

## The Words of a Fool, or the Dangers of Christian Service

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Aquinas High School National Honor Society Banquet

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I suppose it's because I'm a bit of a renegade, but I have to confess that when I began giving thought to this evening's address, what came to mind first were memories of the boredom I frequently felt when listening to similar speeches during my own student days, and I resolved at once, if at all possible, to do something different—to cut through the platitudes we have grown accustomed to hearing on such occasions in order, if nothing else, to try to keep you awake! Please understand: I don't mean to dismiss the importance of ceremony and courtesy and good manners. The point of this gathering is to honor the honorable and to praise the praiseworthy, and it would be remiss of your speaker to neglect adding his own voice of commendation. I'm afraid that I don't know any of you students personally, so I cannot share in quite the same feelings of pride and satisfaction as your parents and teachers. Nevertheless, I *do* know from many years of experience, as student *and* teacher *and* parent, how much effort has gone into bringing you all to this festive moment, and so I enthusiastically join with others in pronouncing my congratulations.

As I see it, however, we are not assembled tonight for the sake of congratulations alone, and I have not been invited to speak to you because of the strictly generic sort of praise I might offer. Celebrations like this, marking as they do important milestones in life, give us the chance to step off and step back from our daily round of activities and ask ourselves some fundamental questions about where we are headed. And speakers are sought for such occasions, or so at least it seems to me they *should* be sought, for the same reason that the medieval king kept a fool in his court: to pose those basic questions, to stir things up, to keep those in charge from being too complacent and self-satisfied, and to provoke us all into meditating a little more deeply than usual upon just what we are doing and why. As we sit here looking good and feeling happy, our stomachs filled and our heads perhaps starting to nod, let us not for one instant forget that all of this is only a dream. Real life hasn't even begun, and in fact it won't till we die. In ancient Rome, as perhaps you know, the counterpart to the medieval jester was a household slave who, riding in the chariot next to the conquering general in a great triumphant parade, was charged with the task of repeating in his

master's ear the phrase, *Memento Mori*: "Remember, you will die."

Well, I would like to serve as that slave and to play the fool tonight by calling into question something so basic and perhaps even self-evident that you may suppose me guilty of mockery. It is *not*, however, my intention to mock. I am perfectly serious, and my question is this: Do you really think it's appropriate, or is it not in fact a contradiction of principle, for a Christian school like Aquinas High to sponsor an organization like the National Honor Society? Do you really think it's appropriate—the just and proper thing—for a school like *this* to permit its young charges to be inducted into such a body as *that*? Now before you start throwing things, let me assure you at once that I *do* believe it *is* appropriate, and in fact most commendable. Medieval fools, as you may recall having learned, were often subject to their sovereign's wrath, and I have no wish to go home with no head! So please understand, Mr Principal and you other Powers that Be, that I'm not recommending the abolition of the Aquinas chapter of the NHS or the discontinuance of your annual, and very beautiful, banquet. At the same time, however, I can't hide the fact that behind my question there lurks a genuine and abiding concern, however half-facetious my way of expressing it. This concern has nothing to do with the structure or administration of the National Honor Society, or with its charter or history or its constitution or methods of fund-raising, or with any other such *extrinsic* matters, about all of which I know next to nothing. My concern and my question have to do instead with something *intrinsic* to the very nature of the Society and central to its very reason for being: namely, its criteria for student-membership, or rather—to be precise—with one criterion in particular. I suspect that it's going to surprise you that I single it out. Indeed, I hope it *will* surprise you, for it's the fool's aim to disturb, and your surprise will itself provide an indirect proof of the essential problem about which I speak.

According to the Foreword to its handbook, the National Honor Society expects that its members will have demonstrated their worthiness in four principal categories: scholarship, character, service, and leadership. "When the National Honor Society was founded in 1921"—I am quoting now—"our hope was to create an organization that would recognize and encourage academic achievement while developing other characteristics essential to citizens in a democracy. These ideals of scholarship, character, service, and leadership remain as relevant today as they were in 1921." Relevance, of course, is hardly the most important issue, especially if the span of that purported

pertinence is just a few decades. This is but the blink of an eye from the point of view of eternity, and it is with eternity in mind that our faith obliges us to consider all things. In any case, no: the question I'm suggesting we ponder is not about the *relevance* of these ideals to our current political system, but about their fundamental *consistency* with timeless Christian principles, and in order that we might answer that question, I would like us to consider briefly each of these alleged measures of excellence. Let us measure the measures, and let us do this according to the standard of Christ.

