

Building the Ark

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GRADUATION DAY provides an opportunity to honour and congratulate the Priory Institute on the unique service that it provides in Ireland, facilitating distance learning for significant numbers of people around the country who might not otherwise have access to theological learning. I admire what the Dominicans have done in this institute. They have built on the rich resources and tradition of scholarship that was part of the Dominican *studium* here in Tallaght for generations. This includes eminent scholars, a fine library, a sense of continuity and stability, and an environment of prayer and reflection, all of which are important in cultivating the theological enterprise. Nor were all the gems confined to Tallaght. In fact they have reached out to the network of Dominican priories around the country, each with its own unique gifts, and brought them into a collaborative effort to deliver the programmes in a distance learning mode.

Nor have they confined their collaboration to the Dominican friaries: they have engaged a cohort of other theologians, teachers and tutors across the country to work with them in the delivery of a high quality programme. Thus an important network of learning and reflection is being put in place that needs to be capitalised on by the Church as a whole. They have created an important resource that can be a significant antidote to much that is negative and defeatist in our country today.

We talk today of a postmodern culture that is fragmented, narcissistic

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This article is an edited form of his address at the Priory Institute, Tallaght, at a ceremony on 13 November 2010, when 37 students – all part-time – were conferred with the B.Th. degree of the University of Wales, Trinity St David, in respect of their studies at the Institute. This was the first degree conferring in the ten-year history of the Institute. On the same occasion 40 other students received certificates and diplomas.

and pessimistic, where the emphasis is on the individual and his or her experience as the only measure of value or meaning; where subjectivism and relativism mark so many human enterprises. We need only listen to the radio any morning or evening and we are assailed by all those attitudes and approaches, only to find further evidence for how such mindsets led us into the mess in which we are now mired. There is little point in denying or lamenting the fact that this is where we find ourselves and least of all as Christians can we succumb to that temptation. We have to acknowledge the reality of the situation and explore the resources at our disposal to move us forward in hope and confidence.

PARTNERSHIP

Unfortunately, it seems to take a crisis to bring people together and to get them to set aside their more selfish aspirations and desires. It is often in the course of war or its aftermath or some other national disaster that people rediscover their dependence on one another. They realise that it is only in partnership that they can rebuild their lives and security. Alone they can do little; together they can rebuild nations. Perhaps our current economic crisis is presenting us as a nation with a moment of opportunity to re-examine the vision and values that have guided us over the past ten or fifteen years.

The Chief Rabbi in Great Britain, Jonathan Sacks, has probably explored this theme of the common good and the rebuilding of society more convincingly than most commentators. In one of his books, *The Home We Build Together*,¹ he draws attention to the book of Exodus, a book which tells of the most important events in the history of the Jewish people: the liberation of a people from slavery, the dramatic interventions by God on their behalf, the plagues, the crossing of the Red Sea and the trek across the desert, the miracles of manna and water from the rock, the appearance of God among them and the handing over of the ten commandments, and so much more. Yet, a third of the book of Exodus is taken up with what appears like a relatively trivial or incidental episode, told in great detail, namely, the making of the Tabernacle where the Ark of the Covenant was to be housed.

Why did this episode command so much attention? In Sacks' view, it was the fact that the people had to work together in its construction. He says:

It was built out of difference and diversity ... Each Israelite brought his or her own distinctive contribution. Some brought gold, others silver, others bronze. Some gave jewels, others animal skins, and others drapes. Some gave of their skills and time ... The Tabernacle was built out of the differential contributions of the various groups and tribes. It represented orchestrated diversity.²

When God commanded them to build the Tabernacle he was in effect saying: to turn this group of individuals into a nation, they must do something together. A nation is made by the contributions of all its citizens, each making a contribution according to her or his capacity. It is by engaging together in a constructive enterprise that a new society is shaped and formed. The Tabernacle simply provided the project.

In many ways the project that has been undertaken by the Priory Institute is not dissimilar, nor is, indeed, the project in which you as graduates might be involved as you return home after this celebration. The Institute here has not lamented the changes that have occurred in Church and the wider society, rather they have seized the opportunity to reach out into a very busy and fragmented world and offered a resource to people who might not be readily able to travel to college several times a week to attend lectures. They have managed to network a team of more than fifty people, theologians and others, who can cooperate on a very demanding enterprise to make the wisdom of the Christian tradition available as extensively, expertly and conveniently as possible. Several theologians have had to write the texts for the modules; others have had to review them; lecturers and tutors have had to engage on-line, by phone and in local gatherings with students; administrators and facilitators in regional venues have had to attend to the various needs of the participants and coordinate a rich learning experience. All told, it is a very demanding, cooperative enterprise. Yet it models what is possible in response to a very changed social, ecclesial and edu-

1. London: Continuum, 2007

2. Ibid. 138

cational environment. The Moderator, Joe Kavanagh, the Director of Distance Learning, John Littleton, and all the staff involved in this can be genuinely proud today of their efforts as they see almost 80 people acknowledged and rewarded by the University of Wales, Trinity St David for the excellence of their academic achievements.

