

The Role of the Shadow Curriculum in Achieving the *Pax Academica*

When the organizers of this conference asked me for my academic title, I replied that “mother” was fine, or “Mrs.” I added that they could add “Old Wife” behind my name although I hoped that I would not be telling “old wives’ tales.”

As a wife and a mother, mine is the voice of the family, crying for protection in an embattled society. I am charged with more than stoking the many fires of our clan-home; with my husband, we are defenders in the central keep of the Domestic Church. Our home, as any Christian home, is a sacramental, where our unique family is called, as stated in *Familiaris Consortio*, to become a community of love. The emphasis is on “love,” for it is only through love that any community can live in peace and happiness.

Despite all the broken families and all the attempts in these recent revolutionary years to redefine “family,” everyone knows what a family is: one man and one woman living faithfully together in a life-long sacramental union for the purpose of mutual help and to raise up good children. Extended

family includes many others, but under the same clan umbrella. It is an inescapable fact that the family is the building block of society. It is the family through which “the future of mankind passes.”

In this, our ancient and essential task is not unlike -- in mission at least - - to the monastic life. In the 6th century St. Benedict wrote in his *Rule*: “We intend to establish a school for the Lord’s service. In drawing up its regulations, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome. The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to a little strictness in order to amend faults and to safe guard love.”

If our homes are to become missionary outposts of the universal church and if our Catholic universities are to teach *Ex Corde Ecclesia*, then there could be no better mission statement than St. Benedict’s for establishing policies at all levels.

Once before, many years ago, I served as “the voice of the family” on the staff of a major seminary. While there I often told seminarians caught in a spiritual quagmire that they needed to go clean up their rooms before we talked about their problems or difficulties. Practical cleaning influences spiritual housekeeping; so in the seminary, so in the home, and so in the university -- *urbi et orbi!*

I am here this morning, once again as the voice of the family, to talk about how the shadow curriculum affects the *Pax Domestica* as well as the *Pax Academica*, for both are in need of the peace that can be achieved only through clear and unprejudiced thinking about policies that affect student life. Just as the health of the body affects the health of the mind, and *vice versa* in the individual, so also the peace and effectiveness of education – at every level – interconnects with, depends upon, and influences the peace of the home and family.

What, then, is this “shadow curriculum” that is so destructive of peace – familial and academic? The shadow curriculum is those unstated but enforced expectations, set forth by an unspoken ideology; most often that ideology is radical nihilism, but it drags secular materialism in its tow. The shadow curriculum reveals itself and imposes itself on faculty and students through the intellectual, cultural, social, and religious influences geared towards shaping the formation of students in all areas of life. Two simple examples that reveal the nature of a shadow curriculum’s agenda imposing itself on others are activities of freshman orientation and dormitory management, where campus environmental raunchiness is at its most noxious.

The shadow curriculum is quick to recruit incoming freshmen. In their first week on the campus, the students are regularly inducted into the unspoken

social expectations of the university, to which a king's ransom is being paid in tuition for a "good education." There are "aids awareness" programs, supposedly for distribution of condoms and graphic instruction in their use, but in reality "aids" education is homosexual recruiting, sponsored by the Lesbian-Bisexual-Gay-People's-Union on campus. There is "rape awareness" for women, where packets are given out that have the lists of what constitutes rape on a date – and how to be sure that "no means no" when there are no restrictions on male presence, day or night, in the dorms. Then, the professional managers of freshman orientation week are hired to come onto the scene to run the "ice breakers." The ice-breakers involve chummy contact – sitting in a circle and giving "the person on your left" a backrub – or telling in a group-confessional of "the worse thing I've ever done." This serves to breakdown the natural reluctance one has with strangers, without building community in any positive way. Last month, one of the Midwest colleges had vagina-shaped chocolate given out during freshman orientation to give the message to the freshmen that "our bodies are not something to be ashamed of." The real message is disgustingly obvious, and it is not that about the dignity of the body.