The first criterion, scholarship, seems to me at once obvious and incontestable. Though someone might object to its primacy, to its coming first in the NHS list, surely no one will dispute the claim that academic excellence should be an essential ingredient in the record of every honored student, including therefore the Christian student. The Christian of course will remember the words of Saint Paul about not becoming prey to "philosophy and vain deceit" (Col. 2:8), and he will therefore be cautious not to confuse real wisdom with mere mental dexterity. He may also be wary about the word itself "scholarship". I know that *I* certainly am—I who live and work among scholars! My friend Owen Barfield, himself a lifelong friend of C. S. Lewis's, once defined for me the "ideal scholar" as the man who's read everything lest he be less than ideal, but who's understood nothing lest he be more than a scholar! We shall certainly have to be cautious that quantity does not replace quality and that the length of our resumes or the numerical value of our SAT scores are not taken as proof of discernment or a sense of proportion. But short of that, as long as we're aware of the difference between information and insight, there's nothing to stop the Christian from praising a mind that's used well.

The second criterion, character, is obviously even less objectionable. Indeed if a religious man were ranking these elements, this would surely come first in his hierarchy. This is not simply because a good character is a good thing to have, an important corollary or addendum to a disciplined mind. Rather character, rightly understood, is itself a mode of intelligence, the other side of the coin from the proper use of one's mind. *Quantum sumus scimus*, as Christians of the scholastic era said: "We know just as much as we are." Ordinarily we speak of five senses, but in fact the entire human self is an organ of knowing, and its inward conformity with the One in whose image it is made is a *sine qua non* if it aspires to be more than an organic version of Wikipedia. Not every saint is a sage, but every sage *is* a saint, for it is impossible to know and know deeply unless

one's entire soul is in tune with itself and with God. Nobility, generosity, patience: these are so many facets of the gem of Divinity, inward lights by which we may see our way forward into the innermost essence of things. So, yes: character *is* crucial and must appear in any list that a Christian will honor.

This brings us then to the final two NHS ideals of service and leadership, which I think we can very profitably consider together, as if they were a single criterion. For leadership is in fact just a dimension of service, its most visible aspect. Both are linked with the domain of acting and doing, even as scholarship and character are connected rather more fundamentally with being. In any case it is *here*, as I see it, where certain dangers arise. Since I've offered no criticisms of the first two criteria, it's a simple process of elimination to guess that service must be for me the problem child in our list. And so it is. Indeed, fool that I am, I'm going to go so far as to claim that it's quite simply *not* Christian to insist upon service as a measure of honor. Here of course most of you will surely pounce with objections. Wait just a minute, Mr Speaker! you'll say: How can you *possibly* say that service is a danger for Christians? What about "bearing one another's burdens"? What about our love for "the least of these My brethren"? And what about the fact that our Lord Himself came "not to be served but to serve"?

Well, yes, of course. I'm obviously going to have to grant the legitimacy of these allusions to Scripture. But having readily done so I must *also* call your attention to yet another Biblical passage, which may serve as a kind of proof text for my audacious claim. What I have in mind is the familiar story of the two sisters of Lazarus, Mary and Martha. Allow me to quote from Saint Luke:

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village; and a woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving; and she went to him and said, Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me. But the Lord answered her, Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her (Luke 10:38-42).

