

“A MIND IS A TERRIBLE THING TO WASTE” LESSONS FROM THE GROCERY STORE

Okay, I willingly admit that I am a bit quirky. When I shop for groceries I am awfully particular, seeking to order only what I think I will eat during any given time frame. Why purchase six bananas if you only think you'll eat three? They quickly go bad. Recently, when ordering sandwich meat, the kind young man behind the counter asked me “How much would you like?” I dutifully replied, “May I have .4 pounds, thinly sliced, please?” The look on his face said it all. “4/10 of a pound,” I clarified. Pausing as he furrowed his eyebrows, he inquired “Um... how much is that? Is that like... about a third of a pound or something?” I replied calmly, “It is somewhere between 1/3 and 1/2 a pound. How about just giving me 10 slices.” Or, when filling my car at the gas station, I have a quirky habit of always trying to stop on a round number. Hey, I'm easily amused! I do not like to pre-pay, preferring to use a coupon for cash back. So, when I filled the car to precisely 12.000 gallons and presented my \$.10 discount per gallon coupon, I thought to myself, “No, stop— don't do it...surely this time he will not reach for the calculator.” Oh, how wrong I was!

What has happened to our educational system such that people have effectively lost the ability to think without the aid of a calculator or beckoning **Siri** or **Alexa** into the conversation? I hope this does not come across as haughty, because that is certainly not my intention. I too struggled in math class. When on the first day of my junior year in high school my math teacher exclaimed, “Oh, so you are a Ubel. I'm so looking forward to having you in class. I taught both of your brothers,” I had to make a split-second decision. I chose not to break the bad news, figuring he would find out soon enough. His experience with me would be radically different! While my brothers were quite willing to oblige when I sought help, they never “spoon fed” me. They were trying to get me to **think through the problem** myself. Sometimes you have to fight through a difficult situation in order to emerge on the other side. I hope that students see the value in simple acts of thinking, pondering and wondering. The joy of education is in **discovering truths**, and all of our efforts in school are directed towards that. God made us to know and to seek to know. When we lose our desire to wonder or are unwilling to engage in problem solving, we have lost something essential.

Isaac Asimov's 1958 short story “A Feeling of Power” describes a distant future in which human beings, so utterly dependent upon computers, have forgotten the fundamentals of mathematics. An entry level technician named “Aub” was discovered to be able to compute in his head, using a piece of paper to calculate mathematical problems. He was brought before the top brass at the New Pentagon. The story relates: “Aub! How much is nine times seven?” Aub hesitated a moment. His pale eyes glimmered with a feeble anxiety. “Sixty-three,” he said. Congressman Brant lifted his eyebrows. “Is that right?” “Check it for yourself, Congressman.” The congressman took out his pocket computer, nudged the milled edges twice, looked at its face as it lay there in the palm of his hand, and put it back. He said, “Is this the gift you brought us here to demonstrate. An illusionist?” “More than that, sir. Aub has memorized a few operations and with them he computes on paper.” “A paper computer?” said the general. He looked pained. “No, sir,” said Shuman patiently. “Not a paper computer. Simply a piece of paper.” Upon this knowledge reaching the President of the Terrestrial Federation, the tale continues... “Computing without a computer,” said the president impatiently, “is a contradiction in terms.”

Well, guess what? The Lord has given us the **greatest computer** of all— it is called our intellect. And God gave it to us to be used. In his treatise “On Truth” (*De Veritate, Q. 14, art. 1*), **St. Thomas Aquinas** beautifully lays out the genius of the human intellect: “When, faced with an object, it is not more disposed to accept one part of a contradiction rather than another, the intellect will be in a state of *doubt*. When it adheres more to one part of a contradiction than to another, with fear that the other might be true, there will be *opinion*. When the intellect is determined to one part of a contradiction without fear that the other might be true, there will be *understanding*, through immediate evidence, or *science*, if of a conclusion depending finally upon immediate evidence. When, however, the will moves the intellect to accept something determinately, not because it apprehends it as knower, but solely because it seems good, there will be *faith*.”

One of the all-time best “tag lines” has to be the iconic slogan from the United Negro College Fund (UNCF) ads of 1972— “A Mind is a Terrible Thing to Waste.” Remember those ads? In fact, the slogan is still used today.

It applies equally to all of us. We need to engage our intellect, to do our own homework, becoming informed about our Catholic faith, current world and Church events, etc. In the end, may we “speak what we know, and know what we speak.” As we look ahead to a new academic year, I pray that our children, Junior and Senior High students and collegiate parishioners all truly set their minds to achieve this year. We need their minds, we need their engagement, we need their hard work to fully utilize the gifts that God has given to them. For when they fully engage, both our Church and society will be stronger as a result.

- Looking to add an ingredient to your spiritual life this fall? Consider the **nine First Fridays**. When our Lord appeared to St. Margaret Mary, a French Visitation nun, he asked her to spread **Devotion to the Sacred Heart**. Part of that devotion consists in receiving Holy Communion on the first Friday of each month for a period of nine months, in order to receive the grace of final penitence.
- The recent 11-page letter released by **Archbishop Carlo Vigano**, Apostolic Nuncio to the U.S. from 2011-2016, has occasioned much commentary from all quarters. The “bombshell” story is unfolding daily, making any bulletin column (submitted on Tuesdays), surely outdated by Sunday. So I will be brief and to the point. Only **one thing** matters– the **truth**. The truth will set us free. Read Cardinal DiNardo’s recent statement as President of the USCCB: (www.usccb.org/news/2018/18-143.cfm)
- No one is a stranger at the **MN State Fair**. My annual visit to the Fair was wonderful in every way. It was cloudy (too much sun tires me out!) but dry. Two dairy Princess Kay reps, (Agriculture majors at the U of M from southeast MN), patiently helped us understand more about the dairy process, while a gentleman at the DNR Fish Pond was extremely patient as I repeatedly misidentified various species in the pond, much to the delight of my priest confreres.
- Keep spreading the word about getting involved at the Cathedral as choir members, ushers, lectors, extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion, catechists, RCIA sponsors. Pray about it and consider answering the call.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector