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Marianist Award Lecture/1992

The Joys and Responsibilities
of Being a Catholic Teacher



The University of Dayton

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THE JOYS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF
BEING A CATHOLIC TEACHER

by LOUIS DUPRÉ

Marianist Award Lecture
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THE UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

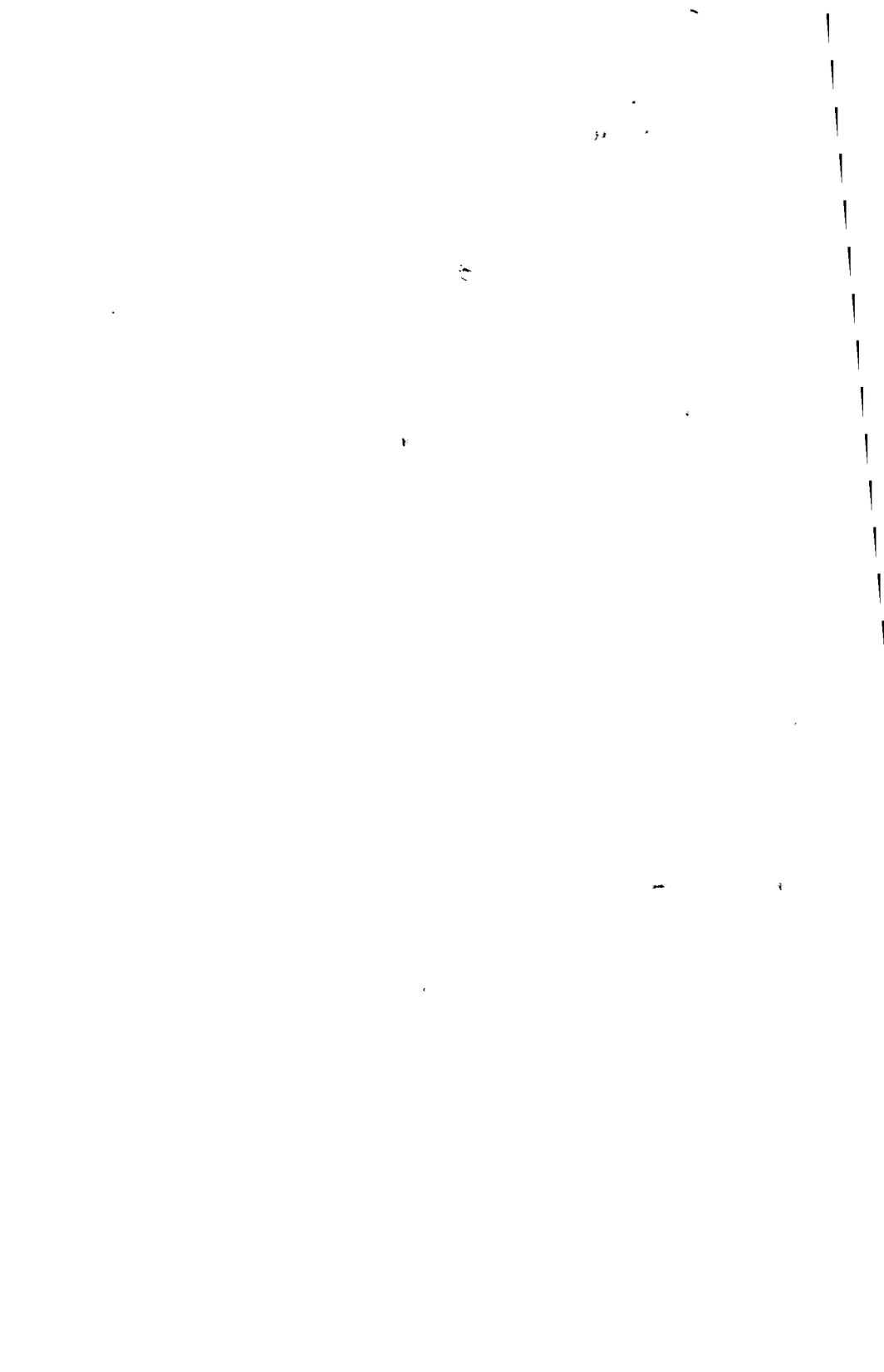
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LOUIS DUPRÉ was born in Veerle, Belgium, in 1925, and graduated summa cum laude from the University of Louvain with a doctorate in Philosophy. His doctoral dissertation, *The Starting Point of Marxist Philosophy*, was published with a government grant, and 1956 received the biennial J.M. Huyghe prize in social studies. He came to the United States in 1958 as a professor of philosophy at Georgetown University. In 1973 he was appointed the T. Lawrason Riggs Professor of the Philosophy of Religion at Yale University. He still holds this position at Yale, where he is also the Director of Undergraduate Studies in Religious Studies.

