

**“Prophet & Scribe: Catholics, Intellectuals, & the Pursuit of Wisdom”**

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Loyola Chapel Series

December 8, 2003

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The Book of Sirach, also known as the Wisdom of Ben Sira or sometimes and rather oddly as Ecclesiasticus, has a special significance for a journalist and author. It is one of the very few books in the Old Testament that has an accurate byline: it was actually written by the person named as author.

Yeshua ben Eleazar ben Sira, or simply Ben Sira, lived and taught in Jerusalem and probably composed this collection of maxims, proverbs, blunt advice, lessons, prayers, poems, and autobiographical observations—the book has been called his “lecture notes”—around 180 years before the birth of Christ.

Wisdom, as you know, has a wide range of meanings in the Hebrew Scriptures, from simple craftsmanship to slippery craftiness, from enlightened self-interested to upright living, from common sense to profound understanding. The Wisdom literature testifies not so much to the God of history as to the God of everyday reality, not so much to the God of Exodus as to the God of Creation.

There are parts of Sirach, as there are parts of the Books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, that read like advice columns.

Dear Ben Sira,

I am planning to divide my kingdom among my three daughters and spend my retirement living with them. What do you think?

Sincerely, King Lear

Dear King Lear,

Do not give your property to another,  
in case you change your mind and must ask for it.  
For it is better that your children should ask from you  
than that you should look to the hand of your children.  
At the time when you end the days of your life,  
in the hour of death, distribute your inheritance. (Sir. 33:20b, 22,  
24)

Sincerely, Ben Sira

Dear Ben Sira,

I recently met three weird sisters, who predicted I would become a king.  
Should I go for it?

Sincerely, Lord Macbeth

Dear Mr. Macbeth,

Divination and omens and dreams are unreal,  
and like a woman in labor, the mind has fantasies.  
Unless they are sent by intervention from the Most High,  
pay no attention to them.  
For dreams have deceived many,  
and those who put their hope in them have perished. (Sir. 34:5-7)

Sincerely, Ben Sira

The Book of Sirach, like other Wisdom literature, sometimes seems to deal with hard questions by offering contradictory statements in different places. Sometimes its declarations read like Zen koans. There is much sound counsel about guarding one's tongue and keeping secrets, and an extended passage, occasionally gross, about table manners. Ben Sira's recipes for raising children would never meet the approval of psychologists. I fear that some of his views on daughters and wives might gain him a hearing with the Taliban.

On the other hand, I deeply appreciate this evening mention of my father's work here in this chapel. For as Ben Sira writes:

He who honors his father atones for sin;  
He stores up riches who reveres his mother.  
He who honors his father is gladdened by children.  
And when he prays he is heard.  
(Sir. 3:3-5)

There are also parts of Sirach that read like raptures by Walt Whitman and the final chapters, preceded by the phrase "Let us now praise famous men," which James Agee appropriated for his Depression-era opus on sharecroppers, render all of biblical history in the most lyric tones.

The verses read this evening portray Wisdom on the cosmic level, a personified, feminine attribution or expression of the Godhead, active in the very divine process of creation. Ben Sira's wonderful poem is consciously modeled on Proverbs, Chapter 8, the focus in recent years of feminist theological interest. There Sophia, personified Wisdom, is brought forth before heaven and earth were established. She was with God, like a master craftsman, at the creation. Here Ben Sira evokes Wisdom as the word from God's mouth hovering, before all ages, like a mist over the primeval deep, holding sway over all the nations but establishing her special abode with the covenant people .

That abode, it seems, was never an easy one. In a prologue written half a century or so later, Ben Sira's grandson tells us that he has worked night and day to translate his grandfather's book into Greek. No easy task, he reminds us, in an early lesson in inculturation. No translation, he warns, whether of this book or all the Scriptures, can ever carry the exact same meaning as the original. But in Greek, Sirach became part of the Septuagint, the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures used by Greek-speaking Jews in the Diaspora and in Palestine. From there it naturally passed into the Christian canon. It was authoritatively and widely cited in Jewish literature even though the Pharisaic rabbis, troubled by its theology about the afterlife, eventually excluded it from the Jewish canon as did Martin Luther, fourteen centuries later, from his German Bible of 1534.

