



Reflections on the Mission of Providence College

Office of Mission & Ministry

COLLEGE MISSION STATEMENT



Providence College is a primarily undergraduate, liberal arts, Catholic institution of higher education. Committed to fostering academic excellence through the sciences and humanities, the College provides a variety of opportunities for intellectual, social, moral and spiritual growth in a supportive environment.

The College actively cultivates intellectual, spiritual, ethical and aesthetic values within the context of the Judaeo-Christian heritage. These values are nurtured by the unique tradition of the Dominican Order which emphasizes quality teaching and scholarship.

Providence College recognizes the unity of the human family that proceeds from its one Creator. It therefore encourages the deepest respect for the essential dignity, freedom, and equality of every person and welcomes qualified women and men from all religious, racial and ethnic backgrounds. Providence College prepares its students to be responsible and productive citizens to serve in their own society and the greater world community.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE CATHOLIC?

• *Produced by the Office of Mission & Ministry*

This is not an easy question to answer. On the one hand, it means that one is a member of the Catholic Church, believes what the Church teaches, and does what Catholics do. On the other hand, to be catholic -- and here the lowercase is intentional -- is to be open, tolerant, and universal in one's interests and sympathies. Both definitions are right and both apply to Providence College. But the most radical sense of being Catholic is to view the created world as a sacrament of the divine, that is, as something that both points to and makes present God's saving grace.

This is a radical claim and implies a reconciliation of what otherwise appears to be opposed. But it is one that derives from our faith in Jesus Christ who in his own person effected that reconciliation. Jesus is both the son of Mary and the Son of God, and as such is fully human and fully divine.

This is what is meant by the doctrine of the Incarnation, a word that literally means taking on flesh. In Jesus, God took on our humanity and made it his own. In this way the humanity of Jesus reveals his divinity. It also changes our understanding of the relationship between the Creator and his creation. For if the humanity of Jesus -- his flesh and blood -- can reveal and make present his divinity, then creation is raised to a new dignity by virtue of God's self revelation. This becomes especially apparent when we consider the church.

The faults and failings of the church are all too apparent, and its humanity, its creatureliness if you will, is certainly evident in the people who belong to it. Yet Catholics believe that despite its limitations the church has been chosen and sanctified by God to be a sacrament of Jesus Christ, to embody his person and mission and to both point to him and make him present in the work that it does in his name.

It is for this reason that Catholics believe that bread and wine at Mass become the Body and Blood of Christ, that pouring water on a child's brow in baptism renders her a new creation in Christ, and that a young couple's marriage vows transforms their intimate love for one another into an expression of God's love for us all.





Reflections on the Mission of Providence College

Office of Mission & Ministry

Thus, there is a paradox at the heart of the sacramental vision for what appears to be ordinary, a mere creature, is in fact extraordinary by virtue of having been transformed by God's saving grace. In a more limited way, the same could be said about a poet's words, a doctor's care, and a friend's forgiveness for all that is good comes from God, reflects the goodness of God, and points back to God.

To view the world in this way -- to see the world of people and things as capable of revealing God and to understand that God's grace can suffuse even seemingly secular realities -- is to regard all things as potentially holy. And because they are we are required to live and act in particular ways.

How we treat one another and especially the least among us, what we profess and hold to be true, how we pray and worship, the questions we ask and the careers we pursue are no mere accidents nor matters of insignificance. They are rather measures of the grace we have been given and of our fidelity to God's call in our lives, and as such, they are the ways in which we are meant to transform the world.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE DOMINICAN?

• Produced by the Office of Mission & Ministry



St. Dominic de Guzman was a thirteenth century Spaniard known for his prayer and his preaching, his compassion for those in need and his joy even amidst adversity. He was a man who defied easy definition. He was neither a monk bound to a single monastery nor a solitary priest ministering to the flock of his parish but something new, an itinerant friar steeped in prayer who put himself and his brothers at the service of the church wherever there was need. The Dominican vocation is therefore complex and two of the traditional mottoes associated with the Order hint at this complexity: *Contemplare et contemplata aliis tradere* means to contemplate and to share the fruits of contemplation with others, while *laudare, benedicere et praedicare* means to praise, to bless and to preach.

Dominicans are thus called to be both contemplatives and apostles, and to balance prayer, study, silence and communal living with service to others and an engagement with the world.

It is for this reason that Dominicans live and pray together in religious houses called priories -- such as St. Thomas Aquinas Priory at Providence College -- and spend many years in study, but also why they teach and minister in colleges and universities, pastor people in parishes, and serve as missionaries throughout the world. But if the vocation is a complex one it is also a focused one. Indeed, the enduring motto of the Order and of Providence College is *veritas*, truth, and one of the truths at the heart of the Dominican vocation is the truth of sacramental grace.

