



PROGRAMMA

A Newsletter for Graduates of the Program of Liberal Studies

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The View from 318

Greetings from the Program -- its faculty, its students and staff (Mrs. Mary Etta Rees) -- in this New Year! It has been a very full and lively year in and around 318.

The return address on Programma has already informed you that the Program did change its name. A simple change of dropping the word "General" was finally seen as most desirable, since it was helpful in avoiding misunderstandings of the Program by misassociation and in maintaining continuity with the strong academic and personal tradition in education which the Program has represented at Notre Dame for the past thirty-two years. On the very occasion of changing the name, the faculty indicated that the change did not signify any departure at all from the traditions and characteristic emphases that have made the Program so successful a liberal educator. The logo you saw on the cover was designed by Richard Houghton, a junior in the Program, to mark the initiation of the new name. It was selected by the faculty from a number of proposals made by students, faculty and friends of the Program. The septilateral figure represents the traditional seven liberal arts of the trivium (logic, grammar and rhetoric) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy.) The liberal arts are the Program's approaches to the circle of knowledge, unified and unbroken. At the center of the Program's effort are the Great Books, the primary sources upon which the liberal arts are practiced and in and through which genuine learning can be attained.

Within a couple of days of this writing (provided that the snows and cold abate), the second term will begin with about 135 students in the course of study provided by the Program. There are approximately fifty students in each of the sophomore and junior classes. This academic year began for the faculty with a workshop in the third week of August on ways of developing better writing abilities in the students. Professor Stephen Rogers directed the workshop, and it was made possible through funds a number of you had designated for the Program during the Campaign for Notre Dame. I think the faculty all discovered some aids toward their own efforts at effective writing, and I must report that the workshop was spiced with some healthy metaphysical confrontations that for a time gave rise to a continuing discussion group known as the local Metaphysical Society. Plans are taking shape for another workshop next summer, and it is likely to focus on mathematics and its role in a liberal arts education.

During the autumn we welcomed Father Nicholas Ayo to our faculty; you can read more about him later in this issue. In December we welcomed Professor Otto Bird when he returned to lecture on his current work on Pascal. Earlier in the

term we heard that Cities Services Company had funded an initial round of a premiere lecture series on liberal education which the Program will sponsor and see to publication as a book.

Certain special achievements by the faculty will interest many of you. Professor John Lyon and Professor Phillip Sloan saw much of their scholarship on the French naturalist Buffon become public with the appearance of the book, From the Natural History to The History of Nature. Professor Michael Crowe had an article on the "Moon Hoax" of 1835 appear in the well-known monthly, Sky and Telescope, and Professor David Schindler has been appointed chief editor of Communio, the international Catholic quarterly. This writer seemed to receive passing grades from the faculty and administration, and consequently will serve a second term as chairman.

In an especially encouraging action, the University's President, Father Hesburgh, and the Provost, Professor Timothy O'Meara, have chosen to locate in the Program the John J. Cavanaugh Chair in the Humanities. We are already launched upon a search as uncharacteristic for the Program as it has generally been for Notre Dame. We are seeking to make a distinguished senior appointment fully in accord with the best traditions of the Program. We welcome your suggestions, your support and your prayers in the endeavor and in all the Program's efforts toward vital Catholic liberal education.

Walter Nicgorski
Chairman

Programma (the Greek word meaning "public notice") is published toward the end of each academic semester by the Program of Liberal Studies for its graduates.

Faculty Editor:

Phillip Sloan

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University of Notre Dame

Welcoming Father Nicholas Ayo, C.S.C.

