

THE MISSION OF THE UNIVERSITY

Raymond DERINE, Professor in the Law Faculty,
Lovanium University, Belgian Congo.

The General Secretariat of Pax Romana is happy to reproduce the text (slightly abridged) of Professor Derine's speech in Lovanium University, on the occasion of the Pax Romana Day celebrations, April 28, 1958

What is the mission of the University, what are the responsibilities of University students and graduates? These are problems which have been raised the world over and are favourite themes of Pax Romana.

If we think of the end to which a University should aspire, we can certainly dismiss the notion which reduces its role to the purely technical and professional formation of students. Neither, in my opinion, should we support those who consider that its ultimate end is the setting up of a research centre. Doubtless the preparation of young people for careers, and the promotion of science is part and parcel of the daily life of the University, but it is not everything. There is something more, less tangible perhaps, but no less real, and in my opinion, even more important. The University must also radiate a spirit. Now, you cannot impose this spirit. You cannot even teach it, and alas, it never comes in the guise of subsidies. Rather it is conceived and takes shape slowly, freely, in great measure thanks to the students themselves.

Even now, Lovanium is the admiration of all. When the University is finished, we shall have buildings and equipment, the envy of many a country. However, all this is not essential. Without a true university spirit, these impressive buildings would be empty vessels. In the last resort, it is the users themselves who make or mar a University.

What is this University spirit?

What is this University spirit of which I speak so insistently? What are the responsibilities of University people?

Dear friends of Pax Romana, on your posters (1) you have rightly said, "Africa needs you". You have come to the University determined to work in the service of the community and in the service of your people. You are convinced that the growth of modern Africa will call for constant, unselfish effort. This is important. For the University spirit is on the wane when the students aspire to honour alone. It is more direly threatened when young intellectuals only think of selling their talents to lead an easy life. Specially in countries where a section of the population makes a show of luxury and does not set an example of detachment, the young intellectual élite is tempted to confuse material advantages and comfort with civilization and true culture.

(1) The speaker is referring to the caption on the posters for the African Seminar.



But neither honours nor still less an easy life attract you. You believe wholeheartedly that noblesse oblige, that to command means also to serve. As future doctors, magistrates, engineers, lawyers, teachers and possibly political leaders, you will be in the public eye. Those who have had neither the chance nor the privilege of doing such advanced studies, will expect a lot from you. Their appreciation will depend on your devotion. If need be, they will judge you and judge you severely. Let us not forget that you can deceive humble folk for a certain length of time, but, if you do not wish them well, if you do not throw yourselves into defending their interests, then sooner or later, their common sense and intuition will find you out.

We need devoted, upright men

Perhaps you are surprised that, when speaking of this university spirit, I have insisted at such length on moral qualities. Is intelligence not the mark of the University man? I admit that the future of a country depends on intelligent, capable men, but it also depends on devoted, upright men, on reliable men whose word inspires confidence, who will not burn their idols for thirty pieces of silver.

What means should University people use to serve the community and promote their people?

Here we need the qualities which are intimately linked with University formation: objectivity, sound judgement, and breadth of vision.

There is too a specific University approach to problems other than scientific, to social and political problems etc. Indeed, the habit of looking for truth in the sciences should affect our daily lives. A University man always tries to judge a situation objectively, quietly, without partisan ideas, ready to examine his adversary's arguments in a favourable frame of mind. A University man can better grasp the relativity of things. He manages to stand back from current events. He looks at problems and solves them in the light of history and a background of several centuries, instead of limiting himself to present contingencies. This breadth of vision will also prevent him from being narrow-minded. He is used to viewing all problems from three angles - in the immediate reality, in their historic setting, and in their world context.

Understanding our times

As University people, we should try to understand the times in which we live. Without broad-mindedness, without a world vision, the extent and repercussions of the present evolution may well escape us completely. We might cling to concepts no longer in harmony with the trends which guide our times.

People say that the world has become one big village. Thanks to modern communications...contacts between peoples grow more numerous and speedier all the time. Every sphere of life is in full evolution.

Let us not accuse the past too much

We know that the era of colonialism is drawing to a close. Let us not accuse the past too much. In 1900, who would have thought that, today in this very country, a young African élite would be formed and assert itself, notably in Lovanium University?

