GETTING OUR HEADS TOGETHER

SIDNEY CALLAHAN

Today there exists very little activity that can be described with the exclusive term "American Catholic intellectual life." Educated Catholics have been assimilated into the larger culture and now find themselves subject to the same general social conditions that militate against all varieties of intellectual life in this country. Within the Catholic community there are other forces that further impede intellectual dialogue. Our present situation, in my view, represents a decline from the level of recent previous decades. But mere nostalgia will not restore the intellectual and spiritual liveliness of a simpler time, with its clear-cut verities. If Catholics are to fashion new creative strategies, we must first come to terms with current social realities.

When I use the term intellectual life, I mean something broader than narrowly focused academic scholarship, or highly specialized scientific work, or the current state of education in colleges and universities. Intellectual life arises from the broad-ranging activity of reading, discussing, and responding to ideas and arguments devoted to the meaning of events, the interpretation of human experience. Intellectuals, as opposed to pure scholars, pure scientists, practicing professionals, or social activists, are engaged in reflective cognitive wrestling with contrasting ideas, current controversies, and opposing worldviews.

Intellectuals may also be scholars, professionals, artists, or activists, but when operating as intellectuals they are constructing and reconstructing their culture’s paradigms or cultural maps. Within a society, the intellectuals are those thinkers making the maps and discussing the proper rules for making maps, rather than the people doing the detailed specialized drawings emerging in the research of lab, library, or the field. Intellectuals are neither purely scholars nor purely hands-on activists. Rather than engage in hand-to-hand combat at the barricades, or in the courtroom, or in the missions, intellectuals shape the course of activism and give general directions to the professions; they are one step removed from the battle, reflecting on the why's and wherefores of the war.

As the intelligence service of the society, intellectuals have to be generalists geared to taking a larger perspective, constantly scanning the theoretical weather, the changing terrain, and the movements of different bodies of troops. In other words intellectuals have to be able to raise their heads from their own narrowly focused projects (and from their own careers), and think critically about what they see. The writers among them then persuasively communicate ideas to others in nontechnical language that everyone can understand, i.e., English. English is the "lingua franca" of the interdisciplinary intellectual life, bridging the jargon of the two-and-twenty cultures of the day.

Bridging the gaps between cultures, bringing news of the currents in a society to its members are important activities. While intellectuals have come in for a lot of scorn and contempt over the course of history, especially in America, they are nowhere more hated and persecuted than in totalitarian regimes. Intellectuals and the intellectual life seek just that general level of applied truth and relevant meaning that can question the status quo and all its operations. Detailed analyses are by nature too specific to cause trouble. No matter how many papers Proust published in the scholarly medical journals, he could never have changed the map of the modern world but for his masterly prose and large syntheses of ideas.

On a more modest modern level—after all, not all intellectuals are geniuses—a work such as Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring marks
launched the ecological movement. In science, social science, and the humanities there are other intellectuals such as John Kenneth Galbraith whose work in economics and public policy addresses problems in an integrated way and thereby changes the ongoing dialogue in many different fields. In recent American Catholic life, John Courtney Murray (on religious liberty), Dorothy Day (on peace), Michael Harrington (on poverty), Daniel Patrick Moynihan (on the family) have significantly shifted the religious or national debate. Still, to function effectively as an intellectual today is not easy. There are certain structural difficulties built into the lifestyles of America’s intelligent educated professionals which can illuminate our special problems within the Catholic community. An intellectual life is built upon certain foundations, and it can flourish best under certain conditions that are increasingly unavailable in American society. (Perhaps there are enclaves that have escaped recent social changes but I have not heard of them.) I would see these problematic conditions in the ways leisure, work, professions, family life, and political and social communities are now structured.

In the current organization of work and professional life, narrow specialization and enormous expenditures of time are required and rewarded. Competitive professional fields are crowded with the results of the postwar baby boom’s demographic bulge. Along with the competitive crowding there has been an information explosion. Everywhere we see a marked increase in the complexity and specialization of jobs so that the ordinary workload, in both the hours required and the imposed pace of work, is heavier than before. (The fax machine has finally finished off work-free vacations unless you can get out of reach of a telephone.) In academia and other professions, we see for the first time in history an affluent educated elite who follow slave-labor schedules and endure increasing stress from competition and overwork. These conditions are legitimated by a cult of productivity and ambition, and are imposed upon all aspiring candidates, who, in a tight labor market have been fairly desperate to succeed.

