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## What We Have Heard and Know


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### **Cover Page Footnote**

The first author would like to express his deep appreciation for the contributions of Laura Carscaddon. Her wisdom and support are invaluable. Correspondence concerning this article should be directed to [dcarscaddon@gardner-webb.edu](mailto:dcarscaddon@gardner-webb.edu).

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Abstract

The following was the commencement address given at the May 12, 2018 afternoon graduation ceremony at Gardner-Webb University. Following a discussion on the essence of what a university is, the address focused on the purpose of obtaining a university education and its relationship to the university motto, *Pro Deo et Humanitate*.

*Keywords:* university, purpose of higher education, God and humanity, John Henry

Newman

“What We Have Heard and Know” (Psalm 78)

Dr. Bonner, colleagues, students, family and friends. It is an honor to be speaking with all of you today. Students, it is gratifying to be celebrating the occasion of your graduation from Gardner-Webb University. Congratulations! I want to express my thanks to you the students for giving me opportunities to do my work and learn alongside you. In addition, I want to “tip my hat” in deep thanks to my colleagues, from whom I learn so much. My colleagues model for me what it means to be a good teacher and scholar.

I am a university professor and it is from that perspective that I will share with you some thoughts on what I believe a university is meant to be and what it means to have a university education. I will be brief.

Universities are unique institutions. Universities are unlike any institution on the planet. A university is not like a business, it is not like the government, it is not like the military. It is more like a Church. It is more like an outward and visible sign of an inward spiritual grace. This statement is especially true for Christian universities.

The philosopher, Etienne Gilson (1991) once argued: All truth belongs to Christ, and since we belong to Christ, all truth belongs to us (p. 28). Christian universities are about seeking excellence, seeking truth, and living the truth no matter the discipline. So, what is the first and best purpose of Christian higher education? Its main purpose is to teach you how to think well so that you become good citizens on earth so that one day you become good citizens in heaven.

One of the best descriptions of a university comes from the 19<sup>th</sup> century Catholic churchman, John Henry Newman. Allow me to share some of his ideas. Newman (2001) likened a university to some great city or emporium where you can find the best kinds of things. He said that the university is “a living voice” that pours knowledge and truth into the minds of scholars

for them to commit to imagination, to recall, to dwell on, to question and re-question (p. 14).

Newman wrote that a University is a place where

. . . students come from every quarter for every kind of knowledge. . . It is the center of trade, the supreme court of fashion, the umpire of rival talents, and the standard of things rare and precious. It is the place for seeing galleries of first-rate pictures, and for hearing wonderful voices and performers of transcendent skill. It is the place for great preachers, great orators, great nobles, great statesmen. In the nature of things, greatness and unity go together; excellence implies a center. (Newman, 2001, p.15)

In one of my favorite sections Newman writes that the university is

. . .the place to which a thousand schools make contributions; in which the intellect may safely range and speculate, sure to find its equal in some antagonist activity, and its judge in the tribunal of truth. It is a place where inquiry is pushed forward, and discoveries verified and perfected, and rashness rendered innocuous, and error exposed, by the collision of mind with mind, and knowledge with knowledge. (Newman, 2001, p.16)

Newman compares the professor to a persuasive and stirring preacher or missionary presenting their discipline in its “most complete and most winning form. Pouring it forth with the zeal of enthusiasm, and lighting up his own love of it in the breasts of his hearers” (p.16).

Newman speaks of how every generation is influenced by the university and how inadequate he feels to accurately describe what a university is. He writes,

It is a place, which wins the admiration of the young by its celebrity, kindles the affections of the middle-aged by its beauty, and rivets the fidelity of the old by its

associations. It is a seat of wisdom, a light of the world, a minister of faith, an *Alma Mater* of the rising generation. It is this and a great deal more, and demands a somewhat better head and hand than mine to describe it well. (p. 16)

What can we say of the knowledge and wisdom you acquired here at Gardner-Webb University? I want you to think about your experiences at Gardner-Webb. What have you done as a student at Gardner-Webb University? Recall those times where you were academically stretched beyond what you had previously achieved. Think about those moments in your classes where something was read or spoken that gave you a different sense of the world or of yourself; where for the first time you saw things differently. Think about those times outside of class that changed you in some way. It may have nothing to do with what you learned in a classroom or on an exam, or on a computer screen or in a book. Think of those disappointing moments that left you bewildered or confused. Now, think of those sweet moments that you will never forget and have made an impression on you. Recall your favorite memory of Gardner-Webb. Dwell on it for a moment.

You have had a remarkable opportunity here. An opportunity that comes only once in a lifetime for most of us. How many times does it happen that we are able to be with others in a highly focused relationship and organized situation for the *sole* purpose of growing in knowledge and wisdom?

Today's ceremony is important because it is a publically observable sign of your accomplishments as a student and this entire community is experiencing the joy of accomplishment with you. If you are receiving a diploma today, Gardner-Webb has officially placed its stamp on you. That stamp is a declaration, a claim about you. It signifies that you are now in possession of what we mean when we say that you are an educated person. Your

experiences here have marked you; changed you in real ways. You have been stamped with the Gardner-Webb University experience. What does that stamp say? It is aptly worded in the motto on the Gardner-Webb University seal: *Pro Deo et Humanitate*; for God and Humanity. It means that you possess those intellectual things that can make the motto real and come alive in our everyday activities. How does a university do that? How can a university seal a person or mark them for some good?

It did not happen without struggle or effort. Anything worthwhile is difficult. It means that you had to rethink some previously held ideas and perhaps come to terms with ideas that you had not considered before. It means, you have allowed *good* ideas to take up room in your head and have allowed these ideas to change you for the better. That is how you are marked and sealed by a university. It was because of my own university experience that I was led to our Lord Jesus Christ and started on the road of forgiveness and grace.

It is common practice in speeches like this to offer advice. My advice for you today is to keep asking questions. Keep pondering and wondering about hard questions. Keep thinking about those things that really matter. Do not let “pressing things” keep you from doing “important things”; important things like practicing your faith to the best of your ability and striving for excellence in whatever vocation or activity you choose. If you do that, then you will bear the Gardner-Webb mark well and live out the motto of this university – *Pro Deo et Humanitate*.

Now, what does the motto “For God and Humanity” mean? Being “for God” primarily means realizing that you are not God. It means you are not in competition with God or could ever be. It also means that God is not in competition with you. It means, allowing ourselves to be humble in order to realize the startling truth that we *cannot* do everything by ourselves. That



we are not self-sufficient. That we need something bigger than ourselves to clean up the messes in our lives and to straighten out our sins, mistakes, and failures. We need something bigger than anything in the universe to make things beautiful again. We were made to worship something bigger than ourselves.

Being “for humanity” means realizing that there is more to a person (or institution for that matter) than their biggest problem. There is more to a person than their worst mistake or failure. It means honoring someone’s strengths and talents no matter how small in order to will the good for that person for their sake. In other words, to love them. Therefore, being “for God” means raising our thoughts and lifting our hearts to adore the Creator and sustainer of our lives. Being “for humanity” means raising up our neighbor in dignity for their sake. Gardner-Webb University chose the right motto for its mission in higher education. Let us take what we have learned here and make the motto real. Congratulations again! Thank you.

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