St. Dominic founded the Order of Preachers -- hence, the O.P. after a Dominican's name -- in 1216. It was a time of rapid social change and one in which people were beset with a welter of competing ideologies that vied for their loyalty. Amidst it all, people longed for the authentic Christian message. Unfortunately, the church was ill equipped to provide what people needed. The clergy was often poorly educated, corruption was rife, and there seemed to be little authentic witness to the Gospel. As a result, heresies like Albigensianism provided an attractive alternative. Popular in southern France and often inspiring admiration because of the piety of its adherents, Albigensianism attempted to solve the complex problem of the relationship between world of the senses and the world of the spirit simply if dualistically.





Reflections on the Mission of Providence College

Office of Mission & Ministry

It maintained that creation was the result of an evil creator and is therefore inherently evil, while the soul or spirit comes from a good God and is good. The choice was equally simple. One should forsake the world of people and things and embrace what is purely spiritual. Indeed, its most devout members would literally starve themselves to death so that their souls could be released from the prison of their bodies and find their proper home with God. Obviously, such a view contrasted sharply with the Gospel revelation of Jesus as fully human and fully divine, and left little room to approach the world as a sacrament of God's grace.

St. Dominic was therefore intent on defending the incarnation of God in Jesus, and so too the integrity of creation and the possibility of sacramental grace. He gathered together men and women, friars and nuns and later sisters and laity, who would live the Gospel more authentically and preach its truth with both their words and their lives. From the beginning he sent his friars to the great universities of the time: Oxford, Paris and Bologna. He wanted his friars to be educated so that their preaching and teaching would be informed, able to answer the questions of the day, and meet people's longing for the Gospel. Ideally, his friars were to be men of faith, prayer, and learning who could respond to the needs of their time without fear and confident that the human mind, a mere creature, could rightly if imperfectly understand its Creator.

It is perhaps no accident, therefore, that the colors of the Dominican habit -- the religious garb worn by the friars, nuns and many sisters -- are black and white, representing as they do the reconciliation of apparent opposites in a greater unity. It is certainly no accident that these are the official colors of Providence College.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A CATHOLIC AND DOMINICAN COLLEGE?

• Produced by the Office of Mission & Ministry

Some aspects of Providence College's Catholic and Dominican identity are obvious. The friars in their habits are hard to miss, St. Dominic's Chapel is located in the very center of campus, and crucifixes adorn the walls of classrooms and offices.

Additionally most students, faculty and staff are Catholic, the 10:30 mass on Sunday nights is always standing room only, and students are required to take classes in philosophy and theology.



Other aspects of the Catholic and Dominican identity are more subtle or even unexpected. Catholic teaching guides the investment of the endowment, the enforcement of parietals in the residence halls, and the generosity extended to students and employees in need. Nearly a thousand students volunteer their service through Campus Ministry every year and at all hours someone can be found praying quietly in the chapel.

By charter Providence College was the first college or university in Rhode Island to welcome students of every faith or none, and it has a long, close and continuing relationship with Rhode Island's Jewish community. Indeed, some of the College's most devoted teachers and alumni are Jewish.

Yet in some ways the Catholic and Dominican character of Providence College precisely as a college is most evident in its approach to faith and reason. For many people, faith and reason stand in opposition to one another; they are black and white, irreconcilable and best kept apart. Not so for Dominicans. In the tradition of St. Thomas Aquinas, Dominicans assert that faith and reason are compatible, complementary, and point to a single truth.

There is no opposition between the theory of evolution and belief in divine providence, for example, because how God accomplishes his purposes is a distinct question from why, even as the answers to the two questions are intimately related. Science has every right to try and understand how the universe works -- indeed, it is God's will that the human mind probe creation in order to understand it -- and theology has every right to assert that everything that takes place is in service of a loving plan.



PROVIDENCE
COLLEGE

Reflections on the Mission of Providence College

Office of Mission & Ministry

What remains true is that it is God's creation. Moreover, while faith is a gift from God reason supports faith. This means that faith in God is not merely the result of custom, feeling and private choice but can be a thoughtful and reasonable response to the evidence at hand. Indeed, while intimate knowledge of God in himself -- Father, Son and Holy Spirit -- requires revelation, knowledge that God exists can be arrived at by reason alone.

The implications of this assertion of the compatibility of faith and reason for education are profound. Questions, debates and challenges are welcomed, as are people of hesitant faith, different faiths, or even no faith at all. Believers cannot take refuge in the assurances of faith but must learn to provide reasons for what they believe and, when it comes to the classroom, they must pursue biology, history or accountancy with uncompromising rigor and integrity as a biologist, historian or accountant.



At the same time, those of questioning or absent faith will be challenged by their studies in the Development of Western Civilization, philosophy and theology. There they will have to contend with an understanding of God that is hardly the sop of comfort that Marx and Freud asserted, and will have to reconsider whether in fact faith in God is a more exacting stance than is non-belief.

It should be evident that Providence College aims at something ambitious and critically important. It attempts to provide an education for the whole person -- body, mind and soul -- that bridges the common divides between matter and spirit, God and creation, faith and reason.

In doing so, it affirms the distinctively Catholic sense of sacrament and grace, and, like the Dominican habit, joins together apparent opposites in a greater unity. If successful, this means that everyone at Providence College will understand that they are made in the image and likeness of God, that their work, love and play can be replete with God's grace, and that they have a unique role in God's loving plan, that is, in his *providence*.



PROVIDENCE
COLLEGE

Reflections on the Mission of Providence College

Office of Mission & Ministry

PRESIDENT'S INAUGURAL ADDRESS • REV. BRIAN J. SHANLEY, O.P., 12TH PRESIDENT OF PROVIDENCE COLLEGE
September 30, 2005



The story goes that when Thomas Aquinas was informed in the spring of 1256 that he had been chosen to assume the office of *magister in sacra pagina* at the University of Paris ("master of the sacred page" was the technical term for a theologian in those days), he immediately began to pray fervently about the theme of his inaugural lecture. The next night he experienced the apparition of a venerable Dominican—in one version St. Dominic himself—who answered his prayer by proposing the following line from Psalm 104:13 as his starting point: *Rigans montes de superioribus suis: de fructu operum tuorum satiabitur terra* (in those days Dominican apparitions spoke in Latin). An English rendering of the verse in your program reads: *From thy high pavilion thou dost water the hills, the earth is enriched by thy provision*. The first sentence of the lecture articulates a core conviction about divine providence that permeates Aquinas's entire theological oeuvre and that I

first learned as a student here: *The king of the heavens, the Lord, established this law from all eternity: that the gifts of providence should reach what is lowest through intermediaries*. God's loving plan for creation is mediated by the ministry of creatures. Specifically, Aquinas argues that the human activities of teaching and learning, the heartbeat of this campus, are integral parts of divine providence, for it is through teaching and learning that we appropriate God's own wisdom and thereby our happiness. That means that what we do here is not simply located geographically at a place called "providence", but rather finds its ultimate significance as part of God's own providence. I offer these inaugural reflections on the meaning of being teachers and learners in the unfolding of the providence of God as the fruit of reflecting on themes that Aquinas goes on to develop in the rest of his inaugural lecture. Thus while I do not claim to be the beneficiary of a vision of a venerable Dominican, reading a venerable Dominican was an answer to my own prayer about what I should say today. By going back to our earliest Dominican university roots, we can re-appropriate what is perennial and central to the Dominican university vocation as our touchstone for the future.

The first theme that Aquinas develops is the exalted nature of theology as the ultimate form of wisdom. Ingredient in this claim is the assumption that all of human knowledge can be integrated into an organic whole with theology at its summit. Needless to say, this idea is not much in fashion at universities these days. What many people do not know, however, is that even in Aquinas's own day it was thought by some to be a dubious assumption. The raging intellectual question in 1256 at the University of Paris concerned whether Aristotelian philosophy could be reconciled with the Christian faith. At stake in this debate was not simply whether or not Aristotelian philosophy could be brought into the service of theology, but also the very unity of the medieval university: if Aristotle and revelation could not be reconciled, then the Faculty of Theology and the Faculty of Arts could not be harmonized and the unity of the university would be destroyed. Without a unified whole of truth, there really is no university because there is no *unum versus*, no unity with respect to something one. Following in the footsteps of his teacher Albert the Great, Aquinas spent his life demonstrating that when the philosophical works of Aristotle (which were then considered to be largely coterminous with rational truth itself) were properly understood, they were in harmony with the revealed truths of the Christian faith. Aquinas's ultimate argument for the unity of truth and the corresponding unity of all disciplines at a university is relatively simple: the source of all truth is the one God who is both (1) the creator of our minds and the world that they are designed to know and (2) the source of all revealed truths believed in faith. What is known to be true on the basis of reason cannot contradict what is revealed to be true in faith because both are ultimately grounded in the mind of God. Truth-*veritas*, the motto of the order--is one and the ally of faith.

