oriented toward the *meditatio* and the *oratio*. The objective of the first is science and knowledge; of the second, wisdom and appreciation. In the monastery, the *lectio divina*, this activity which begins with grammar, terminates in . . . the desire for heaven (Leclercq, 89).

And, though Leclercq does not say it, he implies that in the schools, the scholastic *lectio* leads to a desire for knowledge for its own sake and ultimately, too often, to the inflation of the self.

I could give many illustrations about the worry and fear of allowing monks and nuns to be exposed to too much learning because of the negative impact of knowledge used in the wrong way. Nonetheless, medieval monasteries still continued to be places where both God and learning were loved. But as we move to and through the Enlightenment to modern times, we find an increasing fear of learning, wariness about knowledge, now no longer simply because too much learning can lead to pride or worldliness or over-stimulation which makes prayer difficult (that tension they had lived with relatively successfully for centuries). Now the problem has become substantively different, arising because the stability of classical culture, with its reverence for literature and grammar as the fundamental mode of knowing, has given way to the confusion of modern culture. Categories of knowledge have expanded, methods of learning have created distinct disciplines, some with very different modes of thought and exploration. And so not only knowledge, but the methods of acquiring knowledge, have become differentiated and compartmentalized. Science is now far more powerful than grammar. The empirical methods of scientific exploration have not only taken their place beside the liberal arts, they have, in fact, replaced them. As Bernard Lonergan says, ". . . modern science, precisely because it is methodically geared to knowledge of this world, cannot yield knowledge of God" (Lonergan, 95).

In the face of these dramatic cultural changes, we find the monasteries largely unable—or unwilling—to hold faith and learning in balance, for fear that knowledge acquired through scientific methodology, which "cannot yield knowledge of God," will distort and weaken and eventually destroy the desire for God. Thus the rich history of encouraging monastics to love learning because it will help them love God, the history of living with the constant, creative and ancient tension between learning and faith, begins to be solved in some modern monasteries by simply relaxing the tension and choosing to stress the love of God over the love of learning.

I have recounted these bits of the story of the monastic ancestors of contemporary church-related colleges and universities because I think seeing the ancient theme of the love/fear relationship between faith and learning exemplified in their experience may help clarify for us why the issue has always been so painful and insoluble. The ambiguities, the in-built conflicts, the easy exaggerations and misinterpretations, the need for constant wariness about motivations that plague us today as we try to grasp the truly fundamental reasons for our being as faith-related institutions—all these have been very much present and unresolved from the times of the early Christians and the middle ages through the Renaissance, and remain still into our own time.

But perhaps the very realization that there has never been a time of stasis, of balance, of clarity about how learning and faith are best related should give us encouragement. Though we see around us many institutions, both of higher learning and of religion, that have apparently solved the tension in that relationship by choosing one over the other—denying the intrinsic connection between

them—the end result of doing that is ultimately unsatisfactory. Without the tension, the energy that the tension creates collapses, our gyroscopes are thrown out of kilter, we become queasy and unfocused. We find ourselves unconnected to the ends of knowledge and utterly confused about who God is and how to love Him. I think we see that happening all around us, in the disorientation many Christians and former Christians in our culture are experiencing, in the increasingly intense, (but often unfulfilled) search for meaning. In a world where faith's relationship to knowledge has been severed, the result, for the Christian, is not unlike the severing of our spinal cord—we can live with a severed spinal cord, but our lives are severely truncated and our whole attention is absorbed with pain and survival rather than with fullness of movement and openness to experience.

It is our responsibility as persons of faith to work to heal the break between faith and learning. If we believe that without learning faith cannot come to its fullest expression, and that without faith learning too often becomes focused on self or knowledge loses its point and purpose, then we must seek diligently for some productive way to bring those two powerful forces back into relationship. To do that, we need, I believe, to examine and explore the impact of a corrupted empiricism.