Yeshua ben Sira was a scribe, "one who devotes himself to the study of the law of the Most High." Commentators take the passages in Chapter 38 and Chapter 39 as a kind of ideal self-description.

He studies the wisdom of all the ancients,  
and occupies himself with prophecies;  
he treasures the discourses of the famous  
and goes to the heart of involved saying;  
he studies the hidden meanings of proverbs  
and is busied with enigmas found in parables.

(Sir. 39:1-3, AB trans., see ABD, VI, 933)

“Scribe” is a very loose term in the Bible. It covers almost everything that requires the knowledge of writing, from the simple copyist and record keeper to the most learned advisor to rulers and religious authorities. One scholar compares the biblical use of “scribe” to our use of “secretary,” which can mean anything from an office typist to the Secretary of State. Ben Sira’s scribe is clearly on the high end of this scale—not only a person of great learning and insight but a significant court official at home and abroad.

He serves among the great  
and appears before rulers;  
he travels in foreign lands  
and learns what is good and evil in the human lot. (Sir. 39:4,  
NRSV)

“Scribe” does not have a positive ring for many Christians. The scribes are lumped with the Pharisees among Jesus’s adversaries. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” Jesus says. It is sometimes forgotten that the chapter of Matthew full of those repeated “woes” on the scribes and Pharisees ends with Jesus saying, “Therefore I send you prophets, sages, and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town ...” (Matt 23:34). It is in Matthew, too, that Jesus speaks of “every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven” and “is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (Matt. 13:52).

The uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding the ancient term “scribe” is not unlike that surrounding the modern term “intellectual.” What is an intellectual? Is an intellectual different from a scholar, academic, scientist, artist, preacher, journalist, professional, writer?

When I taught a course on “Intellectuals in American Politics and Culture” at Notre Dame and Georgetown, I gave students a page listing names from John Paul II to Hillary Clinton, from Stephen Hawking to Stephen King, from Noam Chomsky to Madonna, from Antonin Scalia to Hugh Hefner, from Malcolm X to Martin Scorsese. We broke into small groups that discussed who among these was an intellectual, who wasn’t, who was a “maybe,” and most importantly *why*. The intellectuals, we tended to conclude, were those who had produced a significant body of ideas or concepts that were accessible to a general educated public and that addressed questions of central importance for the society.

Obviously sheer brainpower was not the key nor sheer popularity. Winning a Nobel Prize in Medicine or Physics does not substitute for contributing to society’s struggles with questions of equality, justice, violence, and meaning. Being on the best-seller list or having millions of fans does not substitute for meeting a threshold of conceptual originality and quality. Nor in fact does being a saint: Mother Teresa was not an intellectual, my student usually agreed, while Hannah Arendt indisputably was.

What we were discussing were of course what might be called elite or leading intellectuals or, as the phrase now goes, *public intellectuals*. Their work reaches a large public, in other words, a good many strangers. But we should not forget what might be called *local intellectuals*, that is, professionals or teachers or clergy or perhaps just parents or even bartenders who exhibit a similar quality and liveliness and range of ideas but largely reach people only in their face-to-face circles.

In either case, to label someone an “intellectual” was originally intended to be an insult. The term was first used in France in the 1890s to sneer at dissenting professors and writers like Emile Zola who publicly demanded a fair trial for Captain Alfred Dreyfus in the face of judicial and military cover-ups and anti-Semitic hysteria. As so often, however, the dissenters soon seized the negative label as a badge of honor.

In reality this critique and defense of intellectuals, primarily in their involvement in political affairs, had already been a staple of Western intellectual life for a century or more, at least since the Enlightenment and the French Revolution and Edmund Burke’s stinging attack on what he called the “political men of letters.” Ironically, Burke himself was an outstanding political man of letters. That reminds us that much of the standard conservative polemic

against political intellectuals is only a tactic in the long running civil war pitting political intellectuals of the right against those of the left.

The pejorative connotation of “intellectual” was certainly a reality in my childhood. Part of this was simply the practical and populist impulse of the United States that found expression in the jibes at “eggheads” like Illinois governor and presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson or later the denunciations of “pointy-headed intellectuals” by the segregationist Alabama Governor (and also presidential candidate) George Wallace or in Vice-President Spiro Agnew’s attacks on critics of the Nixon Administration as “nattering nabobs of negativism.”

