

THE NOBLE PURSUIT OF TRUTH

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On May 14, I was awarded an honorary degree from Ave Maria Law School. I also gave the Commencement address to the graduating class.

Tom Monaghan founded Ave Maria University, located in Ave Maria, Florida and Ave Maria Law School, which is independent of the university and is located in Naples, Florida.

Tom is the founder of Domino's Pizza, which he sold many years ago. He is a member of the board of advisors of the Catholic League and the founder of Legatus, an organization of Catholic business executives.

When Tom called me to receive the honorary degree and offer the Commencement address, I was delighted. There are not very many truly Catholic institutions of higher education left; most have succumbed to the dominant culture and have become increasingly secular.

Ave Maria University and Ave Maria Law School are different. They are both unapologetically Catholic. It is a tribute to Tom that he took his fortune and spent it on making two first-class Catholic schools.

The following is the transcript of the remarks which I prepared, though the address was given with more spontaneity than what appears here. The audience was appreciative and fun to be with on this special occasion.

In my lifetime I have had the opportunity to meet with many outstanding individuals, including presidents and popes, but of all the successful persons I have met, none has been more humble and more self-giving than Tom Monaghan. He is truly one of the great Americans of our age, and we Catholics are

fortunate to count him as one of our own.

Tom had a vision: he wanted to build a first-class Catholic institution of higher learning, and he has done so. You graduates are testimony to his work.

Regrettably, there are many Catholic colleges and universities these days that have lost their moorings. Some have pro-abortion student clubs on campus—Georgetown has two—while others have openly rejected core Catholic teachings on marriage, the family and sexuality. Ave Maria University, and Ave Maria Law School, are different: they are faithful to the Catholic tradition, and they have done so without compromising their commitment to academic excellence.

Catholic colleges that have lost their way are not unique: most colleges and universities have lost their way. The typical college administrator and faculty member will tell you that higher education exists so that all ideas can be discussed, without favor for one set of ideas over another. They are wrong, seriously wrong.

The fact is freedom of speech does not exist anymore on most college campuses. Heterodox views are not allowed. Thought control is the rule, not the exception. I know—I spent 20 years on the board of directors of the National Association of Scholars, and I ran the Pittsburgh and Pennsylvania chapters for decades. This organization is wholly opposed to the politicization of the academy. As you might expect, it is very busy these days.

Philip Hamburger is a professor of law at Columbia University; he is also a courageous and brilliant scholar. He recently wrote a column for the Wall Street Journal about a Georgetown law professor who is on leave, pending an investigation. What did he do wrong? He issued an inoffensive tweet, one that nonetheless managed to anger the law dean. Here is what Hamburger said about it.

“The problem is now pervasive in law schools. On account of mere dissent, deans investigate faculty for their views, give them meager salary increases, bar them from teaching some subjects, and even threaten to fire them—as at Georgetown. It’s not only deans. Faculties or their appointment committees regularly refuse to hire people with the wrong views. Just as bad, student law-review editors exclude dissenting students from their boards and even threaten to fire editors whom they discover to have the wrong views, whether on pronouns or matters of law.”

In other words, administrators and faculty who tout higher education as citadels of free speech are wrong. As I have said many times on radio and TV, there is more free speech at your local neighborhood pub than there is on your local college campus.

The elites who run higher education are not only phonies, they are wrong to maintain that colleges and universities were founded as places where all ideas can be discussed and weighed. No they were not. Higher education was founded for one reason: the pursuit of truth.

A number of years ago I was asked to go on “The Today Show” to debate a Columbia University dean. He defended the school’s invitation to have Iranian dictator Mahmoud Ahmadinejad speak on campus. He made his case on free speech grounds.

I replied that colleges and universities constitute a community, and as such, they have normative strictures. They do not exist so that every voice can be heard; rather, they exist so that truth can be pursued. That is why Columbia should no more invite someone from the Flat Earth Society to speak on campus anymore than it should invite someone who denies the Holocaust, as Ahmadinejad does.

Does that mean that such persons should not be allowed to speak? Not at all. They should be allowed to speak at forums

that were founded as free-speech venues, places like Madison Square Garden or Central Park. But higher education is different. If the existence of the Holocaust is subject to debate on campus, then the school should shut down.