Typically, in academia, requirements for publication, teaching, research, and service are simultaneously increased and enforced by financially pressured institutions. Only highly specialized research published in scholarly refereed journals will count toward more and more exacting standards for promotion and tenure decisions. (We see the ridiculous plight of a Pulitzer-Prize-winning author like Paul Starr turned down for tenure at Harvard.) The resulting pressure for turning out scholarly publications means that most intellectual energy is directed toward highly focused projects, which only a small group of other scholars can read with profit.

With the increase of educated persons in larger and larger corporations, professions, and educational institutions, we find a proliferation of worlds within worlds. There is more and more specialization as size, dispersal, and relocations of educated populations transform social groupings. There are more and more publications, but they are increasingly targeted for professional, scholarly, or recreational reading. Fewer general journals and magazines exist in which serious intellectual ideas can be publicly discussed. Politics as the common serious concern of all public citizens has become discredited by rampant corruption, political scandals, and recent campaigns designed for the media. The growth of television has made serious inroads on the written forms of communication. A great deal of general intellectual writing used to convey general ideas of importance to a similarly educated population, who shared common cultural concerns despite their different occupations, and who had enough leisure to converse.

Leisure has disappeared from American society. Since leisure is the basis of culture and one of the cornerstones of the intellectual life, we suffer cultural deprivation in the midst of material plenty. Even if there were more common forums and publications, would the harassed, overworked masses of educated Americans have time to read and reflect on them? It takes psychological energy to think and focus attention; it is tempting to skip those expenditures of energy that are not immediately necessary for survival—those things that are not "in my field."] Only fairly leisureed persons can partake of the high form of cultural play that makes up the intellectual life. Our educated classes are working extremely hard at work—and working equally hard at home.

Family life has changed. Servants have disappeared, the extended family is no longer a practical support, and women have gone to work and may pursue their own demanding careers. The leisure that Oxford dons once enjoyed was built upon the backs of various submerged and exploited populations—the servant classes, the toiling natives of the Empire, and women. Women, even educated, privileged women, have always done the "shadow work" of family, household, and culture, the maintenance work that made intellectual leisure possible for an elite group of males.

Today one side effect of long overdue social reforms is that there are fewer exploited groups that the educated classes can oppress in order to obtain time for their own leisure pursuits. (Even the exploited adjunct faculty do not give a full-time department member more time.) Neither at home nor at work do most professional men and women have wives, mothers, maiden aunts, housekeepers, nannies, secretaries, or research assistants to help them cope with pressing workloads. Having many high tech machines on hand is no substitute for devoted slave labor. Today, even priests and clerics no longer inherit the traditional bevy of free female labor to help them on their way. Jesuits take their turn at cooking and doing the dishes. A professional person in America procures a core of helpers and assistants only after he or she has climbed high enough in the professional hierarchy to join the overscheduled and overcommitted leaders of the establishment—who spend their days jetting here and there, crisscrossing the country to attend endless rounds of conferences and meetings.

In educated families there are new pressures from two careers, plus increasingly high standards of childbearing and childrearing. The demands of justly-shared-out family maintenance tasks, or the demands of single parenting, further reduce the time and

636: Commonweal

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energy available for leisure, general intellectual reading, intellectual friendship, and ongoing dialogue. Even getting a nuclear family to eat dinner together regularly can be a major project; friends have to collaborate their calendars to plan for a cup of coffee. When a married couple manage to have common friends, in addition to work and family, their friends may not share their intellectual and professional commitments.

Single persons and vowed religious have their own difficulties in establishing communities of support, much less finding intellectual communities. As a priest friend of mine said of his new life at Notre Dame, "It's hard to get a sustained intellectual conversation going; the Holy Cross spirituality is Benedictine, you know, and after dinner they are always rushing off to communal prayer." Indeed, everyone in America is always rushing off somewhere—often to meditation, yoga, or stress reduction classes. For a common intellectual life there must be more time for ongoing, face-to-face informal dialogues that can stimulate sustained thinking.

