

SERVING FREEDOM

“University! . . . If you serve the truth, you serve freedom, the liberation of the human being and the Nation.” Too often our societies see their universities in purely functional, economic terms, as though the warrant for their existence is to provide scientific and technical expertise for economic development and to provide young people with the intellectual tools to succeed personally within the national economy as they contribute useful services to that economy. The prestigious American Association of Universities, a consortium of the premier research universities in the United States of America describes its purpose:

The *raison d’être* of the American research university is to ask questions and solve problems. Together, the nation’s research universities constitute an exceptional national resource, with unique capabilities. . . . By combining cutting-edge research with graduate and undergraduate education, our research universities are also training new generations of leaders in all fields.²⁹

This ideal is not what Pope John Paul II had in mind when he said that by serving truth the university serves freedom. The truths of the sciences are, as we have said, only partial and provisional.

More to the point, they are not the most important truths. However, they are not truths easily ignored. Not far from my home institution, a well-established Catholic liberal arts college, Saint Joseph’s College, has closed its doors be-

²⁹ *America’s Research Universities: Institutions in Service to the Nation (White Paper of the American Association of Universities)* (<http://www.aau.edu/resuniv/WhitePaper1.01.html>).

cause of insurmountable financial problems. From around the United States, as well as from Spain, Lithuania, and other lands, we hear similar stories as declining student populations combined with the pressure on the young to obtain marketable skills increasingly induces colleges and universities to emphasize the practical education in business and the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) specialties in order to attract students and sources of funding. Furthermore, in the United States even the wealthiest universities rely increasingly on low-paid adjunct professors and graduate students to handle much of the undergraduate teaching load. These economic and financial pressures notwithstanding, the cultural role of the university cannot be ignored. If anything, we may well argue that it should be revitalized. Addressing American Catholic educators, John Paul II spoke warmly of his own experiences teaching in the university and of the importance of its research into the sciences, but he went on to add this:

The goals of Catholic higher education go beyond education for production, professional competence, technological and scientific competence; they aim at the ultimate destiny of the human person, at the full justice and holiness born of truth (cf. Eph 4:24). True academic freedom must be seen in relation to the finality of the academic enterprise, which looks to the total truth of the human person.³⁰

Pope John Paul II spoke these words in Washington, D.C., the seat of the U.S. government, a place filled with the symbols and institutions that represent and by which we Americans exercise our freedom. When John Paul II addressed his homily to this university community in 1987, Poland had not yet regained her freedom, as she would only two years after that visit. However, I suggest that his words are as relevant and important now, to both Poles and Americans, as they were in 1987. In the face of the increasing power of the utilitarian ideology of a “bourgeois liberalism with its ambition to ground everything in the unchecked initiative of the individual, conceived as a little God,”³¹ a regime in which the individual is conceived not so much as a person—as a spiritual being—but as the bearer of rights determined according to his subjective conception of reality and the good, we see our freedom increasingly constrained within strict limits based not on the interests of a dictatorial regime but of a vision of man according to which there is no truth of man, no truth about the good, no knowledge about God beyond that which the “little

³⁰ John Paul II, Address to the Catholic University of America, Washington, USA, 7 October 1979, section 5 (https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1979/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19791007_usa_washington_univ-catt.html).

³¹ Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, translated by John J. Fitzgerald (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 92.

God” conceives in his own mind. In the United States we see increasingly that civic leaders and educators question our historically treasured rights to freedom of speech, of the press, of peaceful assembly, and of religion—rights written into our Constitution’s Bill of Rights—as contrary to the present interests of a progressive society. This pathology, if I may call it that, is even further advanced in the European Union. The source of this pathology, as Maritain recognized and John Paul II would certainly agree, is a loss of the truth about man, the truth about the human person.