This foundational claim has important ramifications for thinking about the search for truth on a Catholic and Dominican liberal arts campus. As Alasdair MacIntyre has written, the greatest contemporary threat to the traditional conception of a catholic university education is posed not by some rival alternative view of the whole, but rather by the widespread view that there is no such thing as an ordered view of the whole. If there is no ordered view of the whole, then a college education involves exposing students to a variety of disciplines with their own distinctive methodologies, leaving students with the feeling that truth is at best relativized to disciplines or at worst non-existent. On this scenario, if there is to be a view of the whole, it will be what I choose to create for myself. By contrast the catholic view of a university education is marked by a belief that, at least in theory, it should be possible to see how all truths fit together into a single whole. Cardinal Newman expressed the view thus: "That only is true enlargement of mind which is the power of viewing many things at once as one whole, of referring them severally to their true place in the universal system, of understanding their respective values, and determining their mutual dependence." This capacity of mind is classically called "wisdom," and that is what a catholic education aims to inculcate.



Reflections on the Mission of Providence College

Office of Mission & Ministry

This classical view of an integrated edifice of knowledge poses challenges for us as a campus community. First, what sort of curriculum best achieves such educational goals? As we begin to do curricular review, we have to ask ourselves how we put together a unified view of the whole. How do we balance the need to develop specialized competencies in a particular discipline (the major) in a way that also educates the whole person for an appreciation of truths in other domains? How do we devise philosophy and especially theology courses that are truly integrative and architectonic? In educating our students to integrate faith and reason, it is not enough to make some broad theological claims about the ultimate compatibility of truth and leave it at that level. Aquinas himself demonstrated that you have to take on the contentious issues and show how apparent conflicts between the various bodies of knowledge, and especially between science and theology, can be resolved. He himself worked through the debate in his own day between those who held that the world must have had a beginning in accord with the biblical account in *Genesis* and those who argued that science shows that the world cannot have had a beginning. Aquinas endeavored to show that those on both sides of the question erred in claiming demonstrative status for their respective positions; neither science nor faith could prove its point. Historically what were thought to be genuine conflicts between faith and science have been largely generated by exaggerated claims by one side against the other. While Aquinas himself seems to imply that the error would always be on the scientific side, his position allows for the possibility that an apparent conflict could be resolved by a re-interpretation of a theological claim when the scientific claim does have demonstrative force or even great probability. In our own day we need to equip our students to parse through the debates about intelligent design versus evolution, for example, in a manner that involves the integration of science, philosophy, and religion. The same can be said about the most contentious moral issues of our day: stem cell research, the nature of death, and the value of a human life in a mother's womb. Public discourse on all these questions is impoverished because the participants usually approach the question from a narrow perspective that does not integrate scientific, philosophical, and theological distinctions. A student educated at a Catholic and Dominican college ought to be able to integrate all the perspectives in the pursuit of the truth.

In order to do that, however, they need to have good teachers. And this is the subject of the second part of Aquinas's inaugural lecture. He says that teachers need to be "lofty" like the mountains. Now we all know that professors do not need to be reminded to be lofty, but what should that mean? First, it means that teachers and students are not equals; there is an inherent hierarchy implied in Aquinas's comparison of teachers to mountains and students to the earth below. Hierarchies are not as fashionable in our own day as they were in Aquinas's. Yet given the contemporary pressures on the academy to conform itself to the marketplace, there is something salutary and corrective in reminding ourselves that teachers know more than students. They are therefore entrusted with the responsibility of guiding students toward what they need to know rather than what they want to hear. Universities and their teachers should not treat students as consumers whose demands have to be met for fear of losing market share. It is rather that professors need to teach students to want to know what they need to know so that they can come to see the truth for themselves and choose what is worthy of choice.

There is a second sense in which teachers need to be "lofty": they have to have some sense of the whole and the place of their own discipline in that whole. There is enormous pressure in our graduate educational system and in our system of tenure to encourage and indeed pressure professors to specialize in a narrow area. The result can be a fragmented and compartmentalized faculty that often cannot relate its own domain of knowledge to the larger whole. We cannot expect our students to integrate their own knowledge if their professors cannot help them. While not everyone can master everything worth knowing, as Aquinas seems to have done, we need to foster a climate on this campus where professors are encouraged to go outside the bounds of their own disciplines and dialogue with colleagues in diverse fields. The success of the Development of Western Civilization program that lies at the heart of our curriculum is directly attributable to the effort of the faculty to model for students the kind of integrated thinking that lies at the heart of a Catholic and Dominican liberal arts education. The same modeling goes on in other interdisciplinary programs.