For a full-bodied intellectual life to flourish there should also be a community small enough and conceptually cohesive enough for those who pursue inquiry and reflection to share core commitments and knowledge. A group of persons must generally know the same things, read the same things, and be committed to the same values and goals. Few people, even in academia, have access to other people who share their specific interests or their values. In my department for instance, there are twenty-two psychologists, all hired for their different specialties, all reading different journals—when they have any time left over from teaching four courses while commuting among five campuses. We can barely talk psychology together, much less explore the relevance of religious values to our discipline. I do sometimes talk with colleagues in the philosophy and English departments, but my friends there are equally peripatetic, and often share the humanities' traditional distrust of psychology, or what they conceive psychology to be—no small problem for the field itself.

At last count there were forty-some special divisions in the American Psychological Association, which in addition just suffered a major schism between those emphasizing psychology as an experimental science and those who are willing to include the interests of professional clinicians in the organization. The dissenting scientists went off to start a new organization. This rift forces us to recognize that psychology is many different subdisciplines using the same label. Our confusion is typical of the rapid growth of academic specializations across all fields and professions.

From what I have seen of theology, philosophy, political science, sociology, and English literature, similar schisms and separate schools exist. Often a person may have to wait for an annual professional meeting to find a few people who share enough of the same scholarly interests to have a lengthy conversation.

Christie C. Neuger, assistant professor of pastoral theology:

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17 November 1989:637
or good argument. And the more interdisciplinary one’s interests, the more difficult it is to find those other persons.

Without a common foundation, or common goals, or a common life with some leisure, an intellectual life withers. Academia, religious or secular, is filled with disillusioned people who entered the scholarly professions seeking the ideal of an intellectual community, but now find themselves no better off than their classmates who went into insurance. Committed Catholics who seek to integrate their religious belief with their professional work have their own peculiar troubles. Perhaps modern Marxists are undergoing some of the same difficulties.

Catholics and Marxists once shared, respectively, one of the most favorable conditions for a lively intellectual life; it is enormously stimulating to share ideological commitments and to have a belief system that advocates the integration of thought, practice, and personal life. The effort to integrate one’s words, deeds, work, and attachments, to serve a transcendent cause, energizes and enlivens professional work. It counters selfish careerism and pushes the mind to grapple with large perspectives and distant horizons. In fact I would say that one of the ways that the ideal of a Catholic intellectual life has been differentiated from secular scholarship or science has been its commitment to a holistic vision or sense of religious vocation. Christians have taken very seriously the command to love God with all their hearts and minds; they have long recognized that one of the talents needed for building the kingdom can be a vocation given over to serving God as truth. “Whether you eat or drink, whatsoever you do, do all for the glory of God”—and to study and think well has definitely been praiseworthy, as those esteemed as doctors of the church attest.

Among lay Catholics who became educated in large numbers after World War II, the sense of vocation or calling once limited to the religious orders was taken up with enthusiasm. Many men did not feel called to be priests but were eager to be professors. A great deal of idealism was felt by those laypersons called to intellectual work: One studies and seeks truth for the greater glory of God; one writes and teaches and professes to further the kingdom, out there in the university and the real world, rather than in the monastery.

In that first flowering of the forties and fifties it would be appropriate to speak of the American Catholic intellectual community as fairly cohesive and homogeneous. It was a very small group, its liberal wing sometimes labeled “Commonweal Catholics.” In those days the relatively small number of educated Catholics who were engaged in an intellectual life would all know one another, read one another’s books and articles, and share a common faith and education. Insight into the spirit of this earlier era can be had by reading Wilfrid Sheed’s account of his parents, Frank and Maisie.

Frank Sheed and Maisie Ward were a force unto themselves, who through publishing and frenetic lecturing single-handedly engendered much of pre-Vatican II intellectual life in Catholic America. They also lived their faith in an exemplary style, as did other influential Catholic writers such as Dorothy Day. Other memoirs of those years among Catholic intellectuals can be found in the writings of Raissa Maritain, Abigail McCarthy, Christopher Dawson, and Richard Gilman. Prominent intellectual converts were received into the church, and when they became Catholics they joined a well-defined faith, clearly demarcated, with its own distinct intellectual community. There were various circles and centers, and various publication ventures in the East and Midwest, Fordham, Georgetown, Chicago, St. John’s, Notre Dame, Boston. Educated Catholics gathered in enclaves to study and discuss their faith; they were trying to integrate their faith with the intellectual currents of the day. Much energy was also spent on matters of internal church reform and liturgical renewal—an endeavor which was confirmed by the calling of Vatican II and its surprisingly dramatic unfolding.

Such gatherings of Catholic intellectuals for study and mutual support were necessary because in general the intellectual and professional worlds of the time were fairly hostile to Catholics. Persecution, as it always does, engendered high morale, cohesion, and loyalty among those who did not fall away under the pressure. The forties and fifties were times in academia when doctrinaire secular atheism inherited from the Enlightenment reigned supreme. All religion was a remnant of superstition and Catholicism was the very worst of all. As one secular savant accurately noted, “anti-Catholicism was the anti-Semitism of the intellectuals.”

The crudest misunderstandings and antipathies could be encountered in Ivy League establishment circles, whose members were rigid in their own certainties that either Freud, or David Hume, or science had settled the God question forever. The ecumenical movement was also in its infancy, so Catholics were subjected to suspicion, bias, and subtle pressures from their Protestant neighbors, as well as from the secular world. The prejudice and scorn that Catholics could meet, say in the Harvard philosophy department, would seem quaint today.

During this period many educated, married Catholics were also unassimilated to the mainstream in their sexual manners and mores. They were not only attempting to live new forms of the ancient intellectual vocations (Dominican, Jesuit), but also to practice distinctive spiritual ideals in their family lives. Here again there was an attempt to integrate the influence of the Catholic Worker movement’s stress on providence and poverty (Franciscan) with the liturgical movement’s revival (Benedictine). Many intellectual Catholics were attempting to live by a radically different sexual ethic, sans artificial birth control, aspiring to ideals of love and sacrifice through having large families. Women were exhortcd to live out a particular ideal of the valiant woman, which could not easily encompass career aspirations. The ban on artificial contraception produced intense pressures among educated Catholics, caught in contradictory aspirations—the solitude of the study versus the active labor of domesticity.

Looking back on that period in American Catholic intellectual life, I can see that the atmosphere of the community was charged with a great deal of sublimated erotic energy. Allan Bloom mentions that the sexual restraints of an earlier generation of students lent a romantic or erotic edge to higher education that heightened the life of learning. I found this point intriguing, because I think

638: Commonweal

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there was an erotic intensity informing the atmosphere of postwar educated Catholic life. A heightened existential erotic style of faith was idealized: it could be found in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, Graham Greene novels, and still can be seen today in Walker Percy's writings or John Paul II's discourses on love and sex. Catholics were clearly different from others in their faith, in their thinking, and in their chastity, sexual practices, and commitments.

When all went well with these first- or second-generation of educated lay Catholic intellectuals, things went very well indeed. The commitment and integration of living a vocation to the intellectual life that combined abstract thought with intense liturgical practice, with erotic energy and intense family commitments—in the midst of social persecutions—produced an *esprit de corps* and an exciting sense of bonded community. Dorothy Day's work, along with that of the worker priests and Young Christian Workers, had been influential in persuading Catholic intellectuals that they must be committed to social justice and live a simple life devoted to sacrifice and love. Intellectual Catholics knew who they were, and what they were about. Their vocation was to fight the good fight, seek truth, and persevere in social reform efforts inside and outside the Catholic church. They could talk and argue with one another, but stayed united in order to gain support for the struggle a sometimes hostile world. Literature, philosophy, and above all politics were considered fertile fields for combining religious commitment and intellectual work. Passion and ideology were united.

*S*o what happened? Many things, almost all of them fortunate. First and foremost, after the Kennedy and Vatican II there came a new assimilation and integration into a mainstream culture that was growing bigger and more complex. An increase in population and affluence, along with a series of victories of various sorts, weakened the cohesion of a small semipersecuted community. After the council the goal of working for a reforming council was over. The opening of the windows to long-repressed reform brought a surge of new energies, new experiments, and the rapid growth of pluralism within the church.

But some segments and communities moved ahead while some did not and much conflict resulted. In the turbulent sixties and seventies the numbers of educated and professionally successful Catholics grew and grew. But, as we now know, educated practicing Catholics can be going to work in the libraries, laboratories, and academic leadership positions, just as they go to work in the hospitals, law firms, and boardrooms of corporate America, without contributing an iota to Catholic intellectual life. Successful assimilation into mainstream professional and academic America produces a mixed blessing. Often good, highly intelligent people have little Catholic education or formation, so that there is a huge discrepancy between their secular achievements and education, and their religious knowledge. Counting Catholic CEOs, *Who's Whoers*, even Catholic deans or presidents of secular colleges is not the same thing as assessing the state of Catholic intellectual life.

Another result of the internal reforms after Vatican II is internal pluralism and growth of the church beyond the orbit circumscribed by the traditional Roman European tradition. The Catholic church is now a huge and increasingly diverse institution of many mansions, with new rooms opening up every day. The cultural range of believers and the spectrum of philosophical approaches among intelligent, educated, intellectual Catholics are large and increasing. This means, in practice, that even if one can find a group of fellow intellectuals who are practicing Catholics, there can be wide differences among various religious styles represented. Some Catholic intellectuals come in the neoconservative mode, others tend to be liberal centrist, others are avant-garde devotees of feminism, liberation theology, or Eastern religious movements. When you meet a fellow Catholic today, a certain dance of inquiry ensues, since knowing of the other's active religious practice does not allow taking anything else for granted.

We now have a great deal of fragmentation; or, to put it more positively, a thousand flowers are blooming in the garden. Being a sacramental, worshiping church with both a hierarchical structure and a long tradition of dissent within unity, we have held together. But there are growing tensions and hostilities toward Roman abuses of authority. Conflicts emerge over what we should do with cultural assimilation and pluralism within: Celebrate and go forward, or fight for more integralism and cohesion in the traditional mode? Obviously Roman leadership in the church is bent on restoring the older unities and dominant centralization through the papacy. I do not think this is either practical or Catholic, or that it represents a sound intellectual reading of the signs of the times. A better way may be found.

Our problem is how to cope with the complexity and departmentalization of our life and times in order to achieve a viable American Catholic intellectual life—or lives. I can use my own case as symptomatic of the general problem—and I am unusually fortunate. My large family and circle of friends, almost all non-Catholic, are loving and supportive but not really much interested in my intellectual or professional or religious interests. They love me despite the fact that I am an intellectual, have a professional career, and am a devoted Catholic; we talk together almost exclusively about our personal and private concerns. My female friends and I often extend our reflections on our personal lives through the novels and fiction that we read together, but none of them would ever want to read the psychological or philosophical texts that I eagerly devour.

But every morning I should rise up and thank God that I was born a woman and so have friends. So many males I see seem completely bereft of personal friendships. Intellectual men, in and out of the religious life, may have more difficulties if they do not relate to the male-bonding rites surrounding sports. Discussing sporting events seems to serve as a substitute for intimate masculine conversation. Professional males do seem to talk to their colleagues about their work, but these conversations often are quite guarded and turn out to be more professional gossip than substantively intellectual. Since so many professional relationships are competitive, instead of collaborative and nurturing, males, along with females now rising in the ranks, seem to suffer social and intellectual deprivation, despite their social
Anne Porter

In Storm-Watch Season

For Anne Robertson

The loaming clematis
Has finished blooming
The autumn
Equinox is here
The air is very still
But day and night
Storms in the Caribbean
Keep the Atlantic roaring

The ocean...
Is pouring fog
Into the trees
And with it the fresh smells
Of elgress and of kelp
Float inland from the torn
And chuckling beaches

In the storm-haunted evening
A cricket
Has begun to sing
A street-lamp shines
Deep in the fog
A bell
Of golden light

In three months' time
We will have snow
In three months' time
The savior will be born

advantages in the world of work.

In my own professional life and work I rarely find compatible persons with whom I can fully share intellectual pursuits, this because of my interdisciplinary interests. My fellow psychologists are not much interested in philosophy, ethics, or religion. Ethicists and philosophers I see, and live with, are decidedly not interested in psychology and religion. My fellow parishioners and few Catholic friends give me spiritual support and a sense of religious community but are not really interested in philosophy, ethics, or psychology. My American Catholic intellectual life is conducted mostly by mail and in the library.

What can be done? Perhaps a two-pronged effort could be envisioned. One is a decentored, self-reliant, do-it-yourself, till-your-own-garden strategy. At the same time a larger campaign might be mounted to move Catholic institutions toward different goals that would address the cultural problems of overload, overspecialization, underformation, and isolation of so many educated Catholics. A combination of a bottom-up, base-community approach and a top-down institutional tactic might make some headway.