Beginning with the cultural revolution of the 1960s and 70s, the shadow curriculum began to take over campuses when students were incited to reject

and ridicule all authority as oppressive and outworn morality. “Don’t trust anyone over 30” and “Hey, ho! Western Civ has got to go!” became the chants of the revolution. Many of those 1960s and 70s radicals became and remain tenured heads of departments, deans of schools, presidents of universities, and, alas, school chaplains. From these positions of power, they defend their nihilistic fiefdoms in the name of academic freedom. In the face of this strong opposition at the top, all normal and healthy efforts to clean up the cultural environment has been stymied. Nowhere else but on the campus has this kind of social coercion survived.

If there exists an unbaptized “shadow curriculum” which opposes the family’s values, what could be a family’s interest in the university that imposes it? Is there any good reason for parents to write a king’s ransom in tuition checks to an institution if four years later -- with diploma in hand -- their progeny is shredded morally, “stuck on stupid” (to quote Lt. Gen. Russel Honoré, speaking recently to a persistent journalist), and unfit for a proper vocation, be it marriage and family life, the priesthood and religious life, or the chaste single life?

Take the prevalence of unisex bathrooms and coed dormitories, which have become standard fixtures at secular universities and, alas, at some Catholic universities. What message about the “theology of the body” is

delivered when, side-by-side, freshman men and women are forced to shower, shave, and defecate in the same bathroom facility? How does chastity have even a “hail Mary chance” when open visitation and coed dormitories, often room by room on the same floor, sets up an expectation of the big easy, the most casual of sexual encounters. These are inescapable situations where freshman are required – as they usually are -- to live on campus and forced to conform in the name of building “campus community.”

And it is not just heterosexual activity that is endorsed and enabled. One of our sons was forced to spend the better part of his first semester at a well-known university in Virginia sleeping in the lounge because his 17-year old roommate was using their dormitory room for prostitution. The residence advisor, only two years older than the freshmen he supposedly supervised, warned our son not to mention the homosexual issue when he requested a room change. Mandatory “sensitivity training” sessions were required for anybody who appeared homophobic, or who objected to “diversity” and “self-determination.”

I do not need to name the whole rogue’s gallery of P.C. ideologies and thought police on campus – deconstructionism, atheism, nihilism, radical feminism, secular humanism, materialism, communism. All are clashes of non-

Christian or anti-Christian ideologies that spread through the shadow curriculum.

A young Jewish woman, Wendy Shalit, wrote a book *Return to Modesty* in which she defends the older ideal of modesty and attacks the sexual revolution for its ruinous effects on her generation. Recently, she wrote a review for the Wall Street Journal of a book by Ariel Levy entitled *Female Chauvinist Pigs*; the conclusion of the review is remarkably insightful. Miss Shalit writes, "It may be that, like Ms. Levy, a lot of feminists now regret getting in bed with Mr. Hefner. Yet if you mention the word 'modesty' within 20 feet of them their heads spin around like Linda Blair in 'The Exorcist.' This is where they get stuck... Such a girl requires...a compelling alternative to the Female Chauvinist Pig. Otherwise she may well give in to social pressure -- not to mention professorial nonsense -- and then wonder what's wrong with her when she is not happy with the pig in her bed or the pig she has become." (WSJ, September 21, 2005)

Beginning with the cultural revolution of the 1960s and 70s, a fear of imposing parietals was accompanied by the exaltation of liberty and the pursuit of happiness over the other inalienable right to life. This four decade-long silence about the relation of daily behavior to intellectual development has

done service to no one. Only the faintest attention has been given to the relation between campus policies and dormitory life and the psychological health and spiritual growth of the teenage students, who are forced to cope with a very contaminated environment. Yet, in recent days certain legal precedents have begun to force the issue.