Professor Dupré is the author or editor of more than a dozen volumes, including *Kierkegaard as Theologian*, *The Philosophical Foundations of Marxism*, *The Other Dimension*, *Transcendent Selfhood*, *A Dubious Heritage*, *Marx's Social Critique of Culture*, and *Christian Spirituality*. He has served on the advisory boards of *The Classics of Western Spirituality*, *Faith and Philosophy*, *The New Scholasticism*, *Encyclopedia of World Spirituality*, *Religion and Intellectual Life*, *Eglise et Theologie*, and *Listening*.

A former president of the Hegel Society of America and the American Catholic Philosophical Association, Louis Dupré has been a visiting professor at the University of Louvain, St. Louis University, Brigham Young University, and the University of California at Santa Barbara, and has lectured at many universities in Europe and the United States. His research interests have ranged from the Philosophy of Religion, Marxism and Kierkegaard to spirituality and mysticism.



The following lecture was given at the University of Dayton on the occasion of the presentation of the Marianist Award to Louis Dupré, January 23, 1992.



THE JOYS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF BEING A CATHOLIC TEACHER

The news of this award caught me by surprise—the unique joy of suddenly feeling oneself remembered. Remembered by former students after many years, but also by those who read my work. I do not feel that I deserve it. But precisely in receiving without merit consists the beauty of a *gift*. We can only be grateful. And that I am.

In my remarks I shall first speak of the joys of being a Catholic teacher—then of the responsibilities. These responsibilities derive directly from the ideals of a Catholic education. Though each educator committed to those ideals ought to pursue them, in whatever institution of higher learning he or she works, they have become *institutionalized* in a Catholic university such as this. Hence I thought it particularly appropriate to recall, at this joyful occasion, the privilege of actively participating in the pursuit of this most important goal: the formation of human beings with a more than human vocation.

HUMANITAS AS AN EDUCATIONAL IDEAL

One of the most striking innovations of the period we now call “modern” and which, despite our growing reservations about some of its principles, is still our own, consisted in setting up the idea of *humanitas* as an educational ideal. Why should our most common possession—that which we all share, even if we share nothing else, namely, a human nature—suddenly be converted into a moral ideal? The new meaning of the term informs us that henceforth humanity must no longer be taken to be a “given,” but a goal to be achieved. Much in that ideal has come to appear questionable to us whom experience has taught to distrust an idea of culture pitted against our *given* nature. But, notwithstanding all misgivings about the concept of self-achievement, one application of that ideal deserves to survive as an almost unqualified good. I am referring

to the educational system that emerged from it and that, rather than concentrating on the acquisition of intellectual skills required for performing a specialized task in society, first aims at making the young person a more complete participant in the living cultural tradition in which he or she stands. The educational goal of rendering the student more “human” belongs to the most enviable achievements of our culture.

THE LIBERAL TRADITION

Now, actively to participate in the life of one’s culture requires an acquaintance with its past accomplishments, the tradition which has shaped its present and must continue to provide guidance for its future. The “Statement on the Catholic and Marianist Identity of the University of Dayton” appropriately defines the task: “The humanities examine the articulations of the meanings humanity has given to its existence, and the importance of history and culture in understanding the nature of tradition and the shaping experiences of the past” (p.4). Initially the classical segment of that past—the Latin and Greek literature—was considered to hold the essence of all that mattered in our tradition. These days are, of course, long gone—in America even longer than in Western Europe. But what has remained, and what the American college of liberal arts has probably better preserved than the increasingly specialized and professionalized European university, is the concept of a *liberal*—that is the opposite of a *practical*—education as the most appropriate basis not only for a life of learning, but also for a professional, civil service, or business career, or for any other occupation. Among the various duties my own academic work imposes on me, which include such specialized tasks as guiding doctoral candidates, the one I have always favored is that of teaching decidedly non-specialized undergraduates. Here, to my surprise, I feel my own specialized education to bear its richest fruits. In teaching college courses I feel most happy with my avocation as a teacher. While preparing these remarks I chanced upon the testimony of a famous professor of classics at the end of his career:

