The Meaning of a Motto

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Pro Humanitate gives us a focal point and reminds us that human cultivation, human flourishing — that is our fundamental commitment. The Wake Forest motto, Pro Humanitate, is regularly translated as “For Humanity” and is probably most often understood to mean that we do what we do for the sake of humanity, for the people of the world. It is often heard as a very specific call to community service. This is fine: that is a compelling reading of the motto and we should be mindful of our wider obligations to society.

But I’d like to suggest another, complementary reading. To do that, I start with a short Latin lesson. Let’s consider some Latin vocabulary. Urbanus is the Latin word for “urban, having to do with the city, the urbs.” Urbanitas is “urbanity,” that quality that is characteristic of cities and city-dwellers. So we see that “tas” is an abstract-forming suffix that can be added to adjective stems — urbanus/urbanitas. Romanus is “Roman;” Romanitas is “Roman-ness”: that quality that is defining for being Roman. Following this pattern, if humanus means “human” then “humanitas” should be, not the collective of all human beings, but the quality that makes us human, that which defines us as humans. “Humanness” then might be a translation.

If we look at how the ancient Romans used humanitas, they never use it for “humanity” as a collective. Often it means “kindness”: the ability to show kindness is what defines us. But they also used it to point to human cultivation and learning: that is where they saw real humanness. The second-century essayist Aulus Gellius says that Roman humanitas is the equivalent of Greek paideia — education in the richest sense of developing the fullness of human potential. If Pro Humanitate is the motto of a University, it seems to
me that it is in this meaning that we are getting close to our real commitment. Pro Humanitate calls us to consider what we are as human beings and what constitutes genuine human flourishing.

Human beings are complex, and the investigation of the human is similarly complex. We will individually bring different ideas and different commitments about matters of substance to the discussion. But it is our responsibility and privilege to engage these kinds of fundamental questions and to initiate our students into the centuries-long conversation on being human.

Now, we don’t do this every hour of every day. Our immediate tasks can be more limited and more modest. The most important task at a particular moment may be memorizing irregular French verbs. But Pro Humanitate gives us a focal point and reminds us that human cultivation, human flourishing — that is our fundamental commitment. May I suggest now that we can link up the two understandings of Pro Humanitate: when we as a University are truly doing our particular work of reflecting on humanness in all its richness and complexity then we are truly serving humanity.

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