Last week, in an article titled, “*In Loco Parentis* Goes Loco,” the Wall Street Journal’s opinion page addressed one of the effects of the shadow curriculum that was first begun in the 1970s —the protection of the student’s “privacy.” The issue involved irate parents who are not allowed to see their over-18 children’s grades, nor be informed of their offspring’s health and behavior issues. The matter, which began as a divisive shadow curriculum agenda, the “right to privacy,” concerns more than a toe-off of “liberated young adult” vs. parents. It has now become an arena for other legal battles, played out over issues of student suicide and self-destructive behavior: I quote: “Angry phone calls from parents, or from their lawyers, now bring demands that schools protect children from their own bad habits. Johnny got drunk on an alcohol-free campus or didn’t earn enough credits to graduate with his class? That’s not his fault anymore; it’s the school’s. Caught in a double-bind after an era when privacy and autonomy concerns ruled, colleges can safely respond to the modern understanding of *in loco parentis* only by spending more for legal

advice and intensified campus counseling programs. Parents who complain about higher tuition bills – or missing report cards – are the least of an administrator’s worries these days.” (WSJ, September 23, 2005)

I have focused up to now on the negative aspects of the shadow curriculum as we have seen it in action. It is a powerful tool in the formation of the young person, and while it has been a destructive tool, it need not remain destructive and “in the shadows.” Where it supports the mission of the university and the expectations of the families behind the students, “parallel curriculum,” not shadow, might be a more accurate name.

If the truth of the academic curriculum is to succeed, as hoped, and if the joy of learning is to be realized, then the implementation of the parallel curriculum at a Catholic college must not be ignored. Incoming students with their varied backgrounds, can be put into core curriculum classes and read the Great Books; but if the student life demands community-life-as-barnyard, then there can be no receptivity, no harmony, and no peace for the students, though they read ABOUT the best and highest ideals that the world has to offer.

The Catholic university has a mission to pass along the vision of greatness to its students, and the parallel curriculum can serve as a powerful support system to the academic life of a university, as well as a strong

corrective to the “shadow curriculum” already at work in the high schools from which the incoming freshmen come.

In addressing the challenge of setting up a “parallel curriculum,” the university officials – admissions, administration, and student life – should try to think clearly about what they are doing: Why do they exist? Who are they serving? What sort of adult graduate do they want to send forth?

Everyone comes to the university for different reasons. If there are 5,000 students enrolled in a university, there will be 5,000 different backgrounds -- and not just family backgrounds. Parochial, public, private and home schools have prepared their students in vastly different ways.

For instance, the increasingly huge public high schools – many with more than 5,000 students – march the teenagers for the better part of each day through an impersonal, crowded environment that would not be tolerated, even as it is not even to be found, elsewhere in our society. Moreover, the students are held to few requirements of achievement, conduct, or dress. They are told, on the one hand that they are marvelous and talented individuals, but this is snatched back from them by the rat-race in which they are forced to move for eight hours daily. The teachers seem always concerned with developing self-esteem, but give the kids no proper standards by which they can achieve a better opinion of themselves. Shunning academic discipline and

accomplishment, accolades are given for nothing in particular. In fact, the entire public school message to the students is dehumanizing: you have no worth, you are just a number, you are not to be trusted; survive if you can but abandon all hope of love, beauty and peace.

That bitter message is either perpetuated in institutions of higher education or else it is countered by a strong and united effort of Catholic formation. By what the school chooses to put in place as policy for student life, Catholic colleges and universities have the opportunity to have a happier alternative. Even though a distorted message may have been given in high school, it need not continue in a Catholic college. “They did WHAT in high school? Well, we have a better idea here than THAT.”

To claim, as is often heard, that we “cannot legislate morality,” is to deny not only the effort that teachers give to preparation for their classes, but also the very reason for a university’s existence. Professors assume in their own classes that form is content and that form is formative. They assume that their example will be normative and corrective. And the strict protection of “intellectual property” and punishment of plagiarism speaks of honesty and diligence where understanding and calculation are not possible. If the conditions in which students live are of no consequence, then it would be foolish to teach them -- or even want them to study -- the humanities at all, as

the study of these very subjects draws on human situations and have their effect on life. If the intellectual arguments and explanations of university disciplines had no effect on those elements of the mind that shape and arrange life, there would be no point in demanding any standards.

