

July 29, 2012
Lupus of Troyes

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

When, many decades ago---well less than half my present age---I read Goethe's Faust, I was impressed that trouble starts when Faust grows bored with the great accumulation of things he has learned. *Habe nun, ach! Philosophie / Juristerlei und Mediizin / Und leider auch Theologie / Durchaus studiert, mit heissen Bemuehn*---"Now I have thoroughly and with fervent effort studied Philosophy, Law and Medicine-even, sad to say, Theology." Faust has become an expert in many fields, and now he is able to lead his students around *an der Nase*, "by the nose." In short, Faust is bored and ready for a new adventure. It is then that the Tempter appears with a suggestion.

When I first read this scene, I was pursuing a couple of these subjects myself, so I took warning about the danger of excessive curiosity, particularly the quest of intellectual experience for its own sake.

Victor Hugo describes a similar case in the character of Claude Frollo, the archdeacon at the Cathedral of Notre Dame. Frollo, we recall, started out as a canon lawyer-heaven help him!-but soon "he flung himself upon medicine, on the liberal arts. He studied the science of herbs, the science of ointments; he became an expert in fevers and in contusions, in sprains and abscesses. Jacques d' Espars would have received him as a physician; Richard Hellain, as a surgeon. He also passed through all the degrees of licentiate, master, and doctor of arts. He studied the languages, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, a triple sanctuary then very little frequented. His was a veritable fever for acquiring and hoarding, in the matter of science. At the age of eighteen, he had made his way through the four faculties; it seemed to the young man that life had but one sole object: learning." It all sounds pretty impressive, until we reflect on later pages of the story. In the end there is more mercy for Faust than for Frollo.

Familiar with such accounts, the reader might reasonably conclude that encyclopedic learning is a dangerous thing, and, truth to tell, ascetical literature is full of exhortations to caution about too much learning. Indeed, because this world admires few things more than great learning, the disciplines of study can readily become occasions of vanity and proud display. Even our youngest students are made aware, before the end of the first semester, that learning is prized and intellectual failure is, in several ways, punished.

How much learning is *too* much? I suspect this is the wrong question. It would not have made much sense, for example, to Saint Pavel Florensky, who---at the end of a life devoted to physics, chemistry, mathematics, art criticism, philosophy, languages, and theology---capped it off by dying as a martyr!

I suppose the question is more correctly posed, not in terms of quantity, but in terms of spiritual goodness. In the cases of Faust and Frollo, the quest of knowledge was

problematic from the first. Put simply, neither man knew God, and what they studied did not lead them to God.

We may contrast this with what Ivan Sergieff (St John of Kronstadt) writes on the first page of *My Life in Christ*. He addresses God directly when he reflects on his study of "the laws regulating the mind of man, its love of wisdom, the formation and beauty of speech; I have penetrated partly into the mysteries of Nature, into her laws, into the abyss of the creations of the worlds and their revolution; I know the population of the terrestrial globe; I have acquainted myself with its different peoples, with the celebrated persons, and their works, who have passed in turn through this world; I have in part studied the great science of self-knowledge and of how to draw nigh to Thee . . . I have many books of varied contents; I have read and re-read them, but still I am not yet satisfied. My spirit still thirsts for further knowledge, and my heart is unsatisfied; it hungers, and from all the knowledge thus acquired by the intellect, it cannot gain full happiness. When will it be satisfied? It will be satisfied when 'I will behold Thy face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied when I awake with Thy likeness.'"

What most strikes me in these lines is that they form a prayer. St. John was in quest of the personal face of God, a quest born of a spiritual thirst more radical than any of the subjects he pursued in his many studies. Clearly, he regarded the latter as no impediment.

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