In Praise of Intellectual Curiosity

St. Isidore of Seville

c. 560-636 ~ Spain ~ Feast: April 4

St. Isidore of Seville, a sixth-/seventh- century archbishop who was one of the greatest scholars of his period, has been called “the Schoolmaster of the Middle Ages.” He was born into a noble family around 560 and orphaned young; his education at the Cathedral School in Seville was supervised by his older brother Leander, archbishop of Seville. Leander was a rigorous teacher, and Isidore became learned in many fields. He succeeded Leander as archbishop and served for thirty-six years, until his death.

During his tenure as archbishop of Seville, Isidore presided over important church councils in Spain, and he was active in converting the Visigoths from Arianism, a heresy which claimed that Christ had been human instead of divine. Isidore is best known, though, for his extensive scholarship. Isidore was distinguished for embracing classical, secular knowledge along with theology and biblical studies; his attitude was so inclusively hospitable that it has been called by one biographer “unparalleled in his own period, and never surpassed throughout the Middle Ages.” Isidore believed that knowledge was necessary to serve God, and that preserving and celebrating glorified the God who had given men the gifts to pursue it. Concerned about the intellectual backwardness of his age, he set about transmitting information “so that we might not always grow duller from boorish rusticity.” Isidore compiled an encyclopedia of what was believed to be all knowledge in the period, the *Etymologies*, by copying from Greek and Roman writers and church fathers; it was arranged in twenty books, covering the topics that included grammar, medicine, God and angels, anatomy and physiology, music, architecture, rhetoric and logic, and mineralogy. He also produced works on biblical numerology, on Christian doctrine and morals, and on Visigoth history. He compiled rules for monks and a dictionary of spiritual allegories. His *Da natura rerum* (On the Nature of Things), a book explaining natural phenomena including the change of seasons, the movement of sun and moon, tides, weather signs, and meteorology, was written for the king of the Visigoths. Isidore also wrote about law, and his ideas deeply influenced the development of government in Spain.

One of Isidore’s greatest concerns was educating priests (he insisted that no one who “did not know his letters” should be one). At the Second Council of Seville in 619 and the Fourth National Council of Toledo in 633, he decreed that every diocese should have a seminary and/or a cathedral school. In keeping with Isidore’s own interests, these schools were to teach the liberal arts (particularly rhetoric), medicine, law, Hebrew and Greek, and classical authors, including Aristotle. “It was mainly thanks to him that Spain was a centre of culture when the rest of Europe seemed to be lapsing into barbarianism,” Butler writes.

Since Isidore relied only on copying, not on firsthand knowledge, his books are inevitably full of contradictions, blunders, and pseudoscience. Still, commentators agree on the importance of Isidore’s writings, for they preserved and transmitted a vast amount of learning in a time when it was not otherwise available. The *Etymologies* continued to be used as a popular schoolbook into the sixteenth century. Isidore’s work remains important, too, as a documentation of the state of medieval learning. “To understand Isidore’s mental world is
nearly to reach the limits of the knowledge of his time,” concludes his biographer Ernest Brehaut.

Isidore died in 636, well-known for his charity in addition to his formidable learning. He was declared a doctor of the church in 1722. Because of his encyclopedic knowledge, he has been nominated as the patron saint of the Internet.

Opening Students’ Eyes By Our Own Example

“ Widely curious,” one of my mentors used to say, was the single most important quality for a teacher, and the quality shared by all good students. If a person knew only his or her own discipline—no matter how well—that person was sadly handicapped. My mentor’s own literature classes were dizzying in their breadth and richness; in them, students never just read poems, plays, or novels, but were introduced to music to which the writer or characters would have been listening, to religious and philosophical beliefs that informed their culture, to paintings whose aesthetics paralleled the text’s, to the economic and historical context of the times, and even to the architecture that readers would have seen if they looked up from their books. At any given time, this mentor might be reading a work on geology, one on history, two or three biographies, a work of literary criticism or philosophy. He was not above “secular” knowledge, either, for he was a walking encyclopedia of baseball, of Formula One motor racing, and of jazz and bluegrass music.

