

“A Final Gladness”

The “Last Lecture” at Georgetown

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“Then each time I have remembered my boyhood and each time I have been glad to come home. But I never found it to be a *final gladness*”.

—Hilaire Belloc, Grizzlebeard, the Old Man, All Hallows Eve, 1902, *The Four Men*.¹

“Every professor of philosophy who is worth his salt writes his own text, a text which is his course, whether he publishes it or not. The text exists in his notes or in his head. If he does not ‘write’ this text down in one way or another, he is not a professor because he has nothing personal to say about his subject”.

—Frederick Wilhelmsen, “The Great Books: Enemies of Wisdom?” *Modern Age*, 1987.²

“The folly of allowing ourselves to delay what we know cannot finally be escaped, is one of the greatest weaknesses, which, in spite of the instruction of moralists, and the remonstrances of reason, prevail to a greater or lesser degree in every mind...”.

—Samuel Johnson, #134, *The Rambler*, Saturday, 19 June 1751.³

L On the occasion of my retiring after thirty-four years in the Government Department, to be invited by students at Georgetown to deliver here a “last lecture” is a distinct honor. Surely Gaston Hall is the most elegant venue of its kind in this capital city.

Recently, I was invited to supper with students from several Latin American countries. As I did not know them all, we made a brief statement about ourselves. Near the end, a young lady from Mexico asked me the question that, I suppose, in a “last lecture”, anyone should ask himself, namely: “What is it that you have to say?” “What have you learned from your students and time here?” This question is but another form of Wilhelmsen’s comment cited at this lecture’s beginning: namely, what does a professor finally have to say about his subject, yes, about *what is?* about being itself?

To answer that question, I return to earlier studies. In 1957, *The Thomist*, the fine journal of the Dominicans over at Catholic University, published my essay entitled: “The Totality of Society: From Justice to Friendship”. This essay reflected on Aquinas’ penetrating insights into this central topic. Both in Aristotle and Aquinas, friendship stands at the core of human and, yes, divine reality. No subject stands closer to the heart of a twenty-year old student than that of the proper meaning and practice of friendship, of how it is gained and of how it is lost. If we get that issue wrong, we will get life itself wrong.

In a semester class of some hundred students, left to individual choice to write on any class topic, almost twenty to thirty percent of students write on this subject as it appears in Aristotle, as it is reflected in their lives. It is a sobering and, yes, exhilarating experience for a

student to realize that the best thing ever said on this abiding topic was spoken, not yesterday afternoon, but twenty five hundred years ago. It is such an experience of intellectual continuity that I want each student, on leaving here, to have in his own soul. Real education is not about “current events” or jobs but about those permanent things of the human spirit, things found best for most of us in obscure ancients like Plato, Aristotle, Thucydides, Cicero, St. John, Augustine, and Aquinas.

At the conclusion of this essay on friendship, in confirmation of its argument, I cited from Chesterton’s book on *Dickens*. This is one of the greatest passages that I have ever read. Its whimsical truth has come back to haunt me in various ways over the years. It contains something transcendent that I here bequeath to each of my students of whatever era. The passage from Chesterton reads as follows:

The hour of absinthe is over. We shall not be much further troubled with the little artists who found Dickens too sane for their sorrows and too clean for their delights. But we have a long way to travel before we get back to what Dickens meant, and the passage is along a rambling English road, a twisting road such as Mr. Pickwick travelled. But here at least is part of what he meant; that comradeship and serious joy are not interludes in our travel; but that rather that our travels are interludes in our comradeship and joy, which through God shall endure forever. The inn does not point to the road; the road points to the inn. And all roads point at last to an ultimate inn, where we shall meet Dickens and all his characters: and when we drink again it shall be from great flagons at the tavern at the end of the world.⁴

I have never quite recovered from that passage. It is a graphic English image of how Isaiah 25 described the mountain of the Lord and how Aquinas explained the meaning of the last entry of the Nicene Creed, that of *vita aeterna*, “eternal life”.