I am a teacher. Except for wars and holidays I have never been out of the sound of a school bell. I have written books

and given public lectures, but these I have regarded as part of my teaching. The life I lead is the most agreeable I can imagine. I go from my study to a classroom well lighted, comfortably heated, with clean blackboards and fresh chalk, where there await a group of intelligent and curious young men who read the books assigned them with a sense of adventure and discovery, discuss them with zest, and listen appreciatively to explications I may offer. What makes the process most satisfying is the conviction that what goes on in my own and a thousand other classrooms is more important than the large affairs carried on in the shining palaces of aluminum and glass downtown. For I believe that education is mankind's most important enterprise.

Teaching undergraduates is the part of my assignment I shall be most reluctant to relinquish when my time for retirement will arrive. And I find myself nurturing the secret hope that some college or colleges may even then grant me the privilege of occasionally communicating with their young students these riches which do not attain their full substance until they are shared with others. The humanist education has from its inception consisted in conversation. Socrates, Plato, even Aristotle, our ancestors in that education, thought or wrote in dialogue. Renaissance humanists to whom we owe our idea of Humanities polished the art of epistolary communication to perfection. In doing so, Petarch, Salutati, Erasmus, Lipsius followed but the example of their great Latin models, Cicero and Seneca.

TRANSMISSION OF SPIRITUAL LEGACY

As I see it, a liberal education comprises three parts. First, the transmission of that spiritual legacy in which our culture has found its identity and which alone entitles us to consider ourselves full members of that culture. This study of the Humanities in the narrow sense of the term provides the historical erudition about our past, the material substance indispensable for aesthetic education, intellectual training, and moral reflection. That same study also

plays a crucial role in achieving the refinement of style and taste which belongs to the essence of all genuine culture. For only an intense exposure to the works of the great poets and writers of the past (and I should add musical compositions, sculptures, and paintings) can educate taste. Nothing less than the voices of the poets will awaken the student to an aesthetic power of words. I vividly remember the unique sensation of pleasure and awe that the simple reading of medieval and Renaissance poems in my high school classes in literature inspired in me when I heard my own language across the centuries articulating feelings that continued to resonate in me.

HUMAN NEED TO QUESTION

But a genuinely humanist education includes more than historical erudition or aesthetic education. It also responds to what has been called the essentially human “need to question.” It requires a thematic and deliberate focusing on those questions which every thoughtful person spontaneously asks. It is, of course, a search that results in more questions than we set out with and that never attains final satisfaction. Each answer reformulates new questions, each partial fulfillment excites new intellectual curiosity. But precisely in that unending search consists the paradoxical satisfaction of the intellectual *eros*. Socrates implied that the value of a person’s life lies in examining it, for only the examined life is the virtuous and hence also the good one. Nor is this the privilege of those who have arrogated to themselves the name “philosophers.” According to the Greek sage, it constitutes the value of anyone’s life. It includes a training to critical thinking — to acquire the much needed ability to resist the ever subtler deceptions of the age — what Francis Bacon called the idols of marketplace and theater. But it also involves acquiring the methods for thinking clearly. Here the initiation to various positive sciences proves as indispensable as that to philosophy. All too often our students and not infrequently their teachers as well risk to miss much of the purpose of the humanist education as incorporated in the college system by assuming that an option for “humanities” dispenses one from becoming seriously acquainted with the sciences. The

opposite occurs, of course, among those choosing the positive sciences. Yet a true humanism knows no two cultures. How could anyone today consider himself fully partaking in the culture of his time while remaining totally ignorant of what must count as the most distinguished accomplishment of our age? Still, critical and methodical thought either in science or philosophy do not define the limits of thinking itself. It has become unfortunately one of the philosophical heresies of our century, especially widespread in the English language territory, that they do, for philosophy also has idols of its own. According to an older tradition the powers of reason must be complemented by the light of the spirit — that light which for St. Augustine comes from above. However we conceive of that intellectual illumination it, and it alone, will place the accomplishments of reason in proper perspective and bestow upon them the unity of thought. This, I think, is the supreme task of philosophy proper, one that is indispensable for attaining the goals of a liberal education. Unfortunately in our day only few colleges, most of them Catholic, have sufficiently resisted the trends either toward an arbitrary freedom of curricular choice or toward a more directly practical education, to maintain philosophy as a required subject. I feel particularly privileged to be honored by one of those select institutions.

