Gravitas, Dignitas, Pietas

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If any people in history knew it, the Romans knew how to be serious over serious things. Next to the cultured poets and philosophers of Athens, the Romans saw themselves as a race of soldiers and farmers. The religious rites that Numa instituted early in Rome's history cultivated a deep reverence for ancestry and custom, for bonds between neighbors, and for those boundaries that designate and hallow sacred ground. Roman law reflected a concern for those spaces that must not be violated, whether they be in a temple, a city, a house, or a man's soul. This gravity, admittedly, came along with an almost unbelievable degree of cruelty, and when the Romans did violate that which they knew to be sacred, they were capable of a kind of blasphemy which Anton LaVey only childishly imitates. As Rome turned to the light of the gospel, however, that old Roman spirit with its old Roman language bequeathed to the rising Christian civilization a vocabulary of religion. Indeed, the word *religio* can scarcely be translated anymore because what it signified to the Latin mind—a whole nexus of ritual and feeling that binds a community together—will strike modern secular society as nothing but a silly costume party. This society knows how to be flippant over serious things, but where it sees its flippancy as characteristic of enlightenment, its Roman forebears would have seen it as characteristic of nothing but barbarism.

Listen, for example, to the disdain and hatred with which Livy describes the impiety of Hannibal right after an impressive description of his martial virtues:

> *Has tantas viri virtutes ingentia vitia aequabant: inhumana crudelitas, perfidia plus quam Punica, nihil veri, nihil sancti, nullus deum metus, nullum ius iurandum, nulla religio.*
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> But these great merits were matched by great vices—inhuman cruelty, a perfidy worse than Punic, an utter absence of truthfulness, reverence, fear of the gods, respect for oaths, sense of religion. (*Ab Urbe Condita* 21.4, trans. Benjamin Oliver Foster)

The modern, urbane, secular man has become just such a person, only without the martial virtues. His limp-wristed relativism has no sense of truth (*nihil veri*); his scoff holds nothing sacred (*nihil sancti*); his foul-mouth and moral carelessness betray nothing of that fear which is the beginning of wisdom (*nullus deum metus*); his three divorces demonstrate an utter disregard for oath and covenant (*nullum ius iurandum*); and of course, forty years have gone by since he has gone to church (*nulla religio*).

Classical schools do many things at once to combat this slide into degeneracy, and the classical school movement represents one major point of hope for the future. At these schools, children will, of course, learn Latin, and as they dutifully drill their flashcards and painstakingly translate passages from Cicero and Virgil, they will face a whole array of words that cannot be easily translated into the language of flippancy. At one level, simply learning the words will do them good because a word acts like a designated coat-hook in the mind on which they can hang ideas. Without the hook, the ideas tend to flop down into a sloppy pile—in the mind but indistinct. At a deeper level, however, struggling to translate these words in the context of classical culture forces them into a whole world of thought with an altogether different tenor than their own. Three words in particular capture the Roman spirit well and prove helpfully tricky for students to translate: *Gravitas*, *Dignitas*,

and *Pietas*. Like such students and like those Roman Christians who converted the language of an empire into a language for the Kingdom of God, Christians today can renew their vocabulary of worship through reflection on these words.

Gravitas originally comes from the adjective *gravis*, which means in its most literal sense, "heavy." The Romans extended this original, physical sense of weight into the psychological and spiritual realm so that *gravis* comes to mean "serious," "important," or when English picks it up, "grave." *Gravitas* thus describes the presence of that weightiness in something or someone, the aura of that which matters. *Gravitas* makes things sink decisively in the scales, and its opposite is all that is trivial or frivolous, what someone might today call "fluff." The Romans knew as well as we that this weightiness could have its negative, even its comic, side, and frequently when they spoke of someone's *gravitas* they meant that he was harsh or self-important. The error and comedy comes in, however, not because everything deserves to be treated with casual wit but because some old Roman men were so habituated to the posture and tone of weight that they carried their expressions inflexibly into contexts that warranted a smile.

Although he wrote in Greek rather than Latin, Paul likewise felt the natural connection between weightiness and that which matters when he writes, "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory (*βάρος δόξης*)" (2 Corinthians 4:17). Paul likely makes this connection because he has in mind the Hebrew word for glory (כבוֹד), which comes from a root signifying heaviness. CS Lewis uses this phrase as the title for his justly famous sermon, "The Weight of Glory," and he connects the idea of weightiness to that of a burden in his magisterial final paragraph: "The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbor's glory should be laid daily on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken." Here one finds the fully Christian conversion of that Roman *gravitas* which tends so easily toward a

stony-faced self-importance. The Christian does not seek to locate the heaviness of import in himself but rather in his neighbor. This neighbor may be someone counted insignificant by the world, but the Christian knows what truly carries weight: that this man before him is a person made in the image of God, a person for whom Christ died.

Dignitas comes from the adjective *dignus* which means "worthy." Like *gravitas* it signifies an aura, the presence of an intangible quality giving one the sense of great value. From the columns of their temples to the pomp of the triumphal chariot, the Romans sought to bestow grandeur, majesty, authority, and eminence upon their empire. As with *gravitas*, this can, of course, become a vice. The Romans exalted much that should be despised, and an emperor such as Nero becomes the very picture of insane human pride. The answer to this sin, however, is not to become casual about everything but rather to reserve *dignitas* for that which deserves it, for that which is truly worthy.

Modern culture may know abstractly that something is worthy, but it preserves few institutions or practices that seek to surround these worthy things with the feeling of their worth. Instead, it knows how to surround marriage with the sweet sentiments of Hallmark, and it knows how to surround unreal heroes with enough explosions and dramatic music to make them feel "epic." Worst of all, I fear that these sentiments have come to dominate the aesthetic in church as well. At its best, Christian worship has always been able to incorporate these easier feelings where they were appropriate while keeping the gaze of the saints firmly fixed in serious wonder at a worthy God.

Perhaps this age's inability to dress what is worthy in royal robes comes from its democratic constitution and its repugnance for the pretensions of monarchy. Admittedly, former ages have erred toward a ridiculous pomposity and have surrounded arrogance and imbecility with aristocratic finery. In the face of such

folly, mockery may be in order lest the rich young ruler take himself too seriously and lest he forget the poor. The democratic impulse wants to bring such men down a few pegs and teach them to dress, to talk, to carry themselves like everyone else. The hope is that by bringing down the proud the revolutionary will raise everyone up to the dignity of universal brotherhood. By bringing everything down to the aesthetic of the common man, however, the revolutionary does not succeed in ennobling the poor, which innumerable strip malls, gas stations, and slums will readily attest. Rather, Christ ennobles the poor man by freely inviting him into into a King's banquet. Such an invitation teaches a man to stand up straight, to lift his chin, to walk like a man and not like a beast, to walk, in other words, with *dignitas*.

Pietas goes even further than the first two words from the familiar world of contemporary life and even from most contemporary religious life because *pietas* combines into a single feeling the domains of worship, family loyalty, and patriotism. Or better (as Owen Barfield would no doubt remind us): *pietas* signifies what was once a single unified feeling, which successive generations have broken apart into separate pieces through the inevitable analytic processes of language. This feeling lives within a man as a trembling awareness of those claims placed upon his life by God, by family, by clan, by soil—ties which bind a man to responsibility and sacrifice, perhaps even to martyrdom. On one side, this awareness takes on a note of dread because it is an awareness of duty that takes a man all the way to death. On the other side, however, this awareness is full of a deep joy because it roots a man in those bonds that make possible a fully human life.

People naturally restrict "piety" to the religious sphere, and even in Latin the religious element remains always at the forefront. (The root, *piare* means "to atone for" or "to purify through sacred rites.") The complexity of *pietas*, however, helps a Latin student to see that the specifically religious attitude remains connected to other attitudes. The disposition that teaches someone a sense of hushed reverence

upon entering a church sanctuary is the same disposition that teaches him to feel the thunderclap of irrevocable commitment when he makes his marriage vows or to feel the sober shroud of honor cast over Arlington National Cemetery. I wonder how a Roman would regard the fad of placing cute cafés in the crypts of churches like St. Paul's or St. Martin-in-the-Fields.

One will readily notice that these three words have to do with feelings. *Gravitas* and *dignitas* apply to the object of feeling, while *pietas* applies to the subject. They all, however, turn the attention toward the affective dimension of experience and away from the cognitive. While not entirely true, it almost seems that some time ago those serious about the faith turned toward the life of the mind and thereby abdicated the feel of worship to the most frivolous tastes. More likely, the slow acids of an increasingly mass culture have eaten away the modern worshiper's very capacity for deeper feeling. This seems especially to be the case in large, trendy, evangelical churches, but whole swathes of the Catholic landscape seem to be infected with the same problems. One should not think, therefore, that the issue boils down to reformation disputes about the place of art in churches or the celibacy of the priesthood. Indeed, some country pentecostals seem to know the awful presence best of all.

Whatever the cause of our malady, the path to renewal lies through books—old books, in dead languages. But of course, the Romans themselves might simply suggest a vigorous, manly effort toward serious treatment of serious things.