I know less about the larger institutional approaches but I can at least imagine what might be done from what I have observed of creative efforts at some Catholic colleges and archdiocesan programs. Catholic colleges might start to fight back against the overspecialization of academia by starting interdisciplinary institutes and more public programs devoted to topics which meet the problems of Catholics in secular culture. Many programs I have attended—for instance on the family, on death and dying, on aging, on computer technologies, or the changing church—have brought in Catholic professionals from the local community to meet with the students, faculty, and guest speakers.

Such interdisciplinary intellectual endeavors have often been funded by grants from outside the institutions, such as the state councils on the humanities or corporations. These efforts have also often been the brainchild of some creative retired religious sister on the faculty who no longer has to fight for tenure with constant publishing to update her curriculum vitae. If Catholic educational institutions truly want to encourage the intellectual life as a search for integrated truth, they will have to provide institutional supports and rewards that can compete with the rewards offered by academic grants for narrow specialization and value-free inquiry.

If other institutions in the church wish to further the intellectual life, the world of Catholic adult education awaits. Individual parishes may not have the resources to go it alone, but dioceses, seminaries, centers for spirituality, retreat houses, and other institutes and organizations can provide programs to stimulate the intellectual life. These would have to be broader than courses in Scripture or theology, or studies of the mystics, spirituality, and prayer. The present great revival of spirituality, complete with institutes and publications devoted to spiritual practices, presents a model for an intellectual revival. Spiritual institutes and retreats teach centering prayer and integration of self.
today’s Catholics also need centered, integrated thinking.

The crying need of educated Catholics is for sustained intellectual grappling with the challenge of integrating Christianity with their work and their worlds of secular thinking. Perhaps a national Catholic great books course or a university of the air as in Great Britain could spark such a movement. Perhaps the NCCB, or the Paulists, or the Jesuits, or even the Knights and Daughters might fund a prime-time Bill Moyers-type series of intellectual Catholic conversations on TV to begin the great revival. A project looking to intellectual renaissance could be sponsored in cooperation with Catholic educational institutions and Catholic magazines. Every intellectual Catholic magazine should be working to get its networks of readers together for more sustained inquiry—and thereby ensure a future readership.

At this point the top-down, institutional initiatives and strategies begin to shade into the bottom-up, base-community, small-group approaches. The potential of small groups is certainly not a novel idea. Great changes and social movements have always started with mutant small groups pursuing goals different from those of the mainstream culture. Communist cell groups, AA, the women’s movement, group psychotherapy, and today’s Christian base communities all understand the potency of sustained, focused, small-group interaction to support beliefs and goals. Christianity itself started with a small group, moved on to house churches, and may be headed home again.

When one is intellectually isolated and starving something has to be done immediately on a self-help model. Individuals can work to set up small groups with enough in common to recreate microcosms of past embodiments of coherent Catholic communities. To overcome the present diversity, information overload, and specialization, it will take small groups meeting regularly to go deeply enough into a subject that addresses the fundamental challenges of interdisciplinary intellectual questions. These groups will have to be smaller and more tightly organized than the large formal associations that have heretofore formed—the Catholic guild of physicians or lawyers, or whatever. There must be more cohesion and regular continuity; to get it, small groups will have to be based near home. Meeting only once or twice a year at larger national professional meetings is not enough.

I have had some positive experience of such supportive intellectual inquiry groups, although never in my own discipline of psychology. One small group that met in our living room to study Protestant theology at Harvard three decades ago consisted, among others, of Daniel Callahan, Sidney Callahan, John Noonan, Mike Novak, John Raffé, and Harvey Cox (our ecumenical gesture to Protestantism). All the members of the group started out educating themselves and ended up publishing—often in these very pages.

Another productive, small interdisciplinary group I was in met together in the midseventies, studied the family for a year, reading and discussing the literature. We were particularly inter-

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17 November 1989:641

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ested in the religious and value questions that were regularly left out of the professional literature. A number of books and articles came from the endeavor; we all came away enriched in other ways, as well as determined to muster public support for the much-neglected American family.