Still, there was a special Catholic variant on what led the American historian Richard Hofstadter to title a prize-winning volume *Anti-Intellectualism in American History*. In much of the Catholic world, it seemed that there was no such thing as Catholic intellectuals, there were only “so-called” Catholic intellectuals, or “self-styled” Catholic intellectuals. The tone was unmistakable: these people were not genuinely Catholic and probably not intellectual either.

In this view, the church could get along quite well without intellectuals, thank you very much. That was not, however, the only view. Many Catholic leaders, including no doubt the ‘so-called’ and “self-styled” intellectuals themselves, thought that the presence or absence of Catholic intellectuals made a *great* difference. They wrote laments about the church’s loss of the intellectuals, like its loss of the working classes, in modern Europe. There were recurring debates about whether American Catholicism was not producing or was driving away intellectuals and, if so, why.

Often, the debates grew hot and heavy. Again, were we talking simply about scientists, scholars, learned individuals, people with Ph.D.’s, or what I have suggested is a related but not quite equivalent breed, *intellectuals*? Needless to say, there were problems of data. I am by no means as convinced as Andrew Greeley that in the absence of clear definitions and quantitative data most of these arguments are the equivalent, as he has written, of banging one’s head against the wall, at best an inexpensive form of entertainment and at worst a waste of time. Some efforts at defining and studying intellectuals empirically have been grotesque, while others have provided highly useful checks on our impressions, intuitions, and unavoidably qualitative judgments.

In a few deft pages published three years ago, Father Greeley himself used National Opinion Research Center occupational categories and survey findings to conclude that “some two percent of American Catholics, approximately eight hundred thousand men and women, qualify by their occupation as ‘intellectuals.’” They attend church, he goes on to say, at higher rates than other Catholics and are not noticeably alienated from their faith.

And yet, he adds, “They are for all practical purposes invisible. Most Catholic clergy do not know of their existence and could not care less about them. the Catholic ‘intellectuals’ themselves are probably unaware that they constitute a quarter of the American ‘intelligentsia.’ Their Catholicism generally seems to be low-key. They do not deny their faith, but neither do they emphasize it, perhaps because they work in environments where they feel that their religion would put them constantly on the defensive. Certainly the rest of the ‘intelligentsia’ are serenely ignorant of the possibility that someone could be a good Catholic and simultaneously an able intellectual. They consider their Catholic colleagues who are good scholars to be happy exceptions. Anti-Catholicism continues to be the anti-Semitism of the American ‘intelligentsia.’” How long will it be, he wonders, before the existence of this large Catholic intelligentsia ceases to be a secret?

I think these observations are more or less correct, but I fear they point to something even more serious than a failure of Catholics and their fellow Americans to recognize this group. It is like the old conundrum of whether tree falling in the forest makes a noise if no one is there to hear it. What does the existence of a large number of Catholic intellectuals mean if their faith is low key and deemphasized, especially in their working environments, and if they are largely invisible to many church leaders, to others, and even to themselves?

Father Greeley, in line with work by the sociologist Mitchell Gordon, once wrote some interesting pages considering intellectuals as an ethnic group. Suppose we apply this notion not to intellectuals in general but to Catholic intellectuals in particular. What would we make of an ethnic group that is practically invisible, that has no sense of its self as a group, and that deemphasizes rather than displays its ethnicity while being ignored by the few ethnic leaders who do display it? If we could call that an ethnic group at all, it seems like one that is well on its way to disappearance.

Consider an alternative: a body of Catholic intellectuals, both public intellectuals and local intellectuals, that was aware of itself and rather more than

low-key about its faith, whether or not eight hundred thousand strong, whether or not ridden with differences and divisions, as almost by definition any body of intellectuals will be. Would not such a body be a living witness to Catholicism's affirmation of inquiry and knowledge? Would not such a body be the force for the evangelization of the culture, the injection of the Good News of salvation, the Paschal Mystery of death and resurrection, like yeast into the culture, an evangelization of culture high on almost everyone's list of necessities? Would not such a body be a source of renewal for the church itself?