We are fortunate to have join us this year on a visiting appointment Father Nicholas Ayo, who is returning to teaching after several years as Novitiate director for the Holy Cross Fathers. Prior to that, Father Ayo taught literature and theology at the University of Portland. By this point he has been seasoned by teaching in the Sophomore Seminar and Drama courses. He has given us the following personal introduction. (PRS)

Thirty years ago I can remember leaving a New York Central train to Chicago at the downtown South Bend station, taking a taxi to the University, and watching the golden dome grow larger in the windshield, as freshman-me approached along Notre Dame Avenue. I came back here to teach in August of 1981 on those same rails, this time on an Amtrak train that stopped on the outskirts of town; the taxi ride up Notre Dame Avenue, however, was a perfect déjà-vu. When I was a sophomore at Notre Dame, Father Hesburgh became president and I a candidate for the Congregation of Holy Cross. There was no causal connection. After graduation from Notre Dame, I left Moreau Seminary, now St. Joseph's Hall, and studied theology at the Gregorian University in Rome (1956-60). Four years of Church life and delightful Italian culture widened Indiana's beginning horizons. After ordination I returned to Notre Dame as a prefect in Breen-Phillips Hall --- all male and lights out at 11:00 P.M. I studied for a Masters Degree in English and wrote a small thesis on Orestes Brownson, the Newman of Pioneer America. In 1965 I finished my doctoral studies in American literature at Duke University in North Carolina. For the next nine years I taught literature and literature-theology courses at the University of Portland in Oregon, a younger sister-school of Notre Dame's Congregation of Holy Cross. Campus Ministry and dormitory life were my parish; the classroom seemed all discovery.

In 1974 I was asked to act as director of Holy Cross Novitiate, a one-year program that introduces candidates to their first and most intense exposure to the religious life. For four years in Bennington, Vermont and two years in Cascade, Colorado I lived with novice candidates, most of them studying also for the priesthood. Classroom was not the principal source of education; we lived together, prayed together, worked together, socialized together. These years were enormously satisfying and demanding. What fatherhood called for stands out in my memory of those years.

My approach to the "General Program" was in part an error. I had discovered they were looking for two teachers, though when I actually applied these positions had already been filled, unknown to me far from Notre Dame. My background, I thought, was hand-in-glove for a Great Books program. As an undergraduate I had majored in philosophy, then studied theology, followed by literature. Moreover, the novitiate years made me sensitive to education as to much more than the classroom. I was hopeful to educate where there was community, good verbal sharing, and especially where faith involvement and theological insights were integral to the study at hand and to life at large.

When I finished my novitiate tour of duty, I was given a sabbatical year by my religious community. I spent some time in Berkeley, a month in a rural Jersey parish, a few more months in Princeton. The summer preceding my arrival at Notre Dame I devoted to learning the ways of the Great Books Program at St. John's in Annapolis.

If I had to give a personal reason for finally deciding to accept an offer as visiting professor, it would be a few days spent in the company of former Portland University students of mine, many now in their thirties surrounded by their not so little children. What they told me of their lives, their continued search for wisdom and for God's grace, their efforts at Christian family life and human community among an extended family of families, the utter crucial dimension of their college years and college decisions convinced me, as I never was when I taught them, that a University can do a staggering amount of good for persons, for the Church and the world, the city of God and city of man.

If I had to give a "political" reason I would say that I believe the Catholic Church offers God's grace to the world; I believe that the United States has an important place in history and in the Church of these days; I believe that Notre Dame is important to the country and to the Church world-wide; I think that the Congregation of Holy Cross has a crucial role to play at Notre Dame, not as the exclusive source of its Catholicity, but as a principal source of the continuity of that religious dedication. I thought I was in a position to make a small contribution to Notre Dame's on-going effort to be University and to be Catholic.

If I had to give a providential reason, I would say that I am gifted by God with a hunger for learning, a desire to approach God under the title of the "Truth" and the "Life," a long love-affair with Wisdom. To ponder humanity in its manifestations and its interactions with grace and God's ways is what I do with most of my time. I hope I can do it well enough to belong in front of students as promising as those I have already met. My hope is to enjoy, not only these good students, but also all those books, many of which I read long ago or not at all. I hope to write again.