Students loved his classes, and colleagues and friends loved his conversation. To converse with him was to imagine a world without intellectual boundaries, a world in which unpretentious curiosity was a given. “Why don’t you find out?” he would good-naturedly ask his students, when they asked him a question that he could not answer. He adored people who brought their own informed interests into the conversation, drinking in what they could teach him.

My mentor and Isidore would have gotten along well, for both were intoxicated with learning. Both, too, saw their mission as connecting others to that vast wealth of human achievement, and they trusted that people would be eager to share in this inheritance. Isidore did not assume that the kind of the Visigoths was an idiot—he educated him—and he assumed that his priests would be capable of and interested in handling a broad curriculum. My mentor, too, assumed that people were disposed to learn. The quickest way for students to depress and shock him was not to fail at an assigned task (that could always be corrected, he believed, if the student was willing to work), but to reveal him— or herself to be devoid of curiosity, hostile to learning for learning’s sake. I think it’s fair to say that, like Isidore, this mentor considered intellectual torpor to be a kind of sacrilege.

Ultimately my mentor regarded torpid students with pity, once his incredulity subsided. They were missing so much. It was sad, he would say, that many of them seemed to come from homes where people did not read, where commentary in Time magazine was considered heavy—duty analysis. He remarked on fellow airline passengers who, given a choice of USA Today or a real, substantive newspaper—the New York Times, the San Francisco Chronicle, the Washington Post—would always choose the former. They were our students’ parents, he would say. They were our students, unless we helped them break through the fog that obscured even
their truncated world. We were their only chance to connect with the wealth of human history, of science, of speculation, and of art. And so he would redouble his efforts.

My mentor lived long enough to see the educational system begin to change in ways that make teaching as he did more difficult. Today, at every level, we are likely to be held accountable to stereotypical curricula, standardized tests, and outcomes--all of which are possible to list objectively but certainly do not stimulate curiosity and, creativity. Students are encouraged from childhood to think vocationally. “I’m in school to be an engineer/an accountant/a speech pathologist,” they complain. “Why do I need to learn to write/to learn history/to master algebra?” Considering their education as a linear means to an end, such students are prone to ask a teacher, “What do you want?” They demand to know if material will be on the test, presumably so that they can only use brain space only for what they “need” in the narrowest sense. Even liberal arts majors do this, betraying their field’s birthright, and-- a real tragedy--so do education majors. Even religious education students do it. “How much of this do we really need to know to join the church at Easter?” a woman asked a catechist with whom I am acquainted. It’s enough to make Isidore rise from the grave and launch into a lecture about “boorish rusticity”.

Lecturing won’t help, though, as my mentor knew; all we can do is model wide curiosity ourselves, demonstrating how it enriches the world. All we can do is read, read, read, and experience, experience, experience ourselves, following our interests wherever they take us, bringing our knowledge and enthusiasm to our classes. By so doing, we can suggest that wonder is the desirable norm for a human being, wonder at the riches of human history and science, at the creative productions of the human mind, at the theology and comparative religion and church history, at “whatever,” as our students say. Some of them will notice, surely, as we noticed our own intellectually curious teachers.

“Have you read all of those books?” freshmen sometimes ask me, viewing the shelves that line my office. I always suspect that the very orderly students, the ones more concerned with producing perfect handwriting on their in-class exams than with content, are appalled by the chao, for I have too many books for the shelf space, really, and books are stacked on top of books, sideways, crossways, threatening to cascade. The question they want to ask, I suspect, might be something like, “Why would anyone need that many books?” But, remembering my mentor and Isidore--and all the books I’ve read that are not in my office--I know that I must respond as if the question were literal, and that there’s only one thing that I can say. I smile and scan my shelves, and then I gave directly into their eyes. “Of course!” I tell them.