

FIRST PRINCIPLES

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Last Lecture

James R. Stoner, Jr. - 01/14/10



The following lecture was delivered at Christ the King Catholic Student Center at Louisiana State University on January 21, 2009, as part of a lecture series organized by the pastor, Fr. Than Vu. When Randy Pausch's genuinely last lecture achieved wide notice in 2007, Fr. Vu recalled that it had been common years ago for Catholic groups to sponsor imagined "last lectures," and he decided to revive the practice, inviting four Catholic faculty members at LSU to speak in a series during the spring semester of 2009. Fortunately, writes the author, this turned out not actually to be his last lecture.

Those of you who already know me won't be surprised to learn that, when Fr. Than invited me to speak in his "last lecture" series, I not only jumped at the chance, but right away volunteered to speak first. Soon, however, I reflected on my foolhardiness. Surely the thoughtful person would want to give the *last* "last lecture," not the first one—and really, common sense would say one ought to postpone the task as long as possible, at least if one is serious about such things. Of course, maybe "last" doesn't mean *really* last, even when one is pretending. "Are you leaving LSU?" one former student asked who saw the announcement. "Are you retiring?" I imagine the lady at McDonald's saying who gives me senior discounts on the coffee, though I'm barely old enough to join the AARP. (No plans for either, by the way, if you're wondering.)

But of course Fr. Than had in mind not parting shots but last words, and to tell you the truth, from the beginning I took him seriously. He was asking us to think about our death—supposing, I think, that no true teacher ever retires or leaves teaching for something else—and challenging us to speak as though our death were imminent. For one who likes to joke that he went away to college at age eighteen and never left, thinking about death is a particularly sobering task, though I recognized it as within the tradition of *memento mori* (which translated means, remember you are mortal) that permeates Catholic culture, or did in the olden days. While remembering one's mortality surely does good to the person assigned the task, why, I wondered, should anyone care to overhear his reflections? If the task is honestly performed, I can imagine two answers.

First, someone who genuinely confronts his own mortality does something we all must do, sooner or later—and

maybe better sooner than before it's too late—and if it's done well, sharing one's insight ought to benefit all. Second, people about to die are more apt to tell the truth, for they lose all the little incentives that the world gives us to hide what we know even from ourselves: the temptations of honor or office, of wealth or advancement, of pleasure or popularity, all of them often more readily gained by those who suppress the expression of their opinions than by those who speak openly, and sometimes, I'm afraid, more readily gained by those who dissemble or mislead.

Now I won't claim tonight that I have achieved the level of insight that comes from a radical encounter with one's own mortality. I've been blessed with good enough health and, though I drive the highways in a modest car and fly across the country in commercial airplanes, I have been spared serious mishap. I know abstractly that my good fortune can change in an instant, but I've also been blessed, if blessing it is, with an optimistic disposition and with a fondness for comedy and laughter. No, I'm afraid I would be altogether unconvincing should I pretend to have discovered something new about mortality, or something new about life through contemplation of its demise. I don't say this to belittle those who can, for indeed like anyone else I admire them. What made the late Randy Pausch's "last lecture" so compelling to many was his affirmation of his life in the face of a truly fatal malady; and I recommend to you the writings on death of the late Fr. Richard John Neuhaus, whose recovery from a near-fatal rupture of a tumor made possible another decade and a half of unequalled analysis of religion and public life that ended only a few weeks ago.

Instead, the best that I can do is make the second claim: Like those about to die, I will, in this "last lecture," try to the best of my ability to tell some inconvenient truths—the kinds of things that I don't expect will make me popular, not least in the faculty club. My topic will be a simple one: I want to tell you about what I've found, through experience and reflection, to be truly good. I won't speak about the things that most everyone in our culture already thinks of as good—life itself; health; sufficient wealth to permit some leisure and not so much as to consume all one's attention; honor or fame or simply recognition; friendship; justice; grace. These are all good things and worthy of praise and also of scrutiny and attention, but not tonight from me, for by our fiction, time is short, and their value is hardly overlooked today. Nor will I speak about fulfilling your dreams, not because having a "dream"—a more precise word might be "ambition"—is not a good thing, but again, because the topic is everywhere exhausted.