What stands in the way of such a development? The Second Vatican Council put many of the earlier analyses of anti-intellectual forces in American Catholic life to rest. Yet those forces have their successors. Four years ago, in a symposium marking the seventy-fifth anniversary of *Commonweal* magazine, held here in Chicago with Cardinal George and others, I outlined some of the sources of a post-conciliar Catholic anti-intellectualism.

The social activism and the therapeutic turn of the 1960s were on my list. So were the otherwise valuable recognition and elevation of experience as a starting point for religious reflection – but unfortunately as the ending point as well. Whether the issues were those of sexual morality and family or of poverty, crime, racial inequities, economic structures, or international relations, personal experience, witness, and testimony had become the dominant mode of approaching issues. Conversion and sacrifice took the foreground. Systematic analyses of causes and effects, of underlying principles, of relationships to a web of other evidence, or to a heritage of theory, doctrine, and wisdom were minimized. Finally, there was the party spirit rampant among the church's most active and vocal elites. The work of the intellect requires a curiosity, generosity, playfulness, and candor that an atmosphere of fear and suspicion scarcely allows. In such an atmosphere, to dissent is to betray. Ideas are reduced to motives.

To be sure, the postconciliar period has been one of extraordinary Catholic scholarship, particularly in theology and Scripture. Catholic women scholars, for example, have been in the forefront of feminist theology. The difficulties arise in the movement from academic disciplines to wider circles. Much of even the best religiously relevant scholarship by Catholic thinkers seems academically encapsulated, not in conversation with the political, cultural, and artistic currents of the broader society, nor evidencing that parallels to many Catholic quandaries exist equally in Protestant, Jewish, and secular milieus. And much of the wider Catholic consumption of this work seems

utilitarian, not grappled with, or questioned, or assimilated, but employed as ammunition for preexisting causes. We meet new forms of the old argument from authority, whether the authority is Cardinal Ratzinger or Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza. Similarly, Catholic social justice circles have talked a lot about “structural social analysis” without actually producing much of it, at least much going beyond sweeping condemnations and making significant contact with serious social, economic, and political theory, cultural criticism, history, and philosophy.

When the *National Catholic Reporter* at the time of the Council, its creator and editor, Robert Hoyt, conscripted two young intellectuals to write point-counterpoint columns for the paper. Garry Wills was the conservative columnist. John Leo was the liberal columnist. Three decades later, these two writers are fixtures on the intellectual landscape, Leo as an acerbically witty columnist for *U.S. News and World Report*, Wills as a prize-winning author of enormous productivity and range, columnist, critic, essayist, translator, historian, and political thinker. If Bob Hoyt were still alive and founding the *NCR* today, he might feature Wills as the liberal columnist and Leo as the conservative.

It is amusing to note how three decades later, these two writers appear to have traded places on the political and cultural spectrum. For our purposes, it is more telling to note that at some point after those early years, the *NCR* became either uninterested in such a point-counterpoint or unable to sustain it. No conservative voice has a regular place in the *NCR*, any more than do liberal voices in its conservative counterpoints. That speaks, I believe, to party spirit, polarization and the limits of intellectual openness.

If these are factors working within Catholicism, even after the Council, against a strong and sizable body of Catholic intellectuals, what about factors outside Catholicism? Again, if Father Greeley’s data is to guide us, a great deal of the serious social, economic, and political theory, cultural criticism, history, and philosophy is in fact being produced by Catholics. Not only that. It is being produced by Catholics who retain, he argues, a measurable Catholic sensibility—one that tends to be sacramental and communal, that is, to see the world as positively filled with grace and human community as positively supportive rather than antagonistic. Does this sensibility, “survive the training and perspective required to be an ‘intellectual’?” he asks. “Or is it eroded by the socialization and acculturation process that the intellectual life demands?” His answer is “no.”

My answer is “no, but . . .” That training and acculturation, whether in graduate studies, professional education, journalism, or the arts, may not extinguish our Catholic sensibility but it significantly impedes our ability to name that sensibility, to articulate it self-consciously in intellectual and aesthetic ways, and therefore to reflect upon it, to defend, modify, refine or deepen it, to share it, and to celebrate it.

