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## The Moral Response of the University

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## **The Moral Response of the University**

**JOAQUIN G. BERNAS, S.J.**

A university is many things, but it is not an island. It must not be. A university is the discovery and the unraveling of the cultural riches and of the forces and the ferment that shape the nation and its people. A university is the transmission of what is best and must be preserved. A university is an instrument for the growth and the transformation of a society in a world that is rapidly in process. A university situates itself at the crossroads of action within the nation and shares in the nation's excitements and frustrations, in the nation's glory and despair, and is shaped as well by the nation's triumphs as by its agonies. A university is a bridge that links the nation with the ferment around the world. A university, in other words, is people and world. Therefore a university's concerns and priorities are dictated and shaped by the concerns of the people and nation it serves. It is this privileged role and privileged position that is the wellspring of the excitement that can grip a university.

Today, what is it that is agitating people and nation? Although it is the popular thing to do these days, I shall not speak of an inhospitable government. Neither am I prepared, however, to endorse the almost idyllic description of a garden paradise made in a recent state-of-the-nation address. Nor need I repeat what my Chairman has said more than once about the economy or what parliamentarians of the street are shouting about political life. Only the intentionally myopic can fail to detect the economic and political ills that plague the land. All these demand attention.

*This note is excerpted from the Inaugural Address of Fr. Bernas, S.J. as President of the Ateneo de Manila University, delivered on 15 August 1984.*

They demand analysis. They demand reflection. They clamor for solution. And a university must respond within the limits of its capacity. But, what kind of response?

Without doubt an intellectual and technical response is expected of a university. Beyond the technical and intellectual, however, the university is asked to give more. The university is asked to bring to bear upon the problems of the nation every moral resource at its command. The moral response, to my mind, is the more pressing task. It is my conviction that, while the economic and political problems that beset us are of enormous magnitude, they are at root symptoms of a more deep-seated disease. The disease, if not vigorously attended to, can be fatal to our life as a nation. As a university colleague has so aptly put it, what we are facing is "the erosion of the anthropological foundations which ground the possibility of civil society." What we are facing is "a situation where the indispensable bases for an authentically democratic and Christian society are radically being undermined."

What are the anthropological foundations of civil society? Basically they are four: truth, justice, peace, love (*Mater et Magistra*). These foundations have been violently shaken. In the conduct of public affairs *truth* has been badly battered. People have learned to believe as true the exact opposite of what is officially announced. And when the untruth is made public it is hypocritically given the semblance of an honorable disguise. *Justice* has been brutalized beyond recognition. The lady has been stripped of her blindfold and the balance scales are often replaced by the truncheon or by the barrel of a gun. The meaning of *peace* has been distorted. Peace has come to mean the desolation of a hamletted village or the grim visage of a silenced salvage victim. *Love* at best has come to manifest itself in the shape of wasteful display and at worst in human sacrifice at the altar of national security. And it is in this critical context that a university is challenged to make a contribution. And today I ask myself and the academic community that has honored me with the presidency: What is it that the Ateneo, as a Jesuit university, can offer?

Let me begin with what we cannot offer. We do not have the material resources of a state university or of affluent and well-endowed private universities. We do not have the fiscal resources of government and of multinational conglomerates. We do not have the laboratories and libraries and the accumulation of doctorate

degrees found in ivy league universities. But what we have we can be proud about. Call it Jesuit tradition, or the Ignatian heritage. Call it anything you like; but we feel proud to be able to say that we are heir to a vision—a vision which shapes the spirit and the method of our approach to the educational enterprise. This is what we have to offer. And if there is anything that can make a President of a Jesuit university nervous, it should be the realization that he has custody of this vision and the responsibility for keeping it alive. Today as I officially assume full responsibility for the preservation and implementation of the vision, let me recall with you its essential components. I can enumerate five.

The first component is the foundation of Jesuit optimism. Optimism is a virtue we very much need. We are optimistic because we believe that God is active in everything that is—in nature, in people, in structures, and even in the most tragic disasters. We believe in the goodness of the nation and of the world that God has given us. We believe this to the marrow of our bones. Hence, we believe that there is nothing that is which is unworthy of study. Hence we seek to implant in the minds of the young an insatiable hunger for knowledge because we believe that knowledge can lead to an appreciation of mystery and to a sense of wonder, and finds ultimate fulfillment in worship and service of the Lord of the universe.

Second, our vision includes the conviction that God's noblest gift to men and women is freedom, and that each is called to growth in radical freedom. Hence, true Jesuit education is personal. It focuses on the person and nurtures the person's growth in total freedom—freedom from enslavement to passion and to self, and freedom from enslavement to personal and structural masters.

Third, we see freedom as growing in the crucible of trial. Freedom is not a hothouse product. The history of nations and peoples is a constant struggle between light and darkness, between virtue and malevolence. We see a university as bridge between students and the battlefronts where choices are made and lessons learned and character shaped and freedom tested. For the Ateneo university today, the opportunity is dramatic. Between the isolation brought on by affluence and gentility on the one hand and the turbulent action in streets and hamlets and slums on the other, the Ateneo must be bridge and guide. The Ateneo — its administrators, the teachers, the students — must be willing to experiment,

to experiment with courage, to reflect without regret, to learn with a nation in transition and, in the process, nurture the growth of freedom.

Fourth, our Jesuit tradition insists on the *magis*, "the more," which translates itself into a tradition of excellence. Excellence is a multi-dimensional goal. Unfortunately excellence sometimes translates itself into snobbish elitism. This is to be deplored but we accept it as an occupational risk. Certainly, however, academic excellence and technical excellence are and have been pillars of our educational tradition. Pillars they must continue to remain. There was a time too when excellence in the athletic fields was a major preoccupation. As an instrument of education athletic competition will continue to have a place of privilege. But priorities change with changing needs. The energies exerted in athletic competition or in support of athletic competition have largely been rechanneled towards excellence in service, service especially to the underprivileged. Father Arrupe's formula, "men and women for others," has muted the patented cheer *Fabilioh*. But *Fabilioh* has not disappeared. As in the dark hours of the second world war the spirit of *Fabilioh* courageously manifests itself in works of service to a nation in agony.

Fifth, we see the person of Jesus Christ as central to the educational enterprise. Not that we force Jesus Christ on those who choose not to believe in Him, nor even that we require that teachers must be believing Christians. We do not. But to the nonbelievers we offer nonetheless the sublimity of the Sermon on the Mount and the challenge of the Beatitudes. To the believers, however, we offer more. We offer the example, we offer the challenge, and we offer the personal friendship of Jesus Christ.

These, my friends, are the components of the vision to which the Ateneo is heir: a living God who permeates all, a human person preeminently gifted with freedom, freedom growing in the crucible of trial, multidimensional excellence as a goal that is never fully attained, and the person of Jesus Christ who on His Cross gives meaning and substance to the sacrifice of self.