

Faculty Reflections on Salve Regina's Mission Statement

We read in Salve Regina's mission statement that students are encouraged to work for a world that is harmonious, just and merciful. If, though, we scrutinize past and present human societies, we find that no human society has ever been harmonious, just and merciful. Not completely ... maybe in bits and pieces, partially. No, history offers up no society for which we can stand in awe and say in admiration, "Now, there, that was a harmonious, just and merciful society; let us all try to be just as it was." Will such a society be possible in the future? If the future will be anything like the past, then the answer is no. No future society will be harmonious, just and merciful.

Still, the mission statement is right and good and reasonable. Plato was probably the first to examine this apparent paradox in his Doctrine of the Forms. A solution lies here, in this insight: Ideals are, by definition, unattainable. Harmony, justice and mercy are ideals, and, as ideals, are unattainable. If they were attained, they would be facts and no longer be ideals. We cannot be cynics here, however, assuming that what is unattainable doesn't matter. Ideals matter, and they matter mightily.

They matter, first and foremost, as something that motivates us. Perfect justice, perfect love, perfect peace (the list goes on). No matter how good our present situation may be, we can always envision a better situation, a condition yet to be achieved, one that allures us, engages us, draws us to think less of what we are or what we have and to move onward and upward. Man is an incarnate itch; we're simply hard-wired that way. We would rather not adjust to our environments and situations, preferring instead to change the environments and the situations to adjust to us.

This built-in quest toward an ideal situation has occasionally been presented as a metaphorical journey. In book seven of Plato's "Republic," one prisoner in the cave is forced to climb out of the cave into an outer and other world, a world that is the really-real world, a place of enlightenment. Dante moves out of hell, through purgatory, into paradise. John Bunyan's Christian, in "Paradise Lost," journeys out of the City of Destruction, away from the Slough of Despondency toward the Celestial City. In these metaphors, the ideal is presented as a transcendent realm of enlightenment, as Paradise, and as the Celestial City. In these, the traveler really does reach the ideal.

But look again at human history, where the ideal is not reached, no matter how much progress we make. The ideal is never reached because it is a moving target, a target and challenge that we give ourselves, whether willingly or not. Perfect peace. Perfect justice. Perfect love. Perfect harmony. They draw us forward, urging us, motivating us to keep trying. Should we keep trying, knowing full well that the ideal is unattainable? Are writers and philosophers giving us bad advice?

Not at all: Jesus Christ happened to agree with these writers and philosophers. In Matthew 5:48, we read "Be ye perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect." Perfect? We have our work cut out, then.