
Nobel laureates. Don Tanzella Nitti: “The quest for knowledge is a quest for truth”

“The quest for knowledge is a quest for truth. This may not be a very fashionable word, yet it is one that underpins scientific research. The desire to know the truth, in all its shapes and forms, unquestionably unites believers and non-believers alike.” Father **Giuseppe Tanzella Nitti**, Doctor of Theology and Professor of Fundamental Theology at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in Rome, offers an insight into the beauty of learning that draws inspiration from the recent awarding of Nobel Prizes, which, over and above the event itself, constitutes a recognition of the quest for knowledge inherent in the human heart. This desire is rooted in the search for a greater good, for the infinite, which unites believers and non-believers alike. “The quest for knowledge, at a closer inspection, is a quest for truth. This may not be a very fashionable word, yet it is one that underpins scientific research. The desire to know the truth, in all its shapes and forms, unquestionably unites believers and non-believers alike. Christianity enters history with the appearance of Truth, but this does not prevent Christians from pursuing and deepening their understanding of Truth as pilgrims, together with other travellers on the journey of life. Typically, scientific disciplines are driven by a passion for research, even at the cost of personal sacrifice and renunciations. I would argue that this runs counter to the climate of disengagement and relativism that characterises our present age. **In your opinion, does the awarding of the Nobel Prize also recall another “magna quaestio”, an issue that has been much discussed and written about, but which continues to offer food for thought and study, namely the relationship between science and theology?** I doubt that the dialogue between science and theology will receive any major impetus from the Nobel Prize awards. Moreover, in their acceptance speech, Nobel Prize laureates often offer considerations of a social, philosophical or ethical nature, and this can encourage debate on issues that could also involve theology. *But the study of the relationship between science and theology is not an exclusive domain of public debates.* Indeed, the relationship between science and theology is now a university discipline found in many English-speaking academic institutions, with specialised journals and prestigious professorships. I hope that some of the Pontifical Universities, too, will eventually host some of these... **How do you regard the decision of the Swedish Royal Academy to award the Nobel Prize for Physics to the Italian physicist Professor Giorgio Parisi and what do you think is the state of health of Italian research?** I was very pleased to learn that Professor Parisi, whom I know and admire, was awarded the Nobel Prize. In much the same way I knew Riccardo Giacconi in my time working as a radio astronomer with members of his group at Cambridge US, and Prof. Rubbia, with whom I attended several meetings at the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. As regards the areas I am most familiar with - astronomy and astrophysics - Italian research is in excellent health and has attained results of the highest international standing in recent decades, such as the contribution to the detection of gravitational waves and the development of cutting-edge technological solutions in the field of astronomy from space. *However, we must not lose sight of the many talented young people who emigrate and remain abroad after completing their degrees or doctoral studies due to the lack of opportunities in their homeland. These include many potential Nobel Prize laureates who would do best not to abandon our laboratories and academia altogether.* **How can the yearning for knowledge be further stimulated in everyone, especially the young?** By nurturing their passion for exploring the great questions that broaden their horizons and provoke fascinating investigations: what is the place of the human person in the cosmos? How did life originate on Earth? What is the origin of the laws of nature? How can scientific and human progress be combined? These questions used to inspire students in our schools and motivate their enrolment in scientific faculties. The focus today is increasingly placed on the short-term perspective, on consumer goods, on what gives us pleasure. People must be taught to develop critical thinking skills. We must not just worry about what our students will do ‘when they grow up’, but help them achieve something ‘great.’”

For Christian believers there is an ultimate goal also in research and science. As if God were gradually revealing - thanks also to scientific activity - the beauty of the mystery that accompanies the life of humanity and the universe from time immemorial. In your opinion, is there a divine pedagogy for revealing this knowledge to humankind, so as to make it ever more aware of the beauty of Creation? The Church Fathers told us that in addition to the Holy Scriptures, God had given humanity an additional book, Nature. This metaphor has permeated the course of history and is still present today, under different forms, in many contemporary scientists, namely: nature has something to tell us, the cosmos reveals a rationality that allows us to study it.

This, I believe, is the pedagogy employed by the Creator.

It is a book that informs us about its Author, it does so by captivating us, yet with discretion, leaving it to our gaze, especially that of scientists, to delve deeply into its pages. **Thus knowledge, any form of knowledge, is not a jealously guarded patrimony to be hidden or restricted to a chosen few, but an opportunity that must be made available to all...** I believe so. There exists an intellectual charitable dimension that we must not ignore. Promoting human dignity means not only providing people with basic goods, food and shelter, which no one should be without, but also allowing them to enjoy a human life in its fullest, nourishing themselves with the bread of culture and knowledge, the lack of which would prevent them from achieving their full dignity. The peripheries towards which Pope Francis encourages us to venture are not only the material ones. In fact they include intellectual peripheries, where the Gospel has possibly not yet arrived.

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