In its own way, the passage is not unmindful of what Socrates hoped that he would do after his death at the hands of the Athenians, that is, to converse with the gods and his immortal friends. Truth exists in conversation, in the Word. Both Socrates and Chesterton are ultimately, I think, about “a final gladness”, about the tavern at the end of the world.

My dissertation, completed here at Georgetown in 1960, was written under Heinrich Rommen. It was entitled “Immortality and the Foundations of Political Philosophy”. Later, with some reflective completion, it was published by the Louisiana State University Press under the title: *Reason, Revelation, and the Foundations of Political Philosophy*. The argument concerns the truth that Chesterton saw in Dickens, that Aristotle and Aquinas saw in friendship, of the New Testament passage in John that tells us that “I no longer called you servants but friends”. The only real immortality is not that of states, corporations, ideas, biological species, or even of stars and universes, but that of human souls and the resurrection that they portend. What is hinted at in the philosophers is completed both in fact and in grace.

Permit me to dwell briefly on the connection of man, cosmos, and the triune God. My first book, *Redeeming the Time*, in 1968, already emphasized the centrality in revelation of the otherness, of the persons within the Godhead. Unlike what Aristotle seemed to imply that “God was lonely”, God, as God, in fact, was not alone. Both Jew and Muslim, for their own reasons, reject this understanding, this revelation that, I think, ultimately opens the final intelligibility of things to us.

God did not need to create the world because He “needed” someone to talk to or to have friends or because he needed or wanted our submission. Yet, personal love and friendship are of His inner divine essence and as persons ours also. The world is not created because of some lack in God. This truth opened a whole new line of thought to me.

To trace this line, I turn to Plato. It took me a long time to warm up to Plato. I was and still am

a confirmed Aristotelian/Thomist. That may be why I was long intrigued by Augustine’s observation in his *Confessions* that the Platonists had the “Word”, but not the “Word made flesh”. In 1996, I wrote an essay in the *American Scholar*, called “The Death of Plato”. Sometimes I think this is my best essay, as I think my semester with students reading Plato together is my best class.

The essence of this essay was that, in his death, Plato, to use a phrase from Josef Pieper, was “in tune with the world”. That is, in some sense, it is all right to die, as Cicero also taught in his treatise “On Old Age”. The only thing that is really serious is not death, but God, as we read in Plato’s *Laws*. All else is unimportant by comparison. This idea was revolutionary to me.

My book, *On the Unseriousness of Human Affairs*, follows from this line of thought. Its title is a quotation from Plato. Human affairs--politics, economics, and culture--have their place. Aristotle had said that “if man were the highest animal, politics would be the highest science”. But he added that, in this universe, beings higher than man exist. As far as we can, he told us in the tenth book of his *Ethics*, we are to devote our lives, not to human or mortal things, but to divine, to the highest things. We can only know a little of these higher things, but it is worth all else. He was quite right. When we read this Aristotelian passage together in a class, I say to the students: “Pay attention”. Some do.

II. A *Peanuts* sequence records Charlie Brown’s little sister Sally’s efforts to avoid going to Kindergarten. Sally finally confesses to Lucy: “Actually, I’m sort of afraid to go to school”. Lucy looks on puzzled. Sally explains: “I hear they ask you a lot of questions, is that true?” Lucy admits: “Yes, I guess so...why should this bother you?” As Lucy, Sally, and Snoopy, who has been listening to this conversation, look straight ahead, Sally explains: “There are certain things I’d just rather not have brought up”.⁵

I have always considered Charles Schulz a major philosopher. I bring up this particular

sequence, however, because it leads me to say some things about what has in fact been a major part of what I have done over the years. The three books, *Another Sort of Learning*, *Students’ Guide to Liberal Learning*, and *The Life of the Mind*, have been devoted to the general issue of things not brought up in schools and universities. I sometimes bemusedly call the project: “How to get an education even while still in college”. E. F. Schumacher’s *A Guide for the Perplexed* is a book I never fail to assign to students as yet largely unaware of what they do not know. Its first chapter talks of going to Oxford, the greatest of universities, only to discover that what is really important to our lives was not much discussed there. Not everyone, unfortunately, realizes that something is lacking.