In the teaching of this semester I have had classes at the end of which I wanted to cheer, and sometimes to cry. I have felt inadequate with Plato's Republic and overconfident with Dante's Inferno in a language and theology I knew all too well. Most of all I have felt the excitement of learning, at middle-age no less, and the joy of helping others comprehend subjects I care about.

My approach to the campus borrows from my Portland days; I am still convinced that living with students in the dorm gives a privileged access to their lives. In my situation, it keeps me young; it puts some tang in the metaphors I choose in class discussion. There's a solidarity that I hope amounts to a witness.

Having been responsible for a Program, its budget and purpose, in the novitiate, I have wanted to be a support to the faculty of this department. What we are, who we are, how we treat each other, how we help each other affects the students in many ways. I know this from experience. The faculty in the Program has a strong, kind, Catholic, and student-caring esprit de corps. My hope is to be a contributor to the overall wisdom and goodness of this unique education at Notre Dame.

Nicholas Ayo, C.S.C.

Editor's Desk

As new editor of Programma, I wish to take this opportunity to give our readership a regular insight into the continuing dialogue among the faculty of the Program as it is manifest through the regular faculty lectures and monthly faculty seminars. If interest and opportunity arise, I will continue to report on the texts discussed by the faculty in our seminars, with possible round-table discussion by interested faculty. Your comments on these discussions will be very much appreciated by all involved.

The topic of our October faculty seminar seems particularly appropriate for an initiation of this column. As a group we met and discussed Christopher Derrick's Escape from Scepticism: Liberal Education as if Truth Mattered (La Salle, Ill.: Sherwood Sugden and Company, 1977, pp.112).

Christopher Derrick is an English Catholic literary critic and author, a former pupil of C.S. Lewis, a one-time RAF pilot, and most of all one interested in resolving some of the paradoxes of modern education in general, and liberal arts education in particular.

Derrick's short and highly readable essay grew out of a visit he made to St. Thomas Aquinas College in Calabasa, California, a small Dominican college of approximately 200 students which is organized around an all-required Great Books curriculum. From his remarks, Derrick indicates he had for many years been envisioning an ideal approach to liberal education that would avoid the unstructured character of the elective system, and would reintegrate faith and learning. As a criticism of the ills of much of contemporary liberal education, Derrick's book engendered little argument among the faculty.

In its most fundamental thrust, Derrick's analysis of the problem of contemporary liberal education reduced to an epistemological and ontological critique of the assumptions behind liberal arts education as it is typically encountered in America and England. As he interprets this, the difficulty in finding any central purpose and coherence in liberal education stems from the reigning epistemological scepticism he finds in reigning academic circles concerning the possibility of answers to any of the "great questions" of philosophy, theology, or liberal learning generally. The consequence of this is the elective system and a final relativising of values and an indecisiveness of intellectual inquiry. The liberal arts student often emerges in the end either frustrated or even nihilistic.

Derrick's solution to the problem is both epistemological and theological. For liberal education to achieve a desired focus and coherence, two key principles must be recognized. First, he feels there is need to reaffirm a fundamental epistemological realism, meaning that at least some things can be known by reason with certainty. This would require a rejection of the tendency of modern philosophy since the seventeenth century. Secondly, he feels that a cohesive "dogmatism" is necessary, meaning that certain antecedent truths must be accepted as authoritative, and these must give some direction to intellectual inquiry. At St. Thomas, with its Great Books program organized under the strong guidance of a Scholastic Thomism, Derrick feels something very close to the ideal he envisions has been achieved. Not only does the education seem to have direction, but on a practical level, the students seem deeply satisfied, well-behaved, and industrious.

These are, of course, the most controversial dimensions of Derrick's essay, not only because of what is argued, but also because of the often polemical nature of the way Derrick argues his case. Derrick has a penchant for painting stark contrasts, with little room in between his polar oppositions. At the same time, he focuses directly on the problem that at least in some contexts, the concept of academic freedom, as a commonly prized value in American higher education, is based on the same epistemological scepticism he sees as the central problem. Consequently, in a Catholic college, where these assumptions are presumably not operative, dogmatic truths must at some point guide inquiry, not in a rigid and heavy handed form of censorship and indexing, but rather in a more gentle framework in which answers to the "great questions" can be presumed, and hence at some point must limit some possible lines in enquiry.