Now I do realize, of course, that even with this telling passage before us, I'm going to have to back

down just a little and admit that I've been exaggerating somewhat for effect. Such is the office of fools! For no, it's not really service as *such* that's the problem for Christians, but rather (it would appear) its excess—its more or less random and merely quantitative multiplication. Martha was distracted, we're told, with *much* serving, and thus she was anxious and troubled about *many* things. This concession of mine, however, in no way takes away from the fact—a most important but neglected fact in our day—that the ideal of service is susceptible to deviation or distortion in a way that intelligence and character are not. There's no such thing as too much of a well-used mind, and it would be altogether absurd to complain about an excessively virtuous character. Being intelligent and being good or just are essentially or intrinsically valuable, no matter the person and no matter the situation in which he finds himself. When we turn from being to doing, however, from certain laudable qualities of human nature itself to the kinds of action it may choose to perform, we're turning (as your patron, Saint Thomas Aquinas, would say) from the essential to the accidental, from the necessary to the contingent, and thus we're moving into a realm where a sense of proportions is crucial and where it's very easy to end up with too much of a good thing.

Indeed, as I see it, *too* much doing, *too* much acting, *too* much dispersing and distracting service is one of *the* most pervasive and distinctive temptations for modern man, including ironically the man who really wants to do what is right. And it's certainly a temptation the very best and brightest of our young people—the sort that get chosen for the National Honor Society!—are constantly being asked to give in to, under pressure too often from their elders and mentors. It's certainly an easy mistake to make. After all, we don't want to be self-centered and selfish. We want to be involved, helpful, considerate people, loving our neighbors as ourselves. What we seem to forget, however, is that the greatest gift of love is the gift with the greatest good in view. Material gifts and works of corporal mercy are doubtless important, and I don't mean to downplay them, but their impact or range is inevitably limited. The only act of charity which can have permanent consequences is that inward and spiritual act, the act of prayer and repentance, by which we seek to rid our souls of their illusions and passions and thus to rid the world of at least one maleficent being. The greatest gift is the one resulting in the greatest good, and the greatest good is salvation. “Acquire inner peace,” Saint Seraphim of Sarov therefore said, “and thousands around you will be saved”.

This, I believe, is the lesson of Mary and Martha, and this is the lesson with which I'll leave

you tonight. No, I'm not seriously advocating the demolition of the National Honor Society, nor of the many clubs and activities in whose ranks you may have accumulated the rewards of good service. But I *do* encourage all of you to be very cautious. In my many years as a college professor, I have seen numerous bright students like you sell themselves short, not by not saying No to drugs, but by not saying No to committees! All of their many meritorious *doings* had left them no time just to *be*. Mind you, their deficiencies are not typically seen on the surface, for as a rule these students go forward, as you have, with A's on their transcripts and bulky resumes in their hands. The problem, however, is that many of them are virtually clueless as to the point of it all.

A couple of years ago, one of these over-achieving Marthas returned to my University and came to see me. He'd done it all. An honors college stellar performer, he was active in this, and he was active in that: student government, Mortar Board, charitable organizations—you name it. Having won a prestigious Marshall Scholarship for study in England, he'd gone on to take his law degree at Yale and was now a successful attorney in New York, earning in his first year as a partner probably about five or six times as much as his poor old professor! Anyway, he'd gone on a vacation, it seems, and he'd taken along a book that he'd been assigned in one of my classes years ago. And he'd *read* it. I mean he *really* read it. When he was in my class, his eyes had undoubtedly passed over all of the pages, and his brain had stored up enough data to write a clever paper and ace my exams—before heading off to more organizational busyness. But now he was truly reading this book. Pondering, contemplating, going for long walks between chapters. And it *scared* him, literally. He was genuinely shocked to discover that the book had a depth, and that beneath its surface were meanings intimately linked with something beneath his own surface, a hitherto unexplored region of being he'd never before even dreamt of. I can't now remember what book it was, for we spoke of several that day. But the particulars in any case are not important. The important point, this young man exhorted me, was that I should take greater pains than I had with *him* to warn all my future students about the dangers of *doing* too much, the dangers of *excessive and distracting service*.

And so I come before you tonight, most respectful of the National Honor Society and very proud of you, its new student members, but nonetheless obliged to fulfill this young man's "great commission", speaking into the ears of those of you who are willing to hear me something not unlike the ancient Roman slave's reminder of mortality: "*Act less like Martha; be more like Mary*"

Take my advice for what it's worth, and do with it what you will. After all these are only the words of a fool.