

University of Notre Dame  
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Questions From the Questionnaire.

34. Why aren't there more evidences of culture at Notre Dame?

Ans. There are evidences of culture here; there will be more of them with time. The groundwork of culture is here; the traditions are here - meagre, perhaps, in comparison with some old-world universities, but sufficient for our needs; the materials are here. Our lack is of raw material on which to work - the material is too raw as yet. Civilization came first to the barbarians of Europe, then culture. It will be the same here.

The first work of the Catholic Church is to save souls. When she has put them in the way of salvation, she can then proceed to enrich with her culture such souls as have capacity for enlargement, for deeper appreciation of truth, of beauty, of goodness. Materialism has so absorbed the attention of the American people that we find it hard to discern spiritual truth. Catholics have been drawn into it as well as non-Catholics, and the mine-run of Catholics know but a few pages of the catechism - and seldom reflect on those. (Not that reflection on the catechism will not produce culture - and that of a very high order, for that was the culture which the Irish, unlettered for three centuries, brought to this country, a culture which produced, already in the second generation, Bishops, judges, and Laetare medalists.)

Flawless English is not culture. Skill in mixing paints is not culture. The ability to recognize Bach or Wagner or Mendelsohn is not culture. The highest culture is the power of the soul to recognize the beauty of truth and goodness in God. When the soul works out from that to creatures, orderly appreciation results. Brownson, rebuking James Russell Lowell for his failure to recognize (in "The Vision of Sir Launfal") that there is rational love in the sense of duty (as opposed to the mere sensible love, which proceeds from our lower nature) declares: "The poet must know as well as feel, and know principles, the eternal verities of things, in their normal order and relations, or his expression will be broken, confused, the ebullition of lawless passion, the extravagances of a wild and inconstant fancy, or the incoherent ravings of folly and madness."

His further reflections are much to the point: "Everybody knows that the great poets, the great artists, have never flourished, save in epochs and countries marked by severe discipline, and ennobled by serious and solid studies. The flourishing period of true art is always immediately preceded or accompanied by a flourishing period of philosophy, of moral science, and of religious truth. Just in proportion as men lose sight of the great and eternal truths of religion, of the discoveries and teachings of a sound philosophy -- that is, of an ideal truth in the supernatural order and in the natural -- their artistic productions become mean and contemptible..."

".... when religion and philosophy, which supply the artist with his materials, are lost sight of or obscured; when the truths of revelation and speculative science no longer preside over education, and form the basis of moral and intellectual culture; when the mind and heart are turned to the external, and become intent only on sensible and material objects - there can be no genuine art; for when the ideal truth is no longer apprehended, it can no more be expressed under the form of the beautiful than under the form of science itself.

"Hence it is - though for the last two hundred years there has been no lack of aspirants to artistic creation - there has been no art. The divine idea, supernatural truth, was obscured by the reformers, and has been pretty much lost sight of by their descendants. There has appeared no philosopher and there has been no philosophy since the middle of the seventeenth century. The ideal truth, which was embodied by our Creator in language, has remained undistinguished. Serious studies, unless in some of the physical sciences, have been despised. The mind has been turned outward to sensible objects, and the heart and soul have been wasted on the material, the ephemeral, the frivolous. Art has therefore languished....."