Actually, to tell the truth, I want to speak about what's good a little differently: not as something personal or private, not as something valuable because chosen, however authentically, but rather as something good authoritatively, something that demands our attention and is good whether or not we wish it to be and whether or not we possess it. For that really is the first and perhaps the most important thing I want to say tonight: that what's good has a reality of its own, that it is not a figment of the human imagination or something that changes radically from generation to generation, but something written in human nature by the author of that nature. Our thinking something good does not make it good, nor does our thinking something bad make it bad—although our being mistaken about what's good can lead us to neglect it, and that's bad.

In short, I want to talk about human happiness, and what I have called my first and most important thought is simply this: Although no one can be happy who is determined not to be, happiness is not achieved by merely wanting it, much less by getting what you thought you wanted. For to be happy, a person has to know what is good and make it one's own—not exactly as a possession, for none of the goods I'm going to talk about are material things, but as integral to one's world and oneself.

I. Constitutionalism

So what's good? Aristotelian that I am, I'll give you a list. The first good I want to mention is *constitutionalism*.

What? I come here and tease you with human happiness, and then I give you—political science? Well, that is my field after all, and what's worse is that I have to tell you that even most political scientists find the idea of constitutionalism to be, frankly, a bit boring. But—remember, I promised I wouldn't be popular—I truly think that it is a great danger today that people think that constitutionalism is boring, for our public happiness—our peace and prosperity and even decency—depend upon it. Constitutionalism is one of the great achievements of our civilization and, although it is not an American invention, we Americans have made our signal contribution to humankind by preserving and perfecting it.



What I mean by constitutionalism is nothing particularly original: limited government and the rule of law. It is both a tradition and a kind of science, discovered by experience but anchored in principles of political right. It includes lessons about how to structure political institutions—separation of powers, federalism, representation, independence of the judiciary, civil control of military power, and much else that all recognize when reminded and that we even take for granted. And it includes various rights that experience has taught mankind are worth guaranteeing even when they are liable to abuse: rights of property and of criminal due process, rights to free speech and to freedom of religion, rights to security in one's home and to safety in one's person against punishment that is unusual or cruel—rights that have at their root respect for the individual conscience. The relation between rights and institutions is dynamic: To focus only on rights without attention to the institutions that define and secure them is folly (the specific folly behind judicial supremacy today), but to focus only on institutions overlooks the integrity of the person that constitutionalism is meant to ennoble and secure. Each people develop their own constitution, for they have their own tradition and history, and this particularism probably contributes to the unpopularity of constitutionalism in a globalized age, but is nonetheless integral its success.

Constitutionalism requires compromise, and that is so much less satisfying than partisanship; constitutionalism supposes that what is good enough for one party is good enough for the other. While partisanship is in itself undesirable, it is inevitable if men are free. To compromise is not necessarily to "sell out," at least in politics; it means to recognize the possibility of one's own fallibility, to listen to one's opponents and to respect their wants and needs, and then to take the time to work towards an agreement—and to have the honesty to live by it. Obviously not everything can be compromised—no absolute moral principle can, like the prohibition against murder or the command to remember the Sabbath—but much in every action depends on a prudential calculation of circumstances, and here prudence often dictates preferring half a loaf to none at all. Constitutionalism is the settled opponent of every version of utopianism except the purely literary, for the longing for redemption through politics is an error in principle, and after the twentieth century, we all ought to know that it ends in a totalitarian nightmare, whether the national socialism of the right or the soviet socialism of the left.

II. Learning

The second good I want to mention is *learning*. If it comes as no surprise that a political scientist praises constitutionalism, perhaps it comes as even less that a professor praises learning. But actually, what I mean to say ought to be surprising, and maybe if I explain what I mean by learning you will agree.