Given the short and reflective nature of the essay, there were many points on which the faculty would have wished to find more development and argument. Personally, I found his arguments too easy, in that his overly-simple contrasts between truth and falsehood, "common-sense realism" and modern scepticism, faith and pseudo-faith failed to take into account any of the serious debates over ecclesiology, authority and historical consciousness that have been made issues of genuine and honest disagreement between committed Catholics. The issues raised by this essay were, however, timely and demanded of us all deeper reflection on the questions. Fortunately, but in a remarkably relevant way, we encountered this essay while a larger forum on the Catholic character of Notre Dame was the subject of a general faculty forum on campus sponsored by the Faculty Senate. The question raised by that larger forum was whether a great Catholic University was one in which inquiry, subject matter and discussion was to take place in a medium which is more than nominally committed to the concept of authoritative teaching and active religious belief, or if it was to mean that Notre Dame was to assume its place among the great American research universities in a way in which an open dialogue with both religious and secular intellectual culture takes place in the great tradition of the encounters of Church and World in Hellenistic Rome, the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, and finally in our own age. Derrick's essay was particularly helpful in directing these concerns to the Great Books concept of liberal education.

The essays that follow have been submitted by faculty who had the time and interest to respond to my call. While not a complete forum, they do give a rather good cross-section of the range of opinions that emerged from the discussion. Contributions from two of our new faculty will open the discussion, followed by two comments by those who have been in the Program longer. A final piece by former chairman, John Lyon, gives us some analysis from the ranks of the senior faculty.

- - Phillip Sloan

Escape from Scepticism proposes that liberal education would thrive best in a secure and truth-knowing Catholic environment. Moreover, Christopher Derrick argues well that Catholic education demands a Catholic milieu for its success. On the small campus of newly founded St. Thomas Aquinas College (Callabasas, California) the integration of Dining Hall, Library and Chapel provides an intense and select ambience where Catholic moral and intellectual virtues may be absorbed. In such a special Catholic environment, a basic liberal education can be pursued without too much dilution of its values by the opposite culture of the non-believing world.

Derrick's thesis is not unknown. Monasteries remain special locations for the pursuit of Christian virtue and learning; seminaries are special schools for the pursuit of ministry formation and theological education. Both institutions attest to the effectiveness of selective and exclusive environments. Even though the seminarian will finally exercise his ministry in the world, it is argued that the seed receives a better initial root system in a greenhouse. I hardly quarrel with this theory, and I believe we need colleges that offer small and select Catholic environments. Nonetheless, we do not say that the majority of men and women should be monks in order to lead a genuine life of Christian prayer and dedication, nor do we say that the future priest is best prepared for ministry in actual isolation from the world, its problems and concerns, its immediate joys and sorrows. Jesus was born in a stable, right in the midst of a disappointing world. From that day hence no merely secular and enemy world opposes us. Grace bears upon everyone and everything, and sin, while not absent, has been finally overcome. The world is redeemed and redeemable. "God so loved the world that He sent His only Son."

It would be naive to presume that the world, graced as it is, is not also a place of enormous evil, often the enemy and not the friend of God. It would be equally naive to presume that the monastery school outside the world, graced as it is, remains without sin, or that the students and faculty are automatically free of blindness.