Since I have been the external examiner for the awards being conferred today, I can personally vouch for the very high standard of work done by both staff and students. I was impressed by the quality and standard of the courses delivered, by the quality of the papers written by the students and by the very comprehensive way in which feedback and encouragement was given to all the participants over the duration of the programmes.

ADULT LEARNING

A phrase that came into vogue some years ago is 'the life-long learner'. It acknowledges the fact that we are never too old to learn and indeed that the rate of change, as well as the enormous expansion of knowledge, demand that we continue to engage with our world as learners at every stage of life. Most undergraduate programmes in all third level institutions now have a significant percentage of adult learners and this is especially true of the humanities. Indeed, the humanities are particularly suited to the adult learner because they have so much life-experience to bring into conversation with the wider wisdom and knowledge available in the university. They have a sense of the extent of the range of knowledge, of how much they both know and don't know, and also of how various branches of knowledge are interdependent and inform one another.

It was this kind of awareness that informed Cardinal Newman as he justified the inclusion of theology in the university as an essential subject for study. He said:

If the various branches of knowledge, which are the matter of teaching in a university, so hang together that none can be neglected without prejudice to the perfection of the rest, and if theology is a branch of knowledge, of philosophical structure, of unutterable importance, and of supreme influence, to what conclusion are we

brought ... but this: that to withdraw theology from the public schools is to impair the completeness and to invalidate the trustworthiness of all that is actually taught in them.³

Obviously, you have not had the chance to study other subjects or disciplines in the programmes that you have been following at the Priory Institute. Nevertheless, as adult learners you are bringing so much more from the university of life to bear on your study of theology and from your theology to bear on what you already know that something of the idea to which Newman aspired is in fact realised in your own learning.

FORMING 'MULTIPLIERS'

While you have inevitably been enriched by your studies, the gift that you have received is not a treasure to be hidden under the bushel. Some year ago, the then Superior General of the Jesuits, Fr Kolvenbach, addressing Jesuits who were teaching in universities, told them that they were involved in the 'formation of multipliers'. In other words, the effects of their work bore fruit far beyond those whom they taught. You as graduates are the multipliers not isolated scholars. Part of your challenge now is to begin to inform all of those other areas of life and activity with something of the vision of the Kingdom of God that you have reflected upon over the past number of years. This may happen in your family, in your place of work, in your local parish or community. In that way the work you have done to date will have a multiplier effect in the wider society.

Two things will be necessary, however, if this is to be realised. The first is to remain a life-long learner, to continue to read and reflect on the Scriptures and theological works. In this way you will continue to be able to harvest the fruits of your contemplation. The second, is just as important, to try to form networks among yourselves and other graduates of theology so as to keep the theological conversation alive. It was with the contributions of each individual with her or his gifts, varied as they were, that the people of Israel built the Tabernacle and were formed as a people who could make a difference, who could be

3, *The Idea of a University* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1959), 102

the people through whom God realised the divine plan. God still depends on human agents for the realisation of the Kingdom among us.

Across the country today there are at least 1,000 people studying theology. This has been the case for a good number of years, so that now there are thousands of theology graduates located all around the country, often unaware of one another or unknown to their parishes or communities. So, this is an enormous resource being built up in the Church. Unfortunately, Church leadership at diocesan or parish level is not always aware of this nor availing of this potential as actively as one might hope. All of our parish workers and volunteers, whether in pastoral councils, as members of liturgy groups or pastoral groups, or engaged in other ministries, all need some basic theological formation if they are to be effective ministers.

HOPE FOR A BROKEN WORLD

Equally, there is need for a theological perspective to be brought to bear on public life in all its dimensions. The values of the Kingdom need to inform our social, economic and political debates. There is a danger that, as one of Seán O'Casey's characters said, we have such respect for religion that we keep it out of as many things as possible. In fact, were we to allow it to inform more of our public discourse then we may not be in the fearful and pessimistic state in which we now find ourselves. The Christian vision offers hope to a broken world. It shows us that sin, frailty and even death do not have the final word. It show us that truth, goodness, integrity and above all love have the last word and are ultimately to be trusted. And very importantly today, the Christian theologian is able to speak for the transcendent dignity of the human person at a time when his or her economic value or significance is more likely to be articulated.

You have talents at your disposal and a capacity to articulate those Christian ideas and principles. Today's ceremony is a public affirmation of that fact. My hope for you is that you will share that talent widely and generously in the years ahead. But for today, enjoy the celebration of your achievement and may I wish you success and blessings in your future endeavours.