By "learning" I refer to knowledge in its full array, valued for its own sake. It would include all the various disciplines, from mathematics on the one hand to languages on the other, considered both in themselves and in their relations to one another; the theoretical as well as the practical, sciences and fine arts, humanities and social sciences; some highly developed in antiquity, some emergent since I was in school; most of them cultivated in the university (though there is much in universities today that I am loath to include); but also disciplines like theology which were once highly developed but now lie neglected or left to dilettantes and amateurs, themselves not to be despised (in theology I'm one), but not exactly learned either.

I use the word “learning” in part to convey the activity; no one is learned without thinking learning a good, and in no field of knowledge today can one simply rest on past achievement. But I also use the word “learning” because its being singular—unlike “arts” or “sciences”—draws attention to the wholeness to which knowledge aspires. The modern university is full of specialists who are expert in their own field and often dismissive of others. Although learning could not rise to heights without a certain division of labor, and although a certain competition or emulation among the fields often keeps them honest—at least in the social sciences, as economists and sociologists strive to better account for human interaction, or political scientists struggle with historians to give the more comprehensive account of the sweep of regimes, or with philosophers to define critical concepts—still it is elementary that one does not fully know any part without knowing the whole of which it is a part and how the part fits into that whole.

But while elementary in principle, it is increasingly rare in practice, at least in universities, for we have structured our whole system of incentives to reward specialization and focus on narrow disciplinary questions, and we deny recognition to activities such as wide reading and deep conversation that would recover some sense of other fields. This undercuts undergraduate education, for a faculty cannot credibly ask students to study a variety of subjects to which they are severally indifferent and in which they cannot distinguish between what is more valuable to study and what less, or more precisely, what comes first and what later. And the problem exacerbates itself in a downward spiral, for those who administer universities are specialists, too, and insofar as they are ignorant of other disciplines even in their outlines, they judge their quality and support their work only by arbitrary or at least very crude metrics, and thereby reinforce incentives to succeed in some mode that may have little to do with what is most needed to know.

Please note that I do not mean to be whining about the neglect of the humanities in relation to the sciences, though it is true that the latter are now ascendant and thus often proud, pluming themselves on their usefulness rather than their dedication to knowledge and ignoring the danger of corruption that lies here. Meanwhile, the humanities have committed a kind of collective suicide by elevating criticism over invention, analysis over synthesis, cynicism over wonder. There is a crisis at their heart, for they doubt their own value; this is less true in the sciences, though more dangerous when it is.

There are, however, some hopeful signs. First, there is a demand for the learning of languages, especially difficult ones such as Arabic, and one recalls that the spread of language learning was the catalyst of humanism in the Renaissance. Second, there is continued advance in the natural sciences, which spurs all of us to rethink even very old fields. Third, there is a renewed interest in religion, particularly among the young, which ought to reawaken theology generally and in certain areas already has. Moreover, I can report that at LSU, I have yet to meet a colleague on the faculty who is not animated by a love of learning—even if faculty rarely seem comfortable anymore in speaking its praise.

III. Beauty

The third good I will bring to your attention is *beauty*. Now here you must admit that I step a little out of character, and I admit that in praising beauty I run the risk, in what I am about to say, of being thought philistine—I confess, for example, that I like poems best when they are written in meter, especially with a good scheme of rhyme—and being called a philistine is what men and women with a learned aesthetic sensibility fear the most. But it is a risk worth running, for it seems to me nothing short of scandalous that our culture has so neglected beauty that it not only fails to create it, but it wastes and squanders many beautiful things it has received.

Now it might be surprising to say our culture devalues beauty. Personal beauty is a near-universal aspiration, it sometimes seems—at least in the minimal form of weight loss—and a huge industry has developed to pursue it. Likewise beauty in sport remains exalted, with all its accoutrements, and also beauty in the design of material things that have everyday use. But, with only a few exceptions, architecture today seems rarely to rise above clever design, and the exemplars that once modeled even modest imitation are now ridiculed—and either permitted to decay or idolized through restoration. Public sculpture on the whole would be comic if not for its expense, though classical form retains a certain lowbrow popularity, and decoration has become largely stylized.

