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Yearning to Learn, by Reilly

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Book Reviews and Notes



Yearning to Learn. By Francis E. Reilly, S.J. Pasig City: Anvil Publishing, 1995. 120 pages.

This is a philosophical book intended by the author for "university people, both faculty and students, as well as former students and the families of students" (Preface, ix) yet written in a "reader-friendly" way. The author exerted efforts to communicate his philosophical thoughts and insights in nontechnical terms so skillfully that even those whose minds normally dwell on philosophy would not easily presume it is a philosophical work. This small book is about knowing or learning, and in particular, about college education, its true value, proper direction and the responsibility that it entails. This book is a call for people to cultivate a passion for learning, for "intellectual excellence," because learning in itself is part of man's vocation and is vital to "self-assembling" or to personal growth. It is composed of nine chapters, which can be divided into two parts. The first part, consisting of the first five chapters, provides the philosophical foundations for intellectual excellence which the author sees should be a key commitment of the university, while the second part dwells on the university as the community itself whose members can—and should—cultivate love for learning, active concern itself for the poor, and holiness.

The first five chapters of the book are focused on the philosophical principles of man's yearning to learn. The first principle is that all men, by nature, desire to know. This is a yearning or an inclination that affects every individual, whether one is educated or uneducated and whether it is on a trivial matter like gossip, or on serious matters like science and business, or on a most essential concern like belief in God. Wondering, questioning, reflecting, and discussing, all of which pertain to learning, are regularly involved in the common activities of man's daily life. Through knowing, we discover many "wonderlands" especially the wonderlands of the academic campus, the ordinary world outside campus, and even of the divine realm.

The second principle is that man's yearning for learning is rooted in his potential nature or unfinished condition, which can be fulfilled through his principal and intellectual activity of knowing. Implicit in this principle is an intrinsic relation between self-perfection and knowing. In other words, know-

ing contributes essentially to what the author calls "self-assembling" or to "human flourishing." Yet this self-fulfillment is not at all separate from the commitment to serve others. The third principle is affirming the "intelligibility of reality." The "wonderlands" of nature and the supernatural are not only wonderful but they are also open to scientific inquiry and rational understanding. Sciences, philosophy and theology are existing disciplines because the material and the immaterial worlds are knowable and human intelligence is relatively capable of understanding them. It follows from this that the human intellect and the totality of reality have an intrinsic correlation. This can be easily appreciated if one believes in God who created man to be like Him in intelligence and if one believes that all beings are intelligible or susceptible to human understanding. The fourth and final presupposition is that it is the knowledge of what is right and wrong and, most of all, the truths about God which matter most for self-assembling or human flourishing.

The last four chapters focus on university education, the passion for intellectual excellence, university service for the poor, and on the relationship between intellectual excellence and holiness. Here, the author initially takes notice of the people who make up the university, namely the students, the faculty, and even the parents of the students. He views them to be constitutive of the university insofar as they cooperate and interact with one another to improve education and attain truths vital to human flourishing. The university provides academic measures for the emancipation of young men and women from a narrow-minded vision of the world and for the formation of their intellectual skills. It is also the institution where questions on God are pursued, for it is the proper venue for a democratic and rational inquiry into all kinds of knowledge.

The author highlights the role of the university in encouraging the cultivation and promotion of the passion for intellectual excellence. He clarifies insightfully that this intellectual or academic excellence should not be confused with the record of the school on the big number of its graduates with honors, with the success of its graduates in securing high-paying jobs, with the big number of its faculty with Ph.D. degrees from schools abroad, or with its elite image. It refers rather to the attitude or the internal trait of the will to cultivate the love of learning even beyond the academic years in the university, or even for the whole period of one's life. As the primary mover in the promotion of the passion for intellectual excellence the university, through its administrators and its faculty, "must deliberately encourage learning," define important agenda for classroom discussion, and stimulate discussions on questions that are relevant to the flourishing or perfection of the human person. Furthermore, it must guide the young men and women under its care in the cultivation of the habit of intelligent decision-making, which has a bearing on activities affecting both themselves and others, and in the critical yet responsible formation of personal opinion whether on matters of justice and human rights, or on matters of national interest.

Yet, the passion for intellectual excellence must be accompanied by an equally zealous living of the truths that are crucial to one's formation as a human person. Authentic human existence requires that intellectual excellence culminate in moral and spiritual growth. Thus, the author sees the university people, including its graduates, as having a vocation to live ethically and be of special service to the poor in society. The latter task is a mandate of a Christian university. In fact, there are Christian universities that have institutionalized the immersion of their students with the urban and the rural poor and have set up centers for social development as an integral part of their service to the nation. There are even instances that in speaking out the truth, in serving as the voice of the oppressed and the weak against unjust regimes, the university suffers tragedy with the ruthless killing of its members.

Finally, the author is convinced that there is a certain link between intellectual excellence and holiness. In other words, an authentic and sincere yearning for learning can be conducive to the promotion of a religious mode of life in the university. If the passion for academic excellence involves a universal outlook or an openness of the mind to the totality of reality, and especially to the pursuit of the highest truths, then this can lead to a knowledge of God in things of the world and especially in people. "Living the life of seeking the important truth is already a preparation for holiness and in some cases, it is a part of genuine holiness" (p. 110).

Whether by design or by coincidence, this book on university education and the pursuit of academic excellence has come up at the time when the School of Arts and Sciences of the Ateneo de Manila University is agitated by the controversy on the reduction of the core curriculum units that could possibly undermine the tradition of liberal education in this university. This book appears to be a reminder and a call that the formative character of Ateneo education could be jeopardized by this radical change in the core curriculum. This is because the more important knowledge and truths that are vital to the formation of the human person are found in the core curriculum courses. Thus, the relevance of this book cannot be overlooked.

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Pinatubo and the Politics of Lahar. By Kelvin S. Rodolfo. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1995. 340 pages.

If the eruption of Mt. Pelee (in Lesser Antilles) in 1902 inspired an opera, *The Violins of St. Jacques*, Mt. Pinatubo's eruption inspired the writing of several books, among which are *Pinatubo: The Eruption of the Century*, by Castro (1991), and *Mt. Pinatubo: 500 years after*, by Dacanay (1991). The eruption also