The Church is a balanced body, made up of monk, priest, and overwhelmingly of lay people -- good, bad, and indifferent. The Church is in the world, yet not of the world. The Christian community makes up a special body, without blemish or wrinkle. It is also the leaven in the dough, plunged into the world's history, knowing its weight and secretly raising the mass up to divine acceptance. Our Catholic schools are already special environments to the extent we screen the admission of faculty and students alike for their moral values and their truth devotion. St. Thomas Aquinas College uses a finer screen, I suspect, than a more cosmopolitan school like Notre Dame University. The smaller school thereby collects a more homogenous and less representative population. While Notre Dame offers a controlled and protected world of its own, it values a wide intellectual questioning and a comprehensive moral searching which Catholics will face in the world and among their fellow Catholics in other places. It is possible that a school like Notre Dame exposes its students to too many problems of mind and life too soon. It is possible that a school like St. Thomas Aquinas allows the world to enter on its own terms too little and too late for the best educational development of its graduates. "Ripeness is all," says Shakespeare. Timing in education remains of the essence. Perhaps schools need constantly to assess their faculty and students. At what stage of life do they enter, what is the

next step for them, is the select environment of any school too inclusive or too exclusive, are the teachers in particular devoted to love, service of others, and the truth? Do we teach a whole way of life by the whole campus community way of life. Are we graced sinners who want not merely words, nor just a history of ideas, nor only job skills, but wisdom, faith, beauty, goodness -- the face of the living God on the Veronica cloth of this crazy and ecstatic world which is now and forever irrevocably the body of Jesus Christ. Escape from Scepticism is a good reminder for all of us of these perennial and deeply cherished truths.

Janet E. Smith

As for Mary, she treasured these things and pondered them in her heart. (Luke 2:21)

Treasuring, reverencing, worshipping: from Derrick's description of St. Thomas Aquinas College in California, one senses that these attitudes are characteristic of the students there and ones which, I think ought also to be characteristic of Notre Dame students. We ought to follow Mary, our patroness, who faithfully treasured the words and deeds of Christ in her heart. One of Professor Cronin's remarks at a recent faculty discussion of Derrick's text reminded me of Mary's acceptance of Christ. After he observed that academics frequently behave as though the only way to arrive at an understanding of truth is through questioning, he pointed out that the Catholic Faith teaches us that sometimes one can gain greater understanding through acceptance and reverential contemplation or meditation. Professor Cronin explained this receptive attitude of faith by suggesting that the best way for a husband to come to understand his wife is simply to love and accept her. This point further reminded me of a friend of mine who always denied that love is blind; he argued that love sees, that is, that the lover sees the beauties to which the non-lover remains blind. In the same way an accepting faith leads one to see the truths which remain obscure to the non-believer. Questioning, in these cases, may lead one astray, whereas acceptance would foster understanding.

Questioning, in a sense, may even be inappropriate for the doctrines of the Church which are solely truths of revelation and thus by definition not accessible to the natural light of man's reason. St. Thomas counsels us that truths of revelation will never be contrary to reason, but, nonetheless, as mysteries, are beyond the grasp of man's reason. We can point to the source of revealed doctrine, make a case for the need for revelation, and seek to understand revealed doctrine better, but we cannot supply for every teaching the rational proof which most questioning seeks. We often forget as well that the teachings of Faith, if St. Thomas is right, are more certain than discoveries of reason. Yet is the presentation of Catholic teachings here at Notre Dame consistent with the understanding of the status of revealed truth stated above? Indeed, I think that Catholic truth is often neglected if not subjected to worse treatment. Particularly distressing, I find, is the fact that non-Catholic thought, for instance, Oriental religious thought, sometimes meets with extremely reverential treatment, whereas some Catholic positions often meet with belittling and even open mockery. These reflections raise the question: how much and what kind of questioning of Catholic teaching is appropriate at Catholic schools?

One of the foremost objections to the educational program at St. Thomas is that the use of an ultimate authority for truth, and the very attitude of reverence which I praise here, works against a most effective teaching tool--the natural scepticism of the young; some say that it is precisely the ability to wonder and to question intelligently which education depends upon and even wishes to foster. And surely such an argument has much strength. Yet I suspect that the students at St. Thomas Aquinas College are not totally docile and unquestioning. Indeed, the teachings of the Church might be said to raise nearly as many questions as they answer: for instance, how does a given teaching affect my life, and how does it agree with or conflict with modern views and/or the views of great thinkers? The question "Is the teaching true?", a question bound to demand the attention of non-believers almost exclusively, has been decided beforehand by those who recognize the Church's authority to proclaim truth. Therefore, the questioning done at St. Thomas Aquinas College would be that which seeks clarification of a doctrine more than it seeks proof or refutation.