But what is really scandalous, I think, is our music. My point is not to denounce popular music to promote the classical, though I certainly want to do the latter. What I mean is that in every genre—songs of life and love, songs of liturgy and worship, concert music of intellectual complexity and vivid insight—we are too easily satisfied with the

banal and the vulgar, the insipid and the coarse. Music permeates our lives as never before, as has been said, but we study it less and find its discipline distasteful. Yes, there are promising developments—especially in cross-cultural music, which is flourishing—but in daily life and in the schools, even or especially in Catholic schools, traditions that are there for the singing and the playing are forsaken. I don't pretend to understand this. My only hunch is that the home of the greatest music in the Western tradition, Vienna, and also Germany and Italy, welcomed the fascists and kept playing great music during their brutal reign. But that beauty is no substitute for justice in politics does not mean that justice can substitute for beauty in art. Are our souls too small to endeavor each in its own sphere?

IV. Faith

Constitutionalism, learning, beauty—next is *faith*. On nothing else is society so misled as on the question of what faith is and whether it is good—not just society at large, I think, but even many of us who take pride in being faithful. Faith is presented as the opposite of science: scientists know, others merely believe. This is not entirely wrong, but incomplete, for it takes for granted that modern science and faith speak about the same things, which is hardly obvious—indeed, is obviously mistaken, as anyone with faith can recognize. By opposing science and faith, faith is clumped together with all non-science and hence with a lot of nonsense, with every prejudice, fantasy, error, and falsehood. Even the faithful are misled into treating faith as a matter of the heart, not the mind—an opinion again not entirely false, but the cause of serious errors: distrust of learning on the one hand, and exaggerated trust of feelings on the other.

For me the breakthrough came when reading Thomas Aquinas on the virtue of faith. Faith, he says, is an intellectual virtue—the habit of mind that accepts true propositions on authority, sometimes because one hasn't had the time yet or doesn't have the capacity to know them scientifically (I'm not simply being elitist here; as Tocqueville wrote, even the philosopher must accept a thousand things on the authority of others), or because in this life, given the imperfection of our senses and our minds, we can at best know them “as through a glass darkly,” though we hope one day to know them clearly as we see God face to face.

Belief, says Aquinas, is between opinion and knowledge, far from ignorance, close to truth. The image I propose is of a staircase: the ascent to knowledge, every step higher, nevertheless requires planks to stand on along the way. Perhaps the greatest philosopher can climb a pole or rest sufficiently on the rungs of a ladder—but most of us ascend best by stairs, where merely stepping forward makes us step upward, little by little, and there are plenty of landings or places to rest. It is essential to this image, and to St. Thomas's argument, that faith and science ultimately seek the same truth—and that, to most of us, is a matter of faith, for Christ said, I am the way, the truth, and the life. But if he told the truth—and how dare we doubt him on this point?—then we faithful have nothing to fear from science, nor scientists from faith, for we have the same end: knowledge of the truth about all things. I like to pray, “Lord, help us to see Christ in every truth we learn, and to look for truth in Christ.” If you notice that my argument supposes there is one true faith, I concede the point and invite you to consider which it is.

Now if I am right that we should see faith and reason as complementary, not conflicting, then we have within our hands an insight which can revolutionize the world of learning—within our faith tradition, we have resources that can restore the wholeness to learning, can give beauty back its luster, can even ennoble our political institutions by keeping the goods they secure in perspective. I don't mean this will happen by suppressing science under faith, but by freeing the faithful from the fear that learning will cause them to lose their faith. Here is a task that will take a generation or more, that is not promised immediate reward or success, but which, against all appearance, makes the life of the Catholic in the university today the most exciting and demanding that I know.

V. Marriage

Marriage is the fifth good upon which I want to comment, and I hope I now have in place the structure to allow me to say what I think. Do I need to define marriage? It is the union of a man and a woman, for life, consummated and exercised in the union of their bodies in the sexual act (or as I like to say, the marital act), undertaken freely by two in the gift of themselves to the other, accompanied by companionship and living together, and welcoming to the new life that is the natural and ordinary fruit of their conjunction—and supported by the society it replenishes.