To be sure, the pursuit of truth is contingent on freedom of speech. Therefore, restrictive lines that are capriciously drawn, or that defy reason—as they do at Georgetown Law—must not be tolerated. That leaves a lot of wiggle room for the pursuit of truth to be realized, without compromising the integrity of colleges and universities.

In the 1990s, I spoke to Ph.D. students at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. After my talk, two male students cornered me saying, rather smugly, that I sounded like one of those patriotic American types. I plead guilty, referencing my veteran status. I said to them, “you obviously disagree with me, and believe that all cultures are equal, and that none is morally better than the other.” They smiled and said that is exactly what they believe.

I then said, “in this country we put pizzas into ovens, and in Hitler’s Germany they put Jews into ovens—that’s just a matter of different strokes for different folks. Isn’t that right?” That wiped the smile from their face and they nervously shook their heads saying no, that can’t be right. But it is, I replied, what I said is logically consistent with your position. Now if you are not happy with that, I commented, perhaps it’s time you rethought your position and spent more time assessing first principles.

Truth matters. To take another example, the Catholic tradition respects natural rights and natural law. Those who sneer at this tradition have not thought things through anymore than the CMU students did.

What did the Nazis who were on trial at Nuremberg say in their defense? They said they were only following orders when they

put Jews into ovens. They were telling the truth, they said, yet they were convicted. But on what basis? They did not violate the positive law, the actual written law. No, they were convicted because the tribunal concluded that they were really not telling the whole truth.

Sir Henry Shawcross, the British prosecutor, said there could be no immunity “for those who obey orders which—whether legal or not in the country where they were issued—are manifestly contrary to the *very law of nature* from which international law has grown.”

It was the Nazis violation of the “law of nature,” or the natural law, that got them convicted. While it is true that Aristotle is regarded as the father of the natural law, it was Aquinas who gave it a Catholic cast, inspiring Catholic theologians and philosophers to provide it with such a rich tradition. From them, we learned that fundamental ideas of right and wrong are inscribed in the hearts of all of us.

The Nazis knew that, too. Naturally, Catholics are never given credit for their contribution to the very basis upon which the Nazis were found guilty. There is an objective moral order, and attempts to deny this truth are scurrilous. Indeed, they may even be lethal.

No matter, postmodernist thought has rendered the very idea of truth to be invalid. Indeed, postmodernist professors like to boast that only the badly educated—the “deplorables”—still believe there is such a thing as truth. They like to cite Nietzsche’s remark, “There are no facts, just interpretations.” I like to remind them that there is another figure in German history who similarly said, “There is no such thing as truth, either in the moral or the scientific sense.” His name was Adolf Hitler.

The latest iteration of the “there is no such thing as truth” school of thought is the fanciful idea that pregnant women are

not carrying a baby. So what is she carrying? Is it a seal? Have you ever heard of a pregnant woman who invited you to her “fetus shower?”

In 2005, Hillary Clinton said, “We can all recognize that abortion in many ways represents a sad, even tragic choice to many, many women.” She never said why. By contrast, we never think it is “sad” when we learn that a family member has to get a root canal. It may be unfortunate, but it is not “sad.” Furthermore, the choice to undergo this dental procedure would never be deemed “tragic.” Her failure to tell the truth was itself telling.

Two men can say they are married, but everyone knows that marriage, which is a universal institution, was founded to facilitate the creation of a family. Two men cannot create a family—they have been disqualified by nature, and by nature’s God. We all know this to be true, yet some prefer to live in a state of denial.

Another fiction is the bizarre idea that the sexes are interchangeable. They are not. People may identify as someone of the opposite sex—they may identify as a giraffe—but that doesn’t change reality. You are either female, with XX chromosomes, or male, with XY chromosomes. No one is walking around with XYZ chromosomes. They may exist in their head, or on a professor’s blackboard, but the truth is that transgenderism is a fiction.

Unfortunately, these examples of postmodernism’s denial of truth are commonplace on college campuses. There are exceptions, of course, and Ave Maria Law School is a primary example. It is testimony to the gift that Tom Monaghan gave you, and indeed all Catholics. It is up to you, as graduates, to make good on his effort. You have been given the tools, now it’s time to execute.

We don’t need any more Catholic spectators. We need

gladiators, men and women who have the courage to stand up for their Catholic convictions. If you do, you will not only endear yourself to God, you will make this a better country.