Yet the educational program at St. Thomas Aquinas College is not for everyone, nor even, I believe, for every Catholic. For although I, with Derrick, believe that every true Catholic holds to all the teachings of the magisterium, I recognize that there are many raised in the Church with varying degrees of commitment to the Church and that many of these are the young. Some young Catholics have made a commitment to the Catholic Faith and wish to use their years of education in large part to refine and strengthen their commitment, not to question its veracity further. These young people would, undoubtedly, be very happy at St. Thomas Aquinas College. Others are in a process of questioning everything, which includes the Catholic Faith passed on to them by their parents. I believe this is the position of the usual Notre Dame student: Furthermore, ~~whereas such students frequently have a desire to believe, they~~ rarely have even a basic grounding in his faith. Thus, one is not certain what he believes nor how strongly he believes whatever he does believe. Unfortunately it often happens that some abandon their Catholic Faith without having much of a notion of what they have abandoned. The character of the Notre Dame student, then, demands a rather different method of teaching Catholic truths from that practised at St. Thomas Aquinas College. Although the teachings of the Catholic Church still should be of the utmost interest, should be given all due respect, and should be presented with the best possible defense, it must be remembered that one speaks with and teaches a committed believer in one way, the sceptical or unconvinced in another. Whereas a dogmatic stance would rightly be taken at St. Thomas Aquinas College, it most likely would be counter-productive at Notre Dame since, as I have pointed out, the Notre Dame student, in general, lacks the knowledgeable and committed faith which respects and feeds on dogmatic proclamation of truth. Although one cannot give faith to another, one can foster an atmosphere conducive to faith. Talk of God and reference to Catholic teaching ought never to be out of place in the classrooms of a Catholic college. When a Catholic teaching bears upon the topic under discussion, the professor should state clearly what the teaching of the Church is and provide, in so far as possible, reasons that the teaching ought to be accepted as true. The professors, of course, cannot insist that the students accept the teaching, but they can and should promote respect for it. In a Great Books program this is easily done since faculty and students are accustomed to treating the views of the wise respectfully and attempting to understand them before moving to critical analysis. Yet, oddly enough, a generally laudable practice, that is the accepting as true only that which is established by reason and the rejecting

of unreasoned assumptions, can work against teaching the truths of faith. The students may tend to confuse the teachings of faith which are beyond reason with unreasoned assumptions. We must teach the students that the usual technique of seeking rational argumentation in support of every position is not always the appropriate approach to revealed truth. And finally, the teacher must work to lead the student to see that sometimes one must accent a truth before one understands it; that one must treasure and ponder the mysteries of faith in order to enjoy the illumination they bring.

Linda Ferguson

"Surely it would be better to keep your mouth shut altogether than to turn the thing into a tragicomedy by interpolating lines from a different play? . . . No, do the best you can to make the present production a success--don't spoil the entire play just because you happen to think of another one that you'd enjoy rather more."

With tongue-in-cheek (we think), a character named More, speaks these lines in Utopia, and with tongue-in-cheek (I think), I cite them, since reading Derrick's Escape from Scepticism produces in me an irresistible urge to think of "Noplacia."

I am hesitant to contribute to this forum, for I risk being taken to represent non-Catholics at Notre Dame, or even non-Catholics in general. I do not speak for others. I represent only myself, and make reference to a very special context: The Program of Liberal Studies.