You don't need to be told that marriage is in crisis today. Many end in divorce, which the law makes easy to obtain and which social attitudes condone if not encourage. Many couples live together and many women bear children without being married. There is powerful and persistent advocacy for extension of legal marriage rights to homosexuals, and less audible but logically following advocacy for extension of such rights to groups of three or more. Meanwhile, reproductive technologies help conceive children outside the womb and so without marital relations, who are then implanted in the wombs of others. Even among the traditionally married, contraception is generally accepted and widely practiced. To all of this most Christian churches now make little objection, or express partial or token opposition and regret. Even the Catholic Church, which maintains all the elements of the definition I gave a moment ago and adds to it her sacramental blessing, seems unable to persuade her own members of the teaching on contraception and maybe also divorce and has failed to give them the confidence to insist that society maintain even the heterosexuality of marriage against the plea of same-sex couples who seek social recognition of their professed love.

Addressing these issues is a matter of great urgency, both to provide clarity in the coming legal battles and to provide guidance to young people, who, I daresay, have the right to a culture that supports marriage and family and that counsels and encourages them as their love for one another grows and matures and bears fruit. Indict my generation and indict the universities above all for failing you in this regard, for the failure is real and no one is taking responsibility for it. Marriage, after all, is not a practice that can skip a generation, so to speak. Quite the contrary, it is a premier carrier of all tradition, which is to say, the means by which we pass along what is good.

Obviously, to say much more would require a whole lecture of its own—and if this really is my last lecture, I can't give that, too—but I have tried to put in place some of the elements needed. I have argued that goods are not made good just because we say so, but because of something intrinsic to them. I have spoken in praise of learning in its many forms, and the defense of marriage will draw on lots of these: on embryology, endocrinology, and developmental biology generally; on sociology and social psychology; on literature and philosophy, and much else. In relating faith and knowledge, I have expressed my confidence in their ultimate harmony—and I am confident that the findings of those sciences and of the faith regarding marriage will remain harmonious, as preliminary evidence suggests. After all, every human being originates in his or her embodiment from the union of a gamete from a human male and a gamete from a human female, uniquely, for biologically speaking one has only one father and one mother for all one's life. Marriage is simply the obverse of this biological fact, an institution appropriate to rational beings that are also animals. Its aspiration is that we come into being through an act of love and then are nurtured in an environment formed by love. Why do we have such trouble seeing divine wisdom in that?

VI. Freedom

Constitutionalism, learning, beauty, faith, marriage—now I'd like to add *freedom* to the list of goods. Here, since time is short, I need to be particularly brief. Despite the fall of the Iron Curtain twenty years ago, freedom today seems to have lost its nobility: the name of freedom has been mingled with acts of extreme license, and the abuses of freedom have been claimed as rights. The term "freedom to choose" has been used to name the right to kill unborn life; the freedom of the market has been invoked to encourage a frenzy that has issued in market collapse and the call for not freedom but regulation, not responsibility but "bailout."

But the good of freedom deserves defense and explanation, for no good act is wholly good unless freely chosen, and the expansion of regulation by one party and of policing by the other threatens to allow us less freedom—and thus

allow us to do less good. Let me quickly sketch three dimensions to freedom that seem to me particularly under siege.

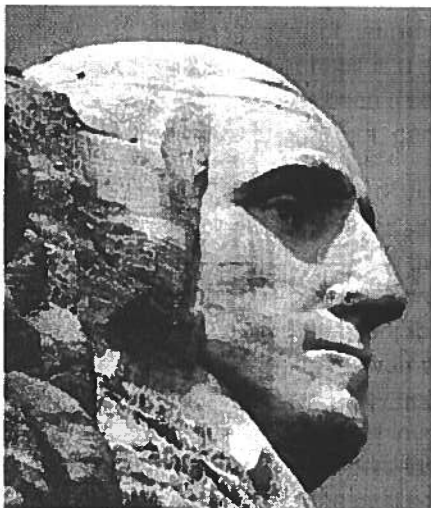
First, political freedom. Mistaking our constitutionalism as a system or machine solely for the adjustment of interests and the satisfaction of ambition, we risk losing sight of the search for common good that animates republican or democratic institutions and that requires, not dictation and calculation, but spirited debate.