We are rapidly going towards a world in which there are no more conquerors or subjected peoples, a world in which a genuine dialogue between all peoples is beginning to take place... This evolution implies that nationalism in the derogatory sense of chauvinistic isolation, is outmoded. Of course, we do not mean that people should sacrifice their languages, their cultures and customs. We simply mean that we should not cut ourselves off from other nations and the universal currents of contemporary history.

Evaluating politics

Still in the same order of ideas, this universal spirit, this breadth of vision helps us to evaluate politics correctly. Unfortunately, politics often stress not what unites, but what separates men and peoples. Now we must admit that the newspapers generally overestimate problems to the detriment of many other values. The space reserved for political events is completely out of proportion to their real interest. Day after day, we are subjected to a battery of news on the latest nuclear tests, on all the political meetings, all the revolts and riots, all the political and social demands the world over. We may end up with the impression that politics is the acme of man's achievements. This error is committed all the more easily in countries which aspire to autonomy. The nationalist movements in Europe often tended to overestimate the value of their political members. Political leaders were too easily considered the only heroes of the fatherland. Yet, at the same time, may we not legitimately ask whether the real heroes are not those who are caring the sick, pouring over a difficult dossier, doing higher mathematics or looking after their children?

Of course, I do not wish to deny the existence of political questions, and some citizens must be actively engaged in politics. It is even desirable that all should be interested in the problems which concern the interests of their country. But, on the other hand, we should rid ourselves of an exaggerated respect for political life. We can be sure that the people - not that abstract entity of which there is often much talk and which represents everyone and no one, but the living community - is often better served by its doctors, magistrates, teachers, engineers and scholars who do their job unostentatiously.

Breadth of vision, balanced outlook indispensable for the élite

This breadth of vision will guarantee the balanced outlook essential to those who form the élite. University training helps us to act decisively but always calmly, serenely. A University man does not get excited about nothing. He takes decisions level-headedly. Narrow-minded people get impatient; they think Paris was built in a day. They want to jump the intermediary stages. Whereas the openminded University man prefers evolution... because he knows that evolution is revolution in the long run. He remembers that his people and the world will survive him. He realizes that it is often reserved to future generations to finish what man begins today.

The role of Pax Romana

How can Pax Romana help to bring about this University ideal? It seems to me that Pax Romana can contribute in a very powerful way to this spirit of objectivity, this balanced intellectual outlook, this universal spirit and this



breadth of vision. Through Pax Romana, we are all the time coming into contact with other countries. This contact gives us points of comparison. It widens our horizons, helps us to see our problems on a world scale. Seen from this angle, the problems which harass us, which sap our energy perhaps or cause us pain, show up in another light, and lose much of their absolute character. And what organization is better placed than Pax Romana to assume this task?

The universality of the Church.

What power or institution favours this universal spirit more than the Church? By tradition, She is universal. To carry out her mission, the Church has always addressed herself to all peoples. She has always tried to contribute to the flowering of all races and all nations. Doubtless in the long history of the Church, there have been moments of weakness when some of her members were too tied up with the masters of the hour. But on the whole, the Church has been the surest protector of the weak, the oppressed and the colonised. She too has been the most faithful defender of the fraternity and equality of peoples. It is not for nothing that she is sometimes accused of sacrificing the selfish interests of a given nation for this universal solidarity.

Today, it has become "the thing" to hail the awakening of the peoples who do not belong to the white race. We cannot but rejoice at this awakening. But everyone knows that the Church was the first to place full confidence in these peoples when she formed native priests and bishops both in Asia and Africa, and this at a time when the wave of nationalism was still insignificant, even non-existent. She did not need the whip of nationalism, because the doctrine of Christ obliges her to be universal and to accept all peoples on an equal footing. There is no need to insist on this point. But in a world eaten by propaganda and political exaggeration, it is sometimes good to remember where to look for old friends...

In Pax Romana, all races and all peoples can be sure of a warm welcome and an attentive hearing for their specific problems provided they remain faithful to this ideal of fraternity and Christian solidarity...

The difficult but noble mission of African University students and graduates

Finally, I should like to say a few words to my African friends. Soon, or at least within a few years, you will have left this University. Then, you will be on your own, free to act as you think fit. You will have a difficult but noble mission. We could go on arguing for ever with people who think that the founding of an African University in the Belgian Congo was premature. But

I firmly believe that your capacities, your breadth of vision, your integrity and devotion will convince the most sceptical. The answer lies with you. In this sense therefore it is true to say: "Africa needs you", but in the spirit of Pax Romana, I shall go further: "My friends, the Christian world needs you!"

Original: French