Once more, think about Garry Wills. There is hardly a better example of a prominent intellectual exhibiting what Father Greeley has called a Catholic sensibility. Wills’s communalism has been manifest in his political writing, especially his interpretations of America’s sacred texts, from the Declaration of Independence to the Gettysburg Address, and his studies of the great figures of our history, from Jefferson and Washington to Martin Luther King, Jr., or even Richard Nixon.. His sacramentalism can be discerned in much of his writing about art, indeed in the sheer scope of his enthusiasms.

Wills follows the pattern further. Far from ever denying his faith, his early books were about explicitly Catholic topics—G. K. Chesterton and the church and religious liberty. Yet for long stretches of his career after that, while at many points he acknowledged his Catholicism, he either did not emphasize it or stood largely as a critic of its more publicly controversial traits. Was this because, as Father Greeley surmised about Catholic intellectuals, he had come to work in environments where his religion could put him on the defensive? Quite possibly, although I am pretty sure Wills would flatly disagree. My guess is that it is more complicated. Even in his early years, Wills squirmed at any self-consciousness about being a Catholic intellectual, with what he considered the consequent “anti-parochial parochialism.” “Catholic intellectuals should be interested in ideas,” he wrote, “not in trying to discover some distinctively Catholic way of having ideas.”

In this respect, is Wills’s recent turn, in writing *Papal Sin* and *Why I Am a Catholic*, a slip into parochialism? Although I have been a critic of these books, they are a needed contribution to the community that nurtured him. I wonder how many younger Catholic intellectuals, without the benefits of Wills’s Jesuit education, before and in the seminary, would be equipped to do likewise.

What does all of this, you may be asking, have to do with Ben Sira, and with scribes, and with the other term, thus far unmentioned, in my title—prophet? A very fair question.

Intellectuals like to think of themselves as prophets. Or maybe they like to think of the prophets as forerunners of intellectuals. The connection is captured in the old Quaker phrase, “speaking truth to power”—as Nathan did to David. This is certainly a dimension of the intellectual’s calling. Some observers would call it a *defining* dimension. Never mind that intellectuals have too often spoken not truth but flattery to power. Then again that was true of prophets also. We frequently forget that Scripture is full of talk of false prophets as well as genuine ones.

I have framed these remarks with the image of the scribe rather than the prophet, of Ben Sira rather than Isaiah or Jeremiah or Ezekiel, not because Catholic intellectuals have no obligation to speak truth to power. They do, to both secular and ecclesiastical power. But in my experience it has been the defiance of power rather than the search for truth that the prophetic image has usually conveyed. The defiance of power in the name of truth is only as valuable as the proclaimed truth is actually true.

The prophets spoke revelation. Thus says the Lord, not thus says Isaiah or Ezekiel. The truths that intellectuals speak, even the truths that they derive from Isaiah or Ezekiel, are not revelation. To pretend that they are is the prophetic temptation. The search for truth is a wonderful, intoxicating activity. “Like the vine I bud forth delight,” declares Wisdom in Sirach. “Those who eat of me will hunger for more, and those who drink of me will thirst for more.” At the same time, Wisdom must be harvested by hard labor and discipline. The courage to defy power, however admirable, is no substitute.

Compared to the prophet, the image of the scribe is obscure and unexalted. A Ben Sira spending years studying the Law and, yes, the Prophets, and poring over texts, and probing proverbs and parables, and instructing youth, and traveling widely in search of wisdom, and taking notes in those travels, and learning from his official tasks: all of this appears far more mundane, far less inspiring than a Jeremiah or Ezekiel in their oracles and visions. But that is exactly why this scribe is a useful, I hope thought-provoking patron for Catholic intellectuals, although obviously there can never be any exact parallel between the second century before Christ and the twenty-first century after.

There is a second reason, however, why I fixed on the scribe and Ben Sira. He lived and worked in a Hellenized world. In his lifetime, Palestine was being fought over by the Egyptian and Syrian successors to Alexander the Great, but both dynasties avidly promoted Greek culture and Greek customs, Greek ideas and Greek ideals, Greek art and Greek excellence. Jewish identity was under pressure. The Book of Sirach was written not long before the desecration of the Temple by Antiochus IV Epiphanes and the subsequent Maccabean revolt and the Temple's purification that is about to be memorialized once again at Hannukah.