Taking only the matter of academic performance, Catholic institutions do not hesitate to lead and to set forth the university's mission. Why then not take the lead in moral formation as well? To think about the academic performance of students requires taking some stance towards influencing the moral life of students – not perhaps their sexual morals, but certainly their intellectual ones. Honesty, responsibility, perseverance, self-control, intelligence, practical wisdom, scientific knowledge, and theoretical wisdom are all virtues that the university assumes, but responsibility and self-discipline, practical wisdom and intelligence in social and personal morality are also imperatives that the whole operation of a university or any school must be concerned to promote.

When the Catholic university has reclaimed its vision of greatness, it becomes what it is meant to be: a truly sacramental institution where every discipline is seen in the light of Christ. In this sacramental vision – where all of creation is known to reflect the glory of God – the university will blaze with the light of Truth and find its joy.

The Good News, coming straight from the heart of the Church, can restore the joy of everyone – students and faculty. All can then dive straight into the clear waters of real academic excellence where learning can be “pure intellectual light infused with love.” That’s the mission of every Catholic institution, and therein lies the greatness to which we are called. The really Good News in education is Catholic to its core -- that we are made in the image and likeness of God. The message -- that we have a mission in this world and a hope for eternal life in the next – simply flames with the Glory.

There is no neutrality on the matter of the “parallel curriculum”. Neutrality on moral issues is an illusion of the past, and to avoid the issues involved is to ensure that undesirable ones continue to tyrannize. Ours is no longer a safe, happy, stable, and conventional society. As unhappy social trends have shown – and as the war on terror has become a vivid backdrop to all of our activity – neglect, ambiguity of signal, or mere indifference is as much a formative influence as conscious interference. If by its “parallel curriculum” and policies a university does not express explicit approval for right living, it gives tacit approval for wrong.

In choosing a college with their adult children, parents should ask three questions of any institution -- and the university authorities should seriously take these questions into account in setting up their parallel curriculum:

- What secular influences are permitted and encouraged on campus?
- What sort of living environment awaits incoming freshmen?
- What is the character and quality of the adult citizens that this university sends forth to form the families and direct the institutions of our future?

These questions define the unspoken mission of the university and decide its attitudes. These questions are, in the long run, far more important than simply “Can we afford it?”

There are so many positive “parallel curriculum” policies that I, as a parent, could suggest to the administration of a Catholic university, but time is up. Besides, I do not want to conclude these reflections with a “nanny scold” -- not even to have the satisfaction of giving the suggestions and advice that all mothers love to impart!

My advice would be to consider the wisdom of the *Rule* and translate its ancient recommendations into a modern parallel curriculum. Following St. Benedict’s guidelines, the university rules should not be harsh or burdensome. But “to safeguard love,” these policies -- set forth for “the good of all concerned” -- should promote a true community of learners and protect the great dignity of the human person. The guidelines should be based on safety of

the students, practical intelligence, concern for the common good -- including the good of the family and greater society.

I want to conclude by reading a passage from the late English detective novelist, Christian apologist, and Dante scholar, Dorothy L. Sayers. In this passage from her novel, *Gaudy Night*, Sayers wrote about the Oxford of the 1930s and the mission of a university:

The Warden rapped upon the table. A welcome silence fell upon the Hall. A speaker was rising to propose the toast of the university.

She spoke gravely, unrolling the great scroll of history, pleading for the Humanities, proclaiming the Pax Academica to a world terrified with unrest. "Oxford has been called the home of lost causes: if the love of learning for its own sake is a lost cause everywhere else in the world, let us see to it that here at least, it finds its abiding home" Magnificent, thought Harriet, but it is not war. And then, her imagination, weaving in and out of the spoken words, she saw it as a Holy War... defenders in the central keep of Man-soul, their personal differences forgotten in face of a common foe... one could realize that one was a citizen of no mean city...her foundations were set upon the holy hills, and her spires touched heaven.

Like Sayers' England of the late 1930s, our world, too, is terrified with unrest. Now more than ever, our children need the *Pax Academica* that can be achieved only by dispelling the darkness of heart and mind and establishing a beautiful and harmonious parallel curriculum in our Catholic institutions.