I approached Derrick's essay with interest, hoping to discover a fresh perspective which would help me better understand my own role at Notre Dame. After all, in general terms, the virtues and principles which Derrick identifies with Thomas Aquinas College (his Utopia) are those which govern our Program. Derrick does allow for me in his ivory tower; indeed, I have more sanction than "nominal" Catholics: "I am not suggesting that there is no place at all in the Catholic college for the Protestant or Jewish instructor, or even the atheist, so long as he is known and recognized to be such and is prepared to co-operate with the college's distinctive purpose" (p. 85). But it not clear from the text why we are allowed. In fact it seems to be an oversight, a loophole, in an otherwise consistent (albeit narrow) position.

Perhaps my presence here has, on occasion offered support to a lonely Protestant student, as it has perhaps comforted women students. But surely this function of representing minorities must be incidental. And I have not chosen a "gadfly" role for myself, nor do I delight in "interpolating lines from a different play." The "present production" is a success, and I do enjoy it. Yet I believe my presence can work positively and distinctly to prevent the smugness, the overwhelming sense of stasis, the complacency of "having arrived," that characterize Derrick's essay.

Derrick criticizes the broad ideal, which allegedly governs other institutions, as having a great weakness: ". . . that it presupposes a general consensus about human values, a general agreement about what kind of man or woman one would ideally wish to be; and while we know from history that such a consensus or agreement can exist, . . . we also know from experience that nothing of the sort exists in the present society" (p. 13). For Derrick "liberal education" in its traditional and truest sense can flourish only within the cloistered confines of "the Catholic college" which he defines so strictly and narrowly and which he perceives Thomas Aquinas to exemplify. But the "weakness" he cites is the presumed lack of consensus about human values in our contemporary pluralistic life. Our Program, as a society of faculty, students and alumni, is diverse, and my own contribution to that diversity is considerable. Yet as a "society" we seem to be in "general agreement about what kind of man or woman one would ideally wish to be." I also believe that, as a non-Catholic in a Catholic institution, I am "prepared to co-operate with the college's distinctive purpose" (supra), insofar as I understand it. I would assert that my seminars are not morally neutral, that we do examine questions of value head-on and in the terms of life rather than of academic argument on self-congratulation. I would also speculate that whatever bad things I might be responsible for, my teaching has probably not caused Catholic students to turn from the Church.

It seems then, that Derrick's opinion of what is possible and desirable differs from mine only in strictness of definition. A broader definition and application of such terms as "Catholicism," "liberal education," and "consensus about human values" bodes more fruitful, not only because that broadness justifies my own position, but because it cultivates the active spirits of inquiry, dialogue, and "real-life" application beyond the confines of the institution.

If someone, from within or without, should happen to write of what we do here, in the Program of Liberal Studies, I hope that he will note that we strive to meet the model Derrick celebrates. But I hope that the writer who tells our story will do so in a more liberal and less antagonizing manner. I hope that he will mention that we sometimes disagree, that we sometimes make mistakes---practical ones, informational ones, pedagogical ones, perhaps, even moral ones. He should note that occasionally we bore our students and that sometimes they bore us, despite the general exertion, involvement, and goodwill in evidence on all sides of the seminar table. But the writer who describes us, whether champion or detractor, will have to conclude that we are, as a society, engaged in the dynamic process of seeking to "do better," and that our search is illuminated by the vision of a good life, by the model of Christian values. But we are not a Utopia; on the contrary, we are "Some Place."

Christopher Derrick's Escape from Scepticism engages issues which cannot but be of serious concern to past and present students and colleagues in the Program of Liberal Studies. The theme of the book is suggested in its subtitle, "Education as if Truth Mattered." In the book, Derrick defends three principles that he takes to be the foundation of any liberal education which would meet the intention of this subtitle. (1) Liberal education must be dogmatic (p. 55). In relation to the current tendency to absolutize academic freedom, a tendency linked with skepticism and relativism, Derrick urges a realistic and rationalistic epistemology. The truth can be known, and it ought to be taught: this is the basis of any education which would be genuinely liberating, hence liberal. (2) The Roman Catholic faith is the only sound basis for such a liberal education (p. 64). And (3) the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas, though not essential, is the most adequate guide in terms of systematizing the Roman Catholic faith (p. 69).