PURSUIT OF MORAL EDUCATION

Finally there is a third goal liberal education has traditionally set itself, and the pursuit of which has now fallen in almost total desuetude precisely at the time when it has become most needed. I am speaking of the moral education. We who live at the end of the modern epoch have lost our confidence in much of what even the generation of our parents unquestioningly accepted as authoritative principles and rules of conduct. I do not believe that I exaggerate in calling our present age with its unprecedented refusal to accept any restrictions to raw individualism, its general decline of civility, honesty, and respect for life — human and planetary — a period of moral bankruptcy. If there ever was a need for higher education to compensate for what family life and social environment have ceased to provide to the adolescent, it is now.

Educating young men and women to think for themselves most decidedly includes an initiation both intellectual and existential into the basic moral principles of a Christian culture. Yet what do we see instead? A general abdication on the part of most colleges of the duty morally to enlighten the young. That the school no longer functions *in loco parentis* does not dispense it from conveying a moral education which consists in more than a relativistic smorgasbord on reports of the choices people actually make and of the various ways in which they theoretically try to rationalize them. Sociology is a legitimate, serious science but no substitute for ethics. The very nature of the tradition into which the educational process must incorporate us has from the beginning posed as its primary principle that the good life is the virtuous one. The Christian assumption of that cultural principle has further explicated it in adding: and the virtuous life is the holy one.

Ethics for the Christian educator ought to be more than information about values. All educational systems are value-oriented, whether they admit it or not. Value consists in what we value, and that may be a very one-sided, subjective ideal. Avoiding a self-centered, or even an exclusively human-centered morality, the Christian looks for an absolute capable of grounding, ordering, and integrating all values. This absolute principle to which the Christian subordinates his entire value system, he or she calls God. Moral education then should be completed by *religious education*. Yet all too often religion itself is presented as adding one more value to all others, thus relativizing what ought to be an absolute ground of values. In functional terms this means that we treat religion as if it were one among many things that we ought to cultivate and learn about. But the "object" of religion does not tolerate this kind of compartmentalization: it either includes all aspects of life or none at all. If God were only the particular subject of an academic discipline called "religious studies" or "theology", He would not be God. Such a discipline is useful and, I think, in a Catholic system of education, indispensable. But the transcendent presence in the educational process touches on all disciplines and, above all, becomes the integrating factor of all moral education. The objective of religious instruction consists not only in communicating the essentials of a doctrinal tradition, but, even

more, in assisting the student in extending the religious attitude based on that tradition to all areas of existence.

THE SENSE OF WONDER

Thus religious education should stimulate that sense of wonder and the need to question which we described as the first goals of the educational enterprise. Far from *a priori* defining the purpose and meaning of the historical and aesthetic exploration of our heritage, or of setting boundaries to scientific and critical exploration, a genuinely religious attitude should open the student toward their limitless possibilities and encourage him or her ever further to pursue them. Indeed, religion ought to teach the student to raise questions before it presents definite answers. In no case should it remain satisfied with providing "information" about sacred history, theology, or morals, without rendering that information meaningful, that is, fit to order the theory as well as practice of one's life and to expand their limits. In presenting the human encounter with transcendence, the educator must evoke the fundamental wonder that hides behind all reality, before attempting to define mystery in doctrine (which he also *must* do, and with all the rigor demanded by an academic discipline!)

But religious education will not succeed in its task, neither the general nor the specific, unless it lays in the student the foundations of an interior life, the beginnings of a contemplative attitude. For this purpose some appreciation of silence appears indispensable. Without it the student will be incapable of creating the emptiness needed to be open to faith or, for that matter, to wonder. In silence we take our distance from our surroundings, temporarily suspending the constant summons of the immediate. Perhaps the most valuable contribution of Quaker schools consists in the few minutes of silence that inaugurate each day. Only in silence does genuine prayer originate. I harbor no illusions about the use to which the child or adolescent puts this silence. As one pupil of a Quaker school whom I questioned about the matter, candidly informed me: "We just look around and wait for it to stop." Quite so, but during that short period of mostly boring emptiness everyday meanings cease to be taken for granted. That is why the

student feels slightly embarrassed and resists this sudden leave-taking from the familiar world. In silence the student becomes capable of surprise and thus acquires a fundamental openness toward all aspects of life. And, to repeat it, creating such an *openness* should, I believe, be our most immediate objective in Catholic education. Without it we must abandon all hope of establishing any authentically religious or selflessly moral attitude.