Second, moral freedom. Even in religion, and certainly in the world, we subject ourselves to arbitrary rules and pride ourselves on discipline—a good thing in itself, but no substitute for conscience, the free determination of the right thing to do in particular circumstances in light of what is charitable and just.

Third, personal or even biological freedom. This is the next frontier for vigilance, for as the chemistry of our brain is better known, people grasp at excuses for bad behavior or think that hormones abrogate the difference between right and wrong. What I've read of neurobiology is fascinating, but as I see it, science has only validated the commonsense notion that habit is a second nature and the commonsense recognition that impulse sometimes mitigates guilt. Nothing has been discovered that undercuts human freedom in the act of knowing truth and choosing good. The physical brain has not, cannot, obliterate the soul.

VII. Patriotism

The last of the goods I want to praise is *patriotism*. Perhaps it is least controversial in most settings today, but I want to direct my remarks specifically to those who are faithful Catholics. Patriotism is love of country, and my observation or fear is that orthodox Catholics increasingly find our country unlovely and unlovable. We try to teach our children self-restraint, and we find them bombarded with temptation; we try to teach them chastity and protect their innocence, and it is impossible to let them even watch the TV news without having to flip off this ad or that story; we try to teach them justice and charity, and they see the grasping praised and the cruel rewarded; we teach them to respect life, and we find the Constitution itself invoked as protecting abortion; we want them to be able to live by the calendar of their faith, and we find a drumbeat insisting on a radical separation of church and state; and then when we try to bring our moral witness to the public square, we are told that we violate the canons of “public reason” and want to impose our faith on others. I hope my articulation of these feelings convinces you that I share them.



What I want to suggest in praising patriotism nonetheless is first, to keep these crosses and persecutions in perspective, and second, that we can in good conscience claim the best and most authoritative strain of American constitutionalism as our own. Catholics were there at the American founding, though the story is seldom told: Charles Carroll signed the Declaration of Independence, Daniel Carroll signed the Constitution, and the cousin of the first and the brother of the second was none other than Fr. John Carroll, the first bishop and archbishop of Baltimore, the mother see of the Church in the United States. They were friends of George Washington and apparently helped him draft an important letter to Catholics, like his better-known letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, that made clear his view—and whose could be more authoritative?—that Catholics were welcome as full citizens in America, and the example of the Carroll family proves that they could be so in good conscience. Under the protection of the Constitution, in the midst of a culture that, given its background in Puritan England, might have been supposed

particularly hostile, American Catholics thrived, and though at the end of the last century a sort of hyperpatriotic nationalism under the name of “Americanism” was denounced by the Church as heretical, twentieth-century Catholics again played a critical role in America’s success, from developing national protection for social welfare in the New Deal, to distinguished participation in the world wars and in the struggle against communism.

The scandal of our contemporary predicament is that so much of the modernist agenda, from abortion rights to gay marriage, has not only been acquiesced in, but actually led by Catholic politicians. I still don’t understand the reasons for it—and I understand and admit a certain sympathy for both sides in the debate among bishops about the denial of communion to such politicians—but to me this much is clear: Our duty as citizens is to raise up a generation of faithful Catholic leaders in political life, able to escape by their prudence or charm the vicious attacks to which the ablest of my generation have found themselves subject. That this won’t happen without conversion, prayer, and sacrifice—even without, as Lincoln said in another context, crucifying our feelings in debate with those who do not share our faith, and even with those who do—does not seem to me a sufficient argument against the enterprise. There—I’ve proposed to the rising generation a second great task.

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Before the reaper checks his watch and does his errand, let me conclude—and thank him from the bottom of my heart for this invitation. God willing, if I make it safely home tonight and back to school on Friday, this won’t be in fact my last lecture. But I think this really was Fr. Than’s idea in inviting us to speak: to challenge us to give every lecture, to teach every seminar, to enjoy every conversation as though it might indeed be, as of course it *might* indeed be, our last lecture, last seminar, or last conversation—in other words, to remember that as teachers, we have no time for anything but the truth.

To learn more, visit the ISI short course on Western Civilization.

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