As Alexander Di Lella, a major commentator on Sirach, writes, "At home as well as in his travels abroad, Ben Sira must have witnessed the baneful effects of Hellenization on the faith and practices of the Jews. He must have encountered many Jews whose faith was rocked by the questions and doubts that arose from Greek philosophy, religion, and lifestyle. To strengthen the faith and confidence of his fellow Jews Ben Sira published his book. His purpose was not to condemn Hellenism as such, but rather to demonstrate to Jews and even gentiles of good will that true wisdom is to be found primarily in Jerusalem and not in Athens, more in the inspired literature of Israel than in the clever writings of Hellenistic humanism."

How well Ben Sira achieved his goal is a further question. It is the project that moves me, the project of assuring the identity of the People of God in the face of a dynamic, attractive, and yet potentially overwhelming culture. It seems pertinent to a project that should occupy Catholic intellectuals today, alongside providing witnessing to Catholicism's affirmation of inquiry and knowledge and supplying the yeast of the Gospel to the culture and church alike and, of course, alongside simply seeking and speaking the truth. This further task is to address the challenge of maintaining in American society and culture a Catholic identity that is both vigorous and distinct. There are probably as many ways of characterizing our American society and culture as there are people in this chapel. Some would stress its pluralism, others its capitalism. Some would stress its openness, others its destructiveness. But even more than Hellenism for the Jews, it is the better aspects of liberal, democratic, science-and-technology based, individualist, entrepreneurial, corporate, voraciously assimilating and merchandizing modern American culture that is problematic for Christians, because so much of this culture is in fact an outgrowth of Christianity.

Catholic intellectuals have traditionally seen themselves less as the nurturers of Catholic identity than as its reshapers. After all, for a good while,

that identity could be largely taken for granted. Its definition and formation and maintenance was, in any case, the responsibility of the hierarchy and the clergy. Catholic intellectuals were the scouts, the critics, the explorers. This division of labor, I submit, is no longer viable, if only because the hierarchy and clergy is not able to carry out their previous roles.

Ben Sira, to be the kind of wisdom teacher capable of his project, had to immerse himself in Israel's religious sources. His book is rich in material drawn from every part of the Bible. Catholic intellectuals who would undertake a parallel task will have to be similarly immersed in their tradition. The Catholic law professor, the Catholic arms control expert, the Catholic geneticist, the Catholic political pollster are going to be immersed in a different way and to a different degree than the theologian or church historian. But to carry out a Ben Sira project in our time, they will have to be engaged in a serious, ongoing study of their faith. They will have to recognize *ressourcement* as the necessary companion of *aggiornamento*.

Catholic intellectuals are somewhat wary of this project. There is a scribal temptation as well as prophetic temptation, and they worry about it: false scribes erect walls and demand loyalty tests. Catholic intellectuals wonder if a concern for Catholic identity means the recreation of a defensive, cramped, harsh, and inward-looking Catholicism.

Ben Sira, however, did more than immerse himself in his own tradition. He had the ability to appreciate the one with which he was contending. De Lilla, in his commentary, continues: "Ben Sira himself often read pagan literature and incorporated many of its insights and values in his own book. Totally secure in the faith of his ancestors, Ben Sira had nothing to fear from exposure to gentile influences and writings. He did not even hesitate of borrow gentile thought and expressions as long as these could be reconciled with the faith and traditions of Israel." [ABD VI, 933]

In other words, he was very much in the spirit of Jesus's true scribe "who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old" (Matt. 13:52).

My hope is that Catholic intellectuals achieve a new self-awareness and cease to be low-key and possibly defensive about their Catholicism. My hope is that they shoulder the responsibility of renewing and preserving Catholic identity, that they do so by the necessary reappropriation of their own tradition, but also that they do so by way of affirmation, not negation, by exploring and

celebrating its heart and soul and not be patrolling its borders or denigrating what is beyond them.

Ben Sira also knew that the pursuit of wisdom began with the fear of the Lord, in awe and humility and reverence at the marvel of existence and the story of salvation. He knew that the pursuit of wisdom required recognition of both the reach of the human mind and the even greater dimension of a Wisdom that the merely human would never encompass or exhaust. He knew that Wisdom, finally, was a thou and not an it, and that pursuing her must begin, therefore, with the elementary obligations of care for the poor, the orphan, the widow, the oppressed.