THE INTERIOR SELF

True interiority, far from enclosing the person within himself, should liberate him from the manifold cares and petty desires that obstruct his way to the other. The cord of the interior self consists not in a concentrated point of self-identity, but precisely in a relation to otherness. Genuine interiority results in uninhibited communication. This appears paradoxical only because of our unfortunate habit, itself typical of the modern attitude, to oppose self-hood to otherness. A less subjectivist concept would reveal selfhood to be total openness. The social achievements of the great masters of the interior life confirm this conclusion. Who was more feminine, both in affection and in effectiveness, than Teresa of Avila or Catherine of Siena? Who more influential as a leader of men than Ignatius of Loyola? Who socially more engaging than Francis of Assisi? Yet precisely they are remembered as the great masters of spiritual life! Even the highly speculative Eckhart served as a remarkably efficient superior of the Rhineland province of the Dominicans, in addition to being a successful preacher. In his well-known sermon "Blessed are the Poor" he admonishes his audience that to be genuinely poor the self must deprive itself from everything, including its own identity. "If one wants to be truly poor, he must be as free from his creature will as when he had not been born." What is this but total openness expressed in unrestricted availability to the Other, to others?

GRATITUDE AND RESPECT

To conclude this reflection on a concrete note, allow me to mention two virtues that signal and promote interior openness: gratitude and respect. Essentially religious in nature they also form the basis of a refined moral sensitivity. Gratitude is the active

counterpart of wonder. In teaching his or her pupils not to take the benefits of life for granted and to be grateful for what it offers, the Christian educator may well make his or her most specifically religious contribution in the moral field. In gratitude we abandon the standpoint of our own private needs and affirm our dependence with respect to the other. We cease to take ourselves as the center of existence and allow the Other or the others to be *what they are*. Gratitude actively reaches out to the other, regardless of personal feelings or desires. As such it sets the primary condition for any kind of spiritual life, and indeed, for Christian love itself. For to love in the Christian sense I must first forsake my attitude of possessiveness toward the other, and love the other for his or her own sake. Gratitude is the virtue that all devout women and men share. The Buddhist as well as the Benedictine monk *thanks* all day long, independently of his personal mood or feeling. He thanks because it is morning, noon, or evening. At the end of the day he sings his thanks for whatever the day has brought — pleasure, boredom, or pain. How he “feels” has no effect upon his thanksgiving: every day is God-given and, as such, good.

Together with gratitude, and partly as a result of it, Christian education should create and foster the virtue of *respect*, possibly the most neglected quality in the moral habits of our time. Only if we accept the other on his or her terms are we capable of respect. To respect the other is precisely not to draw him into the closed circle of my own subjectivity, but to encounter him in the open space where he is allowed to be himself.

You may consider the preceding suggestions marginal with respect to the more fundamental issue of the specifically moral and *religious* quality of our education. I fully admit that they are preliminary to a moral education and even more so to an initiation into the Christian faith. Yet marginal they are not. Because as a precondition for its success a genuinely Christian education demands a radical reversal in attitude. Without such a change the word will not be heard, and, if heard, will not be understood. The religious educator needs as much re-education as the student needs an education, for he or she is often as much affected by the self-centered, pragmatist heresy of our age as those entrusted to his or her care. In this state of affairs our immediate concern should

first go to the disposition itself within which religious faith may take root. Allow me to summarize this preparatory task in words which I wrote some years ago:

What is needed is a conversion to an attitude in which existing is more than than taking, acting more than making, meaning more than function — an attitude in which there is enough leisure for wonder and enough detachment for transcendence. Culture requires freedom, but freedom requires spiritual space to act, play, and dream in. [...] The space for freedom is created by transcendence. What is needed most of all is an attitude in which transcendence *can be recognized again*. (*Transcendent Selfhood: the loss and rediscovery of the inner life*. New York: Seabury Press, 1976, p. 17.)

THE MARIANIST AWARD

Each year the University of Dayton presents the Marianist Award to a Roman Catholic distinguished for achievement in scholarship and the intellectual life.

Established in 1950, the award was originally presented to individuals who made outstanding contributions to Mariology. In 1967, the concept for the award was broadened to honor those people who had made outstanding contributions to humanity. The award, as currently given, was reactivated in 1986.

The Marianist Award is named for the founding religious order of the University of Dayton, the Society of Mary (Marianists). The award carries with it a stipend of \$5,000.

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