Edward Farley, in *The Fragility of Knowledge*, describes what happens when empiricism, the powerful means to modern knowledge, becomes corrupted, when the meaning of knowledge is thinned out by the exclusion of mystery. "The argument," he says,

. . . is not with empiricism itself. It is with a one-dimensional conception of scholarship and science. . . . The systematic exclusion of imaginative, tradition-oriented, and praxis perspectives has helped produce a contemporary scholarship that is specialized to the point of triviality, preoccupied with technologies of method. . . . Here we have the irony of disciplines that live in imitation of the hard sciences but that refuse to do what those sciences themselves insist on—that is, to assess the phenomena in their claims, their truth, their reality. . . . In such a situation, knowledge, always fragile, is distorted (Farley, 14-16).

If knowledge has become distorted, as Farley claims, largely because we have excluded imagination and mystery and tradition from among the claims for its truth, then we must find ways to restore it to wholeness and to reconnect it to faith. It is only when our understanding of knowledge is whole and includes the contributions faith can make to it—and, I must also say, when our understanding of faith is pure and includes the contributions that knowledge can make to it—that we can benefit from the power of their intersection. If we as Christians who believe in the indispensable importance of learning to faith and of faith to learning do not move to bring them to their fullness and then reconnect them, who will?

And who might be our collaborators in this action? Strangely, I think our best collaborators may, in fact, be those who at one time we may have thought of as our strongest opponents: the scientists whose methodology at one time eliminated faith but who have now come to see their own disciplines in a new light and who have opened small, but unmistakable bridges to a world of faith, to a desire for God as a power without whom no explanations are possible.

I think we will not very easily let go of the corruption of overly simplistic empiricism, of the distortions that arise from having disconnected disciplines and fragmented fields of knowledge, and then excluded from them the powerful contributions of tradition and mystery. I believe we will continue to live with the present incomplete and unsatisfactory paradigm about the nature of knowledge for generations to come. But I believe that, if we as Christian educators simply accept that paradigm, when it, as Farley says, "wittingly or unwittingly violates the concreteness and complexity of things, or when it abandons the wisdom of the past," if we do not continue at least in our own institutions to explore the complex nature of knowledge, including the knowledge of God as a powerful end and support to secular knowledge, we are then responsible for contributing to the anguish and pain of our time (Farley, 17). As a result, we will simply watch passively as more and more of our students and our colleagues suffer the debilitating effects of living in a culture which has severed its essential, life-giving spinal cord, its connection between faith and learning.

I have come in recent years more and more to understand and speak of the fundamental

Christian identity of a church-related college as a verb. The identity of an institution lies, not in what anyone says about it from time to time, but in what everyone does about it every day. Identity is not a static thing. Rather it is a dynamic action, a constant movement among the many persons who create an institution and who seek to influence its life. If in our daily creation of our institutions of higher education we do not hold them responsible for relating faith and knowledge, if we do not lead these colleges and universities to help students see that faith and knowledge indeed inform one another, we have misunderstood their mission. If we respond only to our obligations to teach as we have most likely been taught in graduate school, where too often the methodology "cannot yield knowledge of God," we are creating not a church-related college, but simply a college. Possibly a very good college, but not a faith-related one. If we teach in a way that focuses primarily on developing the faith of our students and do not take responsibility for their knowledge and learning, we are creating a religious institution, perhaps a very good one, but not a college. If we do both of these things but in no relationship to one another, we are creating an institution with a schizophrenic mission. Each will be unrelated to the other, neither will inform the other. The result is not a church-related college.

As I think is clear by now, I believe quite strongly that, for those of us who are Christians, the love of learning and the desire for God are intimately related, and for those of us who are engaged in the enterprise of Christian higher education, they are inextricably related. We have an obligation to our students to talk about that relationship and to encourage them to explore it. That relationship has unfolded painfully through history; it is always in tension and in opposition, but only in modern times and in some cultures, especially ours, has it been—for all intents and purposes—severed. Our primary responsibility as Christian educators is to attempt to restore that life-giving connection in whatever way we can, so that the power of faith informed by knowledge and knowledge informed by faith come alive in a world that, perhaps blindly but nonetheless desperately, seeks it.