“We could say more but could never say enough,” writes Ben Sira at the end of a dazzling paean to God’s presence in the natural order.

Let the final word be, “he is the all.”

For the Lord has made all things  
And to the godly he has given Wisdom. (Sir. 43:27, 33)

Amen.

Intellectuals as translate .... Interpreters of cultures ... dialogue ...

“To strengthen the faith and confidence of his fellow Jews Ben Sira published his book. His purpose was not to condemn Hellenism as such, but rather to demonstrate to Jews and even gentiles of good will that true wisdom is to be found primarily in Jerusalem and not in Athens, more in the inspired literature of Israel than in the clever writings of Hellenistic humanism. ... Yet Ben Sira himself often read pagan literature and incorporated many of its insights and values in his own book. Totally secure in the faith of his ancestors, Ben Sira had nothing to fear from exposure to gentile influences and writings. He did not even hesitate to borrow gentile thought and expressions as long as these could be reconciled with the faith and tradition of Israel.” ABD VI, 933

“Before becoming a wisdom teacher, Ben Sira immersed himself in the Torah (Law), Prophets, and Writings that had already become the nation’s literary and religious heritage. Not surprisingly, Ben Sira adapted the older Scriptures in

order to make them relevant to the new Hellenistic age in which he and his people lived. Though he often quotes or alludes to a sacred text, he usually alters it or changes its wording so that there is a new emphasis or a new meaning. Compare, e.g., Deut. 6:5 and Sir 7:29-30; Job 29:21 and Sir 13:23; Isa 51:3 and Sir 15:6. Ben Sira cites or alludes to the Pentateuch, Joshua, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings, 1-2 Chronicles, Nehemiah, Psalms, Job, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Haggai, and Malachi. He also mentions the Judges (46:11-12), the Twelve Minor Prophets (49:10), the Psalms as compositions of David ((47:7), and the Proverbs as the work of Solomon (47:14-17).” ABD VI, 939-40.

the intellectual virtues include both fear of the Lord, knowing one’s human limits, humility, but also practical care for the poor, orphan, widow, oppressed. ... almsgiving ...

flights of poetry in which Wisdom is personified ... not all ...

Ben Sira brings wisdom back to salvation history ... ABD, VI 922

the God of history and the God of everyday experience ... coming together ...

fear of the Lord ... reverence ... awe before the numinous ... Rahner: the mysticism of everyday things ...

“To know God, in the Wisdom Literature, is to be in, and to do, the truth.” ABD, VI, 925 (Roland Murphy).

the crisis of the Wisdom literature ... divine justice ... the flourishing of evil ... and the reality of death ... it did not evade this ... but faced it ... even treading close to blasphemy, as in Job, or skepticism, as in Ecclesiastes ...

the point that Wisdom is ultimately not a thing but a person, not an it but an I or a Thou.

.....

the issue of translation (and inculturation) in the Prologue ...

[the problem of the encapsulated world of so much Catholic thinking]

[born an intellectual ... an ethnic group? A given?]

[the pursuit of wisdom ... the theology of study ... ]

[the pull of truth ... the demands of truth ... the touchstones of truth ... ]

[the model of the prophet ... speaking truth to power ... but the emphasis seems to be on the confrontation with power rather than the challenge of knowing and communicating the truth. Just because you break a lot of eggs doesn't mean you've made an omelet. Just because you've confronted power doesn't mean you're conveying the truth. Further problem is the multiplicity of powers to be confronted.]

[Wisdom as always beyond human ken. But still to be sought ... mystery and problem/puzzle.]

Unique ... or maybe only rare ... in the Old Testament. It was actually written by the person who is named as author!

Known as the last of the sages and the first of the scribes. More here on scribes???

He taught young men ... He traveled widely in search of wisdom [it doesn't just come to you. You must go to it.] He describes the life of the scholar/scribe ... 38: 34-39 ... and the motivation – not for money but to guide ... 33:18

Context: centuries of foreign rule: Persian and more recently the successors of Alexander the Great, in Egypt and Syria. Struggle ... fateful passage to Seleucids ... eventually, after the book, to Antiochus IV Epiphanes ... and Maccabean revolt ... Hanukkah ...