My parallel experience to that of Schumacher took place not at Oxford but in the army at Fort Belvoir in Virginia. We did not have a lot to do there in 1946. I recall going into the post library, classified in the old Dewey Decimal system. I had been to a semester at Santa Clara. I knew I needed to read something. As a nineteen year old, I vividly recall looking at the shelves. I realized that *I did not know what to read*. Where do I begin? It is out of that youthful experience that I have always been full of books or essays to recommend, of advice to form and keep one’s own library, not of anything but of books and essays that tell the truth, that wake us up, of those essays that put things together.

As a result, I am not so much an advocate of “great books”, for, as Wilhelmsen and Leo Strauss teach us, the great books, though we should read them, contradict each other. They can easily produce skeptics. There is a *philosophia perennis* that must come first. So I have, through writing, sought out students on any campus, including our own, who, after their hours in class, still realize that they do not know what to read, do not know how things are, do not know any truth.

III. Next, I might ask: Is there anything in your “field”, in political philosophy that you have

figured out? I approach this issue through the title of another of my books, *At the Limits of Political Philosophy*. A politics without limits, something we see more and more in our time and in our land, approaches the status of a counter-religion, a claim to explain all things as if neither nature nor revelation existed. Through these years, I have been interested in the way that revelation addresses political philosophy. Notice that I say political philosophy, and not philosophy, not because I doubt that philosophy has a central place but because I think that it does. This is the theme of my book, *Roman Catholic Political Philosophy*.

Philosophy in some basic sense, as Strauss taught, is dependent on politics. The politician always has the power to kill the philosopher. The central political experience of our kind concerns the deaths of Socrates and Christ in legal trials in the best existing cities of their time. Must the city always kill the philosopher? It is not without significance, philosophers that they are, that both John Paul II and Benedict XVI have noted the similarity and difference between these two paradigmatic trials.

Plato finally asked whether any existing city could be found in which this deadly result would not happen. Only in a city in speech, he thought. Augustine took up the same question. Only in the City of God, was his answer to Plato. If we do not know of these two cities, or the questions that they answer, we will never understand politics in our own city.

But what about revelation? Revelation, at least as Christians understand it, has an origin in the same source as reason. The two are related; they do not contradict each other. Revelation is intelligence directed to intelligence. Philosophy is the knowledge of the whole as it is open to human reason. Human reason ought itself to be open to *all that is*. It can understand what it is in general that revelation proposes as the meaning and purpose of man and the world. Philosophy, by actively seeking the truth through reason in its own methods, comes to a point where it can go no further. It knows, but also knows that it does not know.

If, when it is most active about these limits, philosophy sees that something in revelation is at least an intelligible answer to something reason cannot answer, it (reason) cannot simply say that it makes no difference. One cannot argue from reason directly to revelation without being God. But it is possible to grasp that the intelligibility in revelation and the intelligibility in philosophy are of a kind. They seem related to each other. Without belaboring the point, it is not legitimate to say that revelation has no relation to reason or that philosophy poses no issues that revelation does not plausibly address. What is reasonable is that it is at least reasonable that they belong together, even if the reason in revelation first comes by faith, itself a virtue involving reason.

In this light, I sometimes think that the Nietzschean position, so influential in all our academies and cultures, that reason is found neither in nature nor in revelation, is proposed as the only way to escape the logic of what I suggest here. That is, we are back in the Garden, to the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, which good and evil we now want to define by ourselves alone, indeed by our politics and courts.

The title of one of my books is: *The Mind That Is Catholic*. Sometimes I think that the best kept secret in the modern world is precisely this mind that is almost the last one that defends reason itself against its denial of itself, as John Paul II told us in *Fides et Ratio*. Nietzsche's skepticism was directed against the unpersuasive modern arguments that he knew did not persuade.

IV. So let me conclude with a word or two to my students, those here and those scattered to almost everywhere. These are the "potential philosophers" that we found in the streets of Athens and, yes, of Florence and of Washington. I have long been interested in the relation of sports to philosophy. I often remark that the closest that the average young man ever comes to contemplation is in watching a good game, in watching what need not exist, but does, in watching it for its own sake. Aristotle had already suggested

this reaction. I cannot tell you how many students, men and women, over the years, who have told me that they always wondered why sports were said to be frivolous, while they themselves found them to be so fascinating and to mean so much to them. Sports, in their own way, though not *all that is*, alert us to things that exist for their own sakes, and hence to things that do not merely pass away.