There is more and more evidence that contemporary Christian scholars are beginning to understand the fragile nature of contemporary knowledge, are beginning to explore ways to probe, and perhaps eventually even to heal, the fractures which have so decimated its relationship to faith in modern times. In a recent consultation about campus ministry at Union College, a conversation titled, "Out on a Limb: Thinking About Faith and Ministry in the College and University Setting," several speakers pushed the epistemological envelope, seeking to heal some of the fractures among the disciplines and to include within knowledge a spiritual dimension which has been unfortunately lost to the contemporary world.

"There are very practical as well as theoretical ways," said Douglas John Hall of McGill University, "in which a Christian community within the university today can become a forum for dialogue between the natural, social and spiritual sciences that are otherwise cut off from one another in their Babel language-worlds and their well-known fear of interdisciplinary discourse."

At that same meeting, Douglas Sloan of Columbia Teachers' College made a strong plea for the power of "living thinking" as a way to counteract the purely quantitative, mechanistic and sense-bound ways of knowing that are regnant today. "The quality of our world," he says,

depends upon the quality of our thinking. If we are tied to a dead thinking capable of handling only the inanimate and the mechanistic, we will find ourselves living more and more in a dead and mechanistic world. . . . A transformation of our world must begin with the transformation of our dead thinking into a living thinking. . . . A living thinking will be a thinking in which the whole human being—thinking, feeling, willing and valuing—is involved in the work of knowing. . . . This transformation of our knowing by a living thinking would bridge the split between faith and knowledge, ethics and science, quality and quantity.

Similarly, in a recent review of the book, *We Scholars: Changing the Culture of the University* by David Damrosch, James Turner of Notre Dame also describes the collapse of the traditional unified structure of knowledge, and the raising of what he calls "methodological walls [among the disciplines], scalable only by the well-trained." But, he says,

Jeanne Knoerle is
Program Director in
the Religion Division
of the Lilly
Endowment.
Chancellor of Saint
Mary-of-the-Woods
College, she writes
extensively on
Christian higher
education.

Christians and secular-minded academics share a single house of learning, and the task of rebuilding it offers opportunities for bridging the yawning gap that opened in the late nineteenth century between Christianity and the larger academic world. . . . Restoring coherence to knowledge is not a job whose outcome we can predict, nor one likely ever to yield a finished product; but it is one in which Christians should roll up their sleeves and labor side by side with non-Christians. Reconstructing a unitary discursive field, even though we can never expect it to be stable, matters greatly for general education and for the public culture all Americans share. It also matters in another way for Christians. A reunified knowledge could once again—in ways impossible now to conceive in particulars—allow Christian scholars to relate their research and teaching concretely and in specifics to the Creator. . . . God might return to the university from the exile into which disciplinary specialization sent him (Turner, 28).

I hope, and indeed I sincerely believe, that these scholars represent only the tip of the iceberg. They make a powerful and accurate assessment of where we are in higher education. And they also issue a hopeful challenge to all of us who believe that we do not simply inherit the identity of our Christian institutions, but that we actively, daily create their identity. If that identity is to include both the love of learning and the desire for God, it will only be because religious people, scholars who believe in religion, intellectuals who practice their faith—you and I—insist that those two ends are not only not contradictory, but are, indeed, mutually necessary if there is ever to be fullness of life. Our work is clearly cut out for us, and I hope to join you in that enterprise. ✠

works cited

- Edward Farley, *The Fragility of Knowledge*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988.
- Jean Leclercq, O.S.B. *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*. Catherine Misrahi, trans. New York: Fordham University Press, 1960.
- Bernard Lonergan. "Belief: Today's Issue." A paper prepared for the Pax Romana Symposium on Faith. Synod Hall, Pittsburgh, March 16, 1968. Reprinted in *Catholic Mind*, May 1970.
- James Turner. "Humbling the Lords of Epistemology," A review in *Books and Culture*, September/October, 1996, of *We Scholars: Changing the Culture of the University* by David Damrosch. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996.
- Douglas John Hall. "Thinking the Faith on the North American College Campus," in *Plumblin: A Journal of Ministry in Higher Education*, Summer, 1996.
- Douglas Sloan. "Can We Avoid Making the Same Mistake Twice?" in *Plumblin: A Journal of Ministry in Higher Education*, Summer, 1996.