I am now in a small group of women in theology who read and discuss intellectual issues from a feminist perspective. We support one another’s development and aspirations, and discuss our intellectual work-in-progress in a way that affirms the feminist belief that the personal is political. We feel both stimulated and deeply grounded in this like-thinking, nurturing, and non-competitive group. But, as is usual with small group efforts, ripple effects occur. Three of us were asked to help plan and participate in an archdiocesan spiritual center’s day for women. We expected 40 to 50 women; some 230 women and a few men attended. Such experiences make one realize the untapped potential for adult education in the American church. The faithful, at least the feminine faithful, thirst to grow intellectually and spiritually.

In my most optimistic utopian flights of hope I can imagine Newman’s second spring of the church come to flower in America. In this scenario we successfully slog through the mire and mudslides caused by the chilling winter fogs blown in over the seas from Rome. In an American Catholic spring a thousand flowers of free intellectual inquiry bloom and we fearlessly remind ourselves that the desire to know and understand is the work of the spirit of truth. All around us the challenges and intellectual problems of our modern era await disciplined, creative thinking, infused and inspired by Christian values. Naturally I am most intrigued by epistemological questions in psychology and ethics of how reason is informed by faith. But in other fields and non-fields there is no dearth of questions—isues, dilemmas, discoveries—now understood mostly or solely in a secular context, that await exploration and clarification from a faith perspective. The last word has not been spoken about the origins of life, the nature of nature, the mysteries of evil and of goodness. Analysis we have in abundance, synthesis is in short supply.

Ideally American Catholic intellectual life can be renewed through the impetus of small groups addressing focused intellectual concerns as they interact with a variety of institutional initiatives. For better or worse, Catholics have now entered the American mainstream and must cope with assimilation, establishments, and internal and external pluralism. After all, we can never go back to being a persecuted minority pressured into ideological cohesion, so it can only be onward, upward, and outward bound for us as a community. Happily, at this particularly turbulent and hopeful time of realignments and reconsiderations in the postmodern world, in history, America may be ready to listen to new voices singing old songs with new verses.

Many have noted that the secular liberal establishment is crumbling in its old certainties. What has been called liberalism’s “thin theory of the good” is breaking down. Catholicism, with its avowal of a more communitarian social justice ethic and its full-bodied view of human nature, has something tonic to offer tired blood and anemic individualism. This may truly be “the Catholic moment” in America. Or perhaps we should say the time is ripe for many different Catholic moments, since the intellectuals in the church, being argumentative, are not speaking with one party line. But the larger culture may be ready to listen to diverse streams of the Catholic tradition in new ways. Our intellectual task is to work harder at understanding how the good news we offer relates to other quests for knowledge. All we want in the end, of course, is to enlister the hearts and minds of all humanity in a mutual seeking of love, peace, justice, and truth. Americans are born utopians: The impossible only takes a little longer.

STAGE

SHOOTING STARS
‘ORPHEUS’ & ‘BESIDE HERSELF’

When celebrated performers come back to the New York stage, audience expectations lie in wait for them. This is true even when they are doing something more complicated, less self-aggrandizing than the usual star turns, which is certainly the case with Vanessa Redgrave in Orpheus Descending and William Hurt in Beside Herself. Still, audiences go to be astounded and, since astonishment is rare in the theater, often come away disappointed. Opinion seems to be divided in both these instances. Some theatergoers have been dazzled by a vision (like Vee Talbott in Orpheus); others, like the man in the original shaggy-dog story, come away saying, “It wasn’t so shaggy.”

Redgrave’s Lady Torrance vibrates at the center of Peter Hall’s Orpheus Descending, a reading of Tennessee Williams’s play that is probably more conventional than Hall thinks it is. He and Redgrave did the play in London at the end of 1988—the first production of the new commercial company he established when he stepped down as director of the National Theatre. Now he has brought the production, recast with American actors, to Broadway. In a number of interviews Hall has repeated what he said in a piece in the Daily Telegraph at the time of the London production (reprinted in the October Playbill)—that Williams is a non-naturalistic playwright, that his verse is a poet’s variation of the spoken language, and that Orpheus Descending is an unusual Williams play in that it “portrays the bigotry and racism of a whole community.” Like Sweet Bird of Youth? Given this understanding of Williams and his play, Hall uses lights and sounds as offstage threats (as Williams’s stage directions suggest) and fills the background with shadowy figures who hover as intrusions in even the most intimate scenes.

Williams opens his play with “two female clowns,” to borrow his description of similar figures in The Rose Tattoo, who turn exposition into a flamboyant set piece. Beulah gives the audi-