



ACU address

8 May 2007 – Sydney Town Hall

I consider it a great honour to accept the university's doctorate at the graduation ceremony of the Faculty of Education.

My life's work has been given to education – through my pastoral work as a priest, and my work as a lecturer in the field of theology. It has left me with a deep conviction that education is one of the noblest of human callings. And I have often asked myself what makes effective education.

It will come as a surprise to many people to be told that the principal agent in the education process is not the teacher but the student. The effective teacher does not 'mould' the student, as popular imagination would have it. A good teacher provides the resources that make it possible for the student to grow and mature, according to their manifold potentialities. The gardener does not make the plants grow, but provides the conditions in which the miracle of organic life unfolds. In a similar way, the effective educator provides resources the student makes use of, so that the immeasurably greater potentialities of their human nature and person are realised.

All dedicated educators have moments of seriousness in which they are made aware of this. As they observe the unfolding of their students' potential, they are humbled as they recognise how modest their part has been in the process.

Students, of course, must be *motivated*, if they are to become agents of self-actualisation. I recognise that this can present an immense challenge in a society that is committed to mass compulsory education. The main point I wish to make this evening is an attempt to address this challenge.

I heard recently a Japanese proverb that neatly sums up much of what I want to say. According to this proverb, '*Knowledge without wisdom is a load of books on the back of an ass*'.

No one can doubt that knowledge is a fundamental resource to be handed on to the student. Effective educators, however, bring to the classroom or lecture hall something more than their fund of knowledge. They bring an enthusiasm for things that really matter, an enthusiasm that is 'caught, not taught' in their interaction with their students.

The proverb I have referred to calls that 'something more' *wisdom*. What is wisdom? It is a remarkable fact that, though it is not easy to define, most people prize wisdom highly. A survey, made in 1975 (seeking to identify the desirable 'social values' of Australians) found that, of the 54 values itemised, virtually 100% nominated as most desirable, 'wisdom (having a mature understanding of life)'. It ranked with 'the protection of human life (that of self and others)' and 'human dignity (allowing each individual to be treated as someone of worth)'.

Effective educators bring to their teaching an enthusiasm for the things that really matter in life. '*An enthusiasm for the things that really matter in life*' – it would be hard to improve on these words, as a down-to-earth definition of genuine wisdom.

The knowledge the teacher makes available is a sharing of human experience. Wisdom provides a *satisfying interpretation that relates human experience to what really matters to all of us*. In the language of contemporary philosophy, wisdom provides an existentially satisfying interpretation of our human experience; wisdom sets us on the path to our true destiny.

But where is the educator to find this wisdom? Today, our western tradition is in profound crisis because - for all its immense 'scientific' achievements – it has lost contact with the wisdom resources of our Judeo-Christian tradition. Today we can recognise that this situation is the outcome of a complex history. Until the end of the medieval period our Christian tradition was the soul of Western civilisation. A proper balance in this relationship, however, had not been achieved. In the chaotic period after the collapse of the Roman Empire, the Church in the West found itself to be the only agency that could assume responsibility for social order. When, at the beginning of the modern period, this unsatisfactory situation was challenged, Church leaders were slow to recognise that the challenge was a legitimate one, and they were reluctant to relinquish the influence that they had long taken for granted. Eventually, the Church withdrew into the world apart it made for itself; and the creative energies that were to shape the modern world became wedded to an ideology that distrusts all that the Christian tradition stands for. Both the Church and the modern world were the losers in this outcome.

But I am raising a question far too complex to discuss further this evening. A solution must be found to this unfortunate estrangement. And with the optimism which is an essential component of Christian hope, I am convinced that a solution will ultimately be found – though finding it will inevitably be long and often painful process.

That great teacher John Paul II suggested the way we can follow as we seek to overcome this estrangement. His suggestion is easy to relate to the argument I have been developing. We must, he said, champion a deeper understanding of the human person. 'The essence of the human person', he declared, 'is *depth*'. In every person there are needs, yearnings, the latent energies that can inspire heroes or motivate destructive monsters, the potentialities and dynamisms that make the history of humanity so dramatic and so unpredictable. Only our Christian tradition, centred in the story of the Christ who 'emptied himself' in order to share our human struggle, can provide the wisdom that will help us to make sense of humanity's mysterious depths.

And it is a faith formed by that great tradition that can help Catholic educators find the wisdom resource that will make them effective educators (in whatever field of the complex contemporary syllabus they are working) – *true wisdom, an infectious enthusiasm for what really matters in life*.

John Thornhill sm