Hellenization ... its attractions ... its questions ... posed to Judaism ...

“To strengthen the faith and confidence of his fellow Jews Ben Sira published his book. His purpose was not to condemn Hellenism as such, but rather to

demonstrate to Jews and even gentiles of good will that true wisdom is to be found primarily in Jerusalem and not in Athens, more in the inspired literature of Israel than in the clever writings of Hellenistic humanism. ... Yet Ben Sira himself often read pagan literature and incorporated many of its insights and values in his own book. Totally secure in the faith of his ancestors, Ben Sira had nothing to fear from exposure to gentile influences and writings. He did not even hesitate to borrow gentile thought and expressions as long as these could be reconciled with the faith and traditions of Israel.” ABD VI, 933

“lecture notes”

“Before becoming a wisdom teacher, Ben Sira immersed himself in the Torah (Law), Prophets, and Writings that had already become the nation’s literary and religious heritage. Not surprisingly, Ben Sira adapted the older Scriptures in order to make them relevant to the new Hellenistic age in which he and his people lived. Though he often quotes or alludes to a sacred text, he usually alters it or changes its wording so that there is a new emphasis or a new meaning. Compare, e.g., Deut. 6:5 and Sir 7:29-30; Job 29:21 and Sir 13:23; Isa 51:3 and Sir 15:6. Ben Sira cites or alludes to the Pentateuch, Joshua, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings, 1-2 Chronicles, Nehemiah, Psalms, Job, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Haggai, and Malachi. He also mentions the Judges (46:11-12), the Twelve Minor Prophets (49:10), the Psalms as compositions of David (47:7), and the Proverbs as the work of Solomon (47:14-17).” ABD VI, 939-40.

the intellectual virtues include both fear of the Lord, knowing one’s human limits, humility, but also practical care for the poor, orphan, widow, oppressed. ... almsgiving ...

Personified wisdom ... the 24 poem is modeled on Proverbs 8. Wisdom dwells everywhere but is at home in Israel.

[Like Dear Abbey ... Dear Ben Sira, I have a son who .... A wife who ...

[Wisdom is cosmic, wisdom is practical ... ]

[What would today’s Ben Sira be like?]

“And he said to them, ‘Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.’” Matt. 13:52.

“Therefore I send you prophets, sages, and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town . . .” Matt 23:34.

This comes at the end of the passages declaring “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” Cited to suggest that the scribal function was part of Matthew’s Christian community or that Matthew himself was a scribe. ABD V, 1015.

“Where is the wise man, where is the scribe, where is the debater of this age?” Paul. 1 Cor. 1:20. Comparing the wisdom of the world with the foolishness of the cross.

[The issue of identity.]

[writing as a key technology.]

Main points for outline ...

The anomalous situation of intellectuals in the church. (the meaning of intellectual ... scholars, specialists vs. public voices ... )

Has the situation improved? Numbers? Maybe. Position? Not really. Reasons?

Examples: Wills, Glendon, Dionne . . . Greeley? Appleby? McGreevy? Poets? Novelists?

Keep their distance?

What the church needs? Truth, honesty, beauty, love ...

what wisdom requires? Goodness, experience, love of the orphan and widow.

Irony, identity,

The prophetic temptation.

The scribal temptation.

Dreams and visions ...

the catholics / ex-catholics in arts and entertainment.

Ben Sira

So-called intellectuals ... my parents ... my fate ...

The disappointment after Council. The Sixties: social justice, therapeutic, expressionism. But also academia ... graduate study ... disciplines ...

Mixed situation ... NCR ... from Wills and Leo to Drinan, Ruether ... John Allen the exception ... hard to see who else? ...

Back to Ben Sira ... What does the church need from them. The Hellenistic context. Identity. Appreciation of the culture.

The prophetic temptation.

The scribal temptation.

The demands of Wisdom.

Catholic thinkers and intellectuals – What does the church need from them? What does the culture offer to them? What does wisdom require of them?

Readings: Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) 24: 1-2 (12), 19-22, 28-29, 32-34; (38:34b-39:5)