I find Derrick's book profoundly disappointing, and I do so precisely because I share his concerns regarding contemporary trends in (liberal) education. I find myself in the situation of crying out for protection from an apparent friend. Quite simply, Derrick makes a very bad case for principles which, when properly qualified, could be rationally defended. Instead of argument Derrick offers us a string of simplistic alternatives. Need any (every) qualification in terms of our ability to know the truth lead to fundamental scepticism? Does freedom of inquiry in liberal education have any intrinsic worth? Are there not legitimate ways of questioning one's Catholic faith, i.e., while remaining faithfully Catholic? These are all extremely important questions. Derrick does them a disservice when he suggests in his book that they all obviously have just one answer--that is, for anyone who has an interest in defending a sound view of liberal education. This suggestion seems to me merely to manifest an ignorance of the many difficult epistemological and theological issues implied in the questions. What we need, and what Derrick does not give us, is a defense of liberal education which is sensitive to these issues, and helps us to reason through them. In a word, while Derrick does make some telling criticisms of current ideas of education, he unfortunately does so without the care for argument which in my judgment should be the hallmark of any criticisms advanced in the name of the liberal arts.

There is much to rejoice at in Derrick's book. He reminds us, for instance, of the primacy of theology in a Catholic college, and of the rootlessness of liberal education in the absence of religion or a magisterial philosophy such as Marxism. He delights us with the memory--and the vision--of an integrated collegiate life, in which one could move from chapel to library to laboratory to dining hall without suffering aesthetic or intellectual or spiritual shock. He is no invertebrate educational salesman, soft-soaping trends in the educational church of-what's happenin'-now. His castigation of "pop" and "rock" music, with their dominant theme of erotic self-pity, as symptomatic of the failure of liberal arts education to leaven the cultural lump is most welcome. Though it is not too pleasant to be reminded of our contemporary trahison des clercs, we nevertheless are grateful to him for reminding us of the characteristic schizophrenia of American Catholicism and American Catholic higher education, that is, the desire to conform both to the dominant values of American society and to the Spirit of the revelation which is Christ. And there is much more to be thankful for in the book.

Perhaps the most significant feature about Derrick's book is his realism. He reminds us that the object of our inquiry is reality, or truth, not ideas about reality or truth. We educate in the liberal arts "as if truth mattered." And we say "Amen" to his sermon. But there is also much in the work that falls short of our hopes for it.

The most significant shortcoming of the book is its naive realism, its too-ready identification of words and things, a sort of literate literalness that verges on verbal idolatry. When we use ordinary language, or other symbolic means of communication, it is not only the case that the symbol has a dual reference (that is, it is itself both a symbol embedded in a system of symbols and also a reference to the reality signified). It is also the case that the symbol is the place at which mind and world intersect. The reality beyond the symbol (the thing, the world) and the reality before the symbol (mind, person) both somehow inhere in the symbol, which is itself part of a system of symbols which has had and continues to have participation in both the referent (the world) and the subject (the mind and its images) of the discourse of which it is a part.

Derrick regularly seems to underplay the inescapably participatory role of mind in the constitution of symbols, symbolic discourse, and meaning, just as he regularly turns his attention from the whole question of meaning, while concentrating on symbols. He also pointedly attacks "fundamental" or absolute scepticism as the enemy of liberal education. But fundamental scepticism is and has been self-refuting since its appearance. It is a bogus issue, a strawman for him to blow down. The real issue is relative scepticism, and the relation between it and liberal education. That issue he avoids.

For all the joy it brings to those of us in the Catholic tradition engaged in education in the liberal arts via the "great books," Derrick's work has the somewhat bitter aftertaste characteristic of a certain pretentiously magisterial polemic style. He appears to lack the humility of that Augustinian cry which might so aptly be the regular prayer of Christian academics: "O Lord, I believe: do Thou aid my disbelief."