Samuel Johnson said that a man is fortunate if, as he gets older, he is surrounded by those much younger than himself. I have been more than blessed this way in my Georgetown years. A professor walks into a classroom every semester. The students are all twenty year old potential philosophers. He is the only one present who grows older. The ones who were twenty when he first started teaching are now fifty. Sometimes they send me cards; sometimes they send their children here. Students keep professors alive. Priests can especially appreciate this vibrancy. Each year, because of his students, a professor can read and reread the books that he knows that he wants to read again and again. He finds Aristotle wiser on the fiftieth reading than he was on the third.

The professor is in class to incite, cajole, inspire, and assign matters so that a young man or woman reads for the first time a book they may never have heard of. This is what he owes them. They want to know, moreover, not just what Plato had to say but what their teacher has to say. Yves Simon, in a famous passage, that I never fail to stress, tells us that there are three kinds of students: those only interested in grades, those who already know everything, and the eminently teachable, those who will allow him, in a short time in their youth, to take them through things which it took him into old age to figure out. The professor hopes that they all finally become “eminently teachable” and that he is worthy of teaching them.

When I come to the end of a semester, to the last class, I realize that I will never see ninety-five percent of these good students again. This is all right. Students have to go to their lives. They

cannot be lounging about campus dives two years after graduation trying to pretend they are still matriculating. The university is not a student’s home. It is more like what Cicero called the world itself, in his treatise “On Old Age”, that is, a “hostel”.

What, in the end, does a professor most want his students to remember? Not himself but what is true and the search for it. Above all, he wants them to remember the Socratic foundations of our culture, that “it is never right to do wrong”, that death is not the worst evil, that ultimately our lives are about eternal life, as Benedict XVI writes in his great encyclical on modernity, *Spe Salvi*. The university is a place where truth, all truth, can be spoken, ought to be spoken. Often it is not. It is imperative, as Schumacher said, that a student knows where to turn when it is not.

So, soon enough, my dear colleagues, students, and friends, I will return to Los Gatos, my first Jesuit home, in what used to be called *El Dorado*. We are glad to return to our houses in this world, as Belloc said, but we find there “no final gladness”. That is not an admonition of despair, only a reminder to seek “a final gladness” where it can be found.

In retiring, the words of Samuel Johnson, cited in the beginning, come back to me. It is “folly to delay those things that cannot finally be escaped”. To recall T. S. Eliot: “In the end is our beginning”. We shall not often meet again. We have here no lasting city, as St. Peter said.

Yet, it is quite clear that human life ultimately is about meeting again, about love and friendship and serious joy, about a final home. So let us think of meeting again, of drinking again from those great flagons in the inn at the end of the world, where we shall meet Dickens and all his friends, Socrates and those with whom he converses, yes, with the God who has told us, when we meet again, that we shall see Him, as we would want it, “face-to-face”.

My “last lecture” at Georgetown is thus about political philosophy as it leads, as I have told you that it must, to everything else. Now you know

why I entitled it as I did. Let me read the passage from Belloc's walk of 1902, one last time: "Then each time I have remembered my boyhood and each time I have been glad to come home. But I never found it to be 'a final gladness.'"

In these things is the truth of human experience. The real issue, fought out in universities and philosophies over the ages and in every human soul, including our own, is not whether there be "a final gladness". Rather, as in the case of Plato and Augustine, it concerns its proper location and whether our manner of living and

thinking is worthy to receive it. Ultimately, my dear students from many years, it is a gift, and we are glad of it. Such is my "last lecture" that I bequeath to you as I leave Georgetown, this blessed place, where I have, in God's grace, met and conversed with so many of you. You all have my blessings and my gratitude.

Fr. James V. Schall, S.J. was, until the spring of 2013, Professor of Government at Georgetown University. This last lecture was delivered in Gaston Hall on December 7, 2012 on the occasion of his retirement.