The third way in which teachers are to be "lofty" is that they need to inspire their students. Despite the hierarchical nature of the teacher-student relationship, no teacher can force a student to learn. Aquinas's understanding of the causal role of teachers in divine providence is dispositive: a teacher cannot put his or her knowledge into the student's mind, but rather can only help the student to come to see things for him or herself. In the best Socratic tradition, the teacher usually does this by first disabusing students of their own prejudices. Once students know that they do not know, then they need to be inspired by the teacher's own passionate inquiry to make the effort themselves.



Reflections on the Mission of Providence College

Office of Mission & Ministry

Teaching and learning is therefore fundamentally a collaborative endeavor: the teacher cannot teach if the learner does not learn, and the learner cannot learn if the teacher does not teach. They need each other's complementary activity to engage in their own proper activity.

Aquinas then turns to students in the third part of his lecture and says that the first quality of a good student is humility. Now humility is not a popular virtue in our day, yet it lies at the heart of the Christian life in general and education in particular. Humility is the virtue that enables us to accept the truth of our own condition, including its cognitive limitations. In students, humility is the realization of where one is ignorant and the openness to listen to another with a different point of view in order to be pointed towards the truth. It is the precondition for the wonder that Aristotle understood to be at the root of human inquiry. Aquinas quotes Proverbs 11:2: *Where there is humility, there is wisdom.* Wisdom begins with humility.

Aquinas makes it clear, however, that humility is not uncritical passivity. Aquinas admonishes students that they need to assess critically what they hear. He himself was a man willing to ask uncomfortable questions and weigh competing arguments. The worst kind of learning is the passive regurgitation of what has been reported by the professor. Students have to ask questions, compare diverse claims, weigh the evidence for themselves, and arrive at their own conclusions. As Aquinas goes on to say, they must be fertile like the earth, able to discover new things for themselves on the basis of what they have learned. Precisely because it is God who promises to fill the earth, students should be optimistic that their capacity to know will be fulfilled. They will know that this is so when they are able to explain to others how things fit together as a whole. In this lies wisdom.

Those of us involved in Dominican education constantly face the challenge of articulating what it is that is distinctive about our tradition as opposed to the Jesuit tradition. I would propose that the answer to that question lies in what we have talked about today. Dominican education should above all else seek to cultivate students who are contemplatives. I know this is a counter-intuitive and counter-cultural claim; I do not expect the marketing people of the college to make this our new slogan on the web site. Yet it expresses the core conviction of the Catholic and Dominican educational ideal: both faith and reason are a means to contemplation of truth about God, and it is precisely for the contemplation of truth that we were made; in grasping this truth about truth-seeking, we come to know who we are as human beings created in the image and likeness of God. If knowledge of truth is the purpose for which we are created and our ultimate end in the beatific vision, then it is vital for our students to come to understand the contemplative vocation as the heart of life. In a world where human identity is in danger of being reduced to social or commercial value, and the role of education correlatively rethought in instrumental or market-place terms, it is a prophetic educational message to assert that the ultimate goal of education is contemplative wisdom. In educating our students to lead contemplative lives we are at the same time educating them to make good choices: it is not possible to know what is worth choosing, and even dying for, apart from an appreciation of the truth of the whole. Moreover, no one who thinks about the truth of the whole can keep it to him or herself. That is why another motto of the Dominican order is *contemplare et aliis tradere* -- to contemplate and to give to others the fruits of contemplation. In educating our students to be contemplatives, we are educating them to be prophetic agents of social change. The most powerful force for transforming both self and society is the contemplation of truth.

Let me conclude, as Aquinas does, with one last question: How do we realize what we have been talking about? Aquinas's answer, not surprisingly, is the grace of God. In recognition of this we began the formal part of the inauguration ceremonies in St. Dominic chapel with a prayer service. Our chapel is nestled in the midst of residence halls, classrooms, and the library. It is not a luxury: it is the place where we make the ultimate connection between what we learn and how we live. It is where our contemplative gaze finds its clearest focus and its deepest illumination. If we are to become who God calls us to be as teachers and students of contemplative truth, then we must rely on the providence of God to guide our communal activity. In formally assuming the office of president this day, I am keenly aware that I am a minister of divine providence. As unworthy as I am, I conclude by making Aquinas's final inaugural words my own: *However, although no one is adequate for this ministry by himself and from his own resources, he can hope that God will make him adequate. "Not that we are capable of a single thought of our own resources, as if it came from us, but our adequacy is from God (2 Cor. 3:5). So the teacher [and the president] should ask God for it. "If people lack wisdom, they beg for it from God and it will be given them" (James 1:5). May Christ grant this to us. Amen.*