

GOODNESS BEFORE GREATNESS: THE END “HANGS UPON” THE BEGINNING

While admittedly unfamiliar with the early 1st century AD Roman astrologer/poet by the name of **Marcus Manilius**, his oft-quoted line “The end depends upon the beginning” (*Finisque ab origine pendet*) from his *Astronomica* (Book IV, line 16) really intrigues me. The phrase was even lifted to serve as the motto for the prestigious Phillips Exeter Academy in NH, though admittedly in a different sense than originally intended. It has been interpreted to mean that the manner in which we **initially proceed** is determinative for how we will fare in the end. That is surely a valid principle. The word *pendet* literally means *hangs*, thus “the end **hangs** upon the beginning.” The full quotation is, “We are born but to die, the end hangs from the beginning.” While not subscribing to the stoic philosophy that our end is “baked into” the beginning in any deterministic sense, there is a **kernel of wisdom** in this phrase.

Has anyone been thinking about the **state of our country** lately? Me too! We must return to the foundational principles that were enumerated at the very *beginning* of our nation if we are to remain true to our roots. Our founders established this nation upon core values and how we abide by those (or do not) is largely determinative of the success or failure of our nation. I cited a quotation in last week’s column, though I **failed in not being thorough** enough in checking my **sources**, something I pride myself in doing. The quotation was not from Alexis de Toqueville’s travels across our young nation, but rather by two ministers who had been visiting from England. **Andrew Reed and James Matheson** penned “A Narrative of the Visit to the American Churches” in 1835 A.D. It reads thus: “America will be **great** if America is **good**. If not, her greatness will **vanish** like a morning cloud.” Amen, brothers! You hit the nail on the head.

The sentiments conveyed by their observation are equally valid today. If we **aspire** to be a great nation, we must first **strive to be good**. Reed and Matheson’s observances 185 years ago were largely positive. In speaking of the Sabbath, Reed wrote: “I have never seen that day observed in Bristol or Bath as it was in Boston and Philadelphia.” Granted, they were ministers, but he saw religious observances as a sure sign that this new nation was populated by a **religiously observant** citizenry. Morally upright as a people, we espoused our founders’ principles: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. We must provide safety and secure basic human rights, while respecting one another. This is a challenge in a pluralistic society. Today with such **stark differences**, it seems an insurmountable task.

If the end depends upon the beginning, then education plays a significant role. The recent Supreme Court decision (*Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue*) ensures that religious persons and organizations can participate in government programs that are open to all. In particular this opens a path for various forms of tax credit scholarship programs that have been implemented in other states. The decision is great news for faith-based schools. Out of curiosity, I pulled up the 2019-20 calendar for the Saint Paul Public Schools and counted a total of **168** student instructional **school days**, a **far cry** from the **180** that I recall from my Catholic school days. Admittedly, memories fade – I seem to recall **walking uphill** to school in **both** directions! But seriously, this may be one reason we are falling behind other countries. We’ve gotten soft!

What principles are our young people learning about patriotism, the U.S. Constitution, or the Bill of Rights? Do we teach civics anymore? How do we form students in civic virtue, while also encouraging them to engage their voices civilly in a pluralistic society? I fear we have created a culture in which the proverbial “squeaky wheel” gets the oil– never a recipe for sustained democracy in action. It is neither about who can shout the loudest, nor who is most **easily offended**. A “cancel culture” is doomed from the get-go. The Constitution wisely provided a forum for the redress of wrongs, enshrining checks and balances and a separation of powers. It promoted respect for those with whom we disagree, that we may learn from one another and progress in knowledge and virtue.

In *The City of God* (Book XIX, 24), Augustine wrote that “a people is an assemblage of reasonable beings bound together by a common agreement as to the objects of their love...” To discover the **character** of a people, **observe what they love**. He was spot on. Do we have such common objects of love today? What are they? Rooting for the Vikings, attending the State Fair? What about practicing **civic virtue** toward the common good

of society? We have a duty to form our young people in love for their country and to educate them to understand her founding principles. We do this, even while working to eradicate existing injustice, because that is what good people do. Being a great nation presupposes we are first good.

- I have long admired the music of **Ennio Morricone**, the prolific Italian composer who created the soundtrack for *The Mission*. The hauntingly beautiful score (Gabriel's Oboe) is a major reason why the 1986 film about Jesuit **missionaries** in 18th century Guarani lands in South American is among my **all-time favorites**. Morricone, who composed hundreds of soundtracks and classical works, died last week at age 91. He was honored last year by Pope Francis for his “extraordinary artistic work in the sphere of music, universal language of peace, solidarity and spirituality.”
- While the Covid-19 protocols are a bit complicated, I am deeply grateful for how well everyone has **adjusted** to the bulk of the changes. I am especially grateful for the help in sanitizing after Mass. You have made our jobs much more manageable.
- Shortcut, anyone? A **century ago** today, July 12, 1920, President Woodrow Wilson officially opened the **Panama Canal** to commercial vessels. Workers had to cut through the continental divide, with up to 160 trains per day carrying rock that had been broken up by dynamite. **Six thousand** workers were employed in this massive project, a true feat of human ingenuity that shaved 7,900 miles off of the trip around Tierra del Fuego.
- Ouch! The Archdiocese of Dublin reported an **80% decline** in stewardship since the outbreak of the pandemic. All the more reason why I am so deeply grateful for **your support** and generosity in these difficult times. The priests of this Archdiocese have approved a **freeze** for our own salaries— no raises for inflation, etc. It is the very least that we can do. We'll get through this, I am confident.
- Shameful. On the eve of Independence Day, a statue of **St. Junípero Serra** was torn down and beaten with a **sledgehammer** on the grounds of California's state capitol in Sacramento. Archbishop Gomez of Los Angeles noted: “St. Junípero was 60 years old when he traveled 2,000 miles from Carmel to Mexico City to protest the injustices of the colonial system and demand that authorities adopt a ‘bill of rights’ that he had written for the native peoples.”

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector