# Order Oeuvres: Liberal Education in Its New Context

Jeremy D. Wilkins, Theology Department, Boston College Lilly Fellows National Conference, Oct. 10, 2020 Tranguillitas Ordinis: Liberal Arts Education and the Common Good

# Tranquillitas ordinis

- Peace as rightness of order (Augustine)
- Order vs confusion
- The common good depends on common meanings, values, commitments
- The quality of the commonweal depends on the quality of its citizens, and vice versa

#### Order *Oeuvres*

- Works of order
- The first order of business
- Our context: a rage for order, a search for culprits

#### The order of the talk

- The contemporary situation in politics: A dialectic of delegitimation
- Two moral languages: Possessive and Expressive Individualism
- The Christian alternative and the service of liberal education

# Competing Narratives of Delegitimation

- Narrative 1: historical oppression, present irresponsibility (racial justice, climate change, etc.)
- Narrative 2: encroachment by administrative state, activist judiciary
- Dialectic of Delegitimation: each narrative suggests remedies the other identifies as causes of delegitimation

### Mutual Recrimination, Mutual Resentment

- Each part sees the other as a 'dominant minority'
- Each blames the other for its suffering
- Each regards the other as alienated
- Each is coherent on its own terms
- Upshot: A civil cold war, the politics of resentment

# Two moral languages

- Structure of thought and perception
- What values are readily noticed
- How values are construced

## Expressive Individualism

- Progress toward autonomy
- Thwarted by dark forces
- Focus on expressive rights
- Focus on distributive / social justice
- State power to remedy inequities
- Tends to overlook the cultural good of common meanings and values

#### Possessive Individualism

- Natural superiority of commercial democracy
- Good of order takes care of itself from pursuit of private interests
- Focus on possessive rights: property and association
- Focus on commutative justice (mutual exchanges)
- Use of state power: ensure public safety and possessive rights
- Weak articulation of structural inequities and cultural goods (like social trust) not reducible to personal and domestic virtue

#### Confusion of Civil Conversation

- Two dialects of Individualism
- Weak articulation of cultural good
- Overlapping vocabularies but different meanings
- Easy to mistake the other for moral incompetence

## Trend toward functional monolinguism

- Polarization of positions, hardening of acrimony
- Fragmentation of social experience
- The new role of social media
- Loss of the middle, horizontally (left-right) and vertically (race to the bottom)

#### Our vocation

- Tender, not fierce
- Out of the Cave
  - Emancipation from the languages of Individualism
  - Re-learning a properly Christian language adequate to the human good
- Repentance and conversion!

#### Fact and Fiction: Out of the Cave

- Evaluating in light of higher causes
- Conviction of virtue and love
- Renunciation of every form of obscurantism, deceit, lust for power

# Good and Evil: Escaping Manichaism

- Manichaeism: 'we' are the good, 'they' are the bad
- Reinforces social division, tribalism
- The others are not our enemies but our fellow citizens
- We and they are implicated in sin
- We and they stand in need of healing
- Hermeneutics of redemption, not retribution

#### Conversation as a Praxis

- Persuasion, not power
- Listening comes first
- The problem is not moral incoherence but inadequacy of moral languages
- The aim of conversation: understanding and conversion, not refutation

# Self-Appropriation

- The ethics of conversation
- Discovering in oneself the norms of inquiry and conversation
- Be Attentive, Be Intelligent, Be Reasonable, Be Responsible
- And face your own involvement in inadequate moral languages
- A self-knowledge, an ethical commitment, an ongoing asceticism

#### Ambassadors of Reconciliation

- The justice of a judge: impersonal pursuit of equity
- Without understanding and repentance, only increases resentment
- The justice of the cross aims for mutual understanding, repentance, conversion, and personal reconciliation
- A restorative justice

## Summary

- Tranquillitas ordinis as civil peace; its opposite, confusion
- Our current situation: dialectic of delegitimation and civil cold war
- Underlying causes: competing moral languages, both inadequate; partition of social experience
- Christian language and the goals of Liberal education
  - Fact and Fiction
  - Absolute Trust in Grace and Virtue
  - Good and Evil
  - Conversation as Praxis
  - The Embassy of Reconciliation