

EDUCATION FOR LIFE

An address by the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Yaounde
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on the occasion of the Formal Opening
of the Academic Year 1980/1981
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To help his fellowman in his need,
is man's greatest good.

Sophocles.

My role as Vice-Chancellor has been on these solemn occasions to endeavour to reflect with you on the role which the University can, and should play, in improving the human situation of our own students – not just their technical competence – and through them that of our nation as a whole and in this way helpfully contribute to an improvement of the world situation. We may perhaps be considered naïve in holding such a belief but if other universities in other countries would share our concern for producing graduates who are not only technically competent, but whose attitude and approaches to their fellow men are the same as those to which we, in this university, have aspired, then, hopefully, some, if not all, of the man-made crises that are threatening to overwhelm us today may begin to find some kind of a solution. There is no doubt that man-made crises and conflicts are more likely to destroy our planet long before conventional energy supplies run out, if the big bang is not avoided! So the real threat to our species is, in the final analysis, Man himself.

What has been our university's policy or role in the Cameroon Society? For the benefit of those who have only recently joined us, let me begin by briefly summarising what I said in my earlier address. In 1974, I stressed the importance of the university in providing the trained personnel for the urgent needs of the nation's development programmes. The need for trained manpower remains pressing and is increasing, not decreasing, with time because success, even partial success, of the development programmes calls for more and more trained personnel, but more apt or more specialized personnel who are to execute the various new projects that were planned. It was in the same spirit that it was decided to create two new specialized University Centres in Douala and Dschang. Others were envisaged but are yet to be executed.

In my second address to this distinguished assembly in 1975, I suggested that the university in addition to training personnel for the various development projects could, and should, also participate directly in some of these projects using their expertise. Such direct participation by university staff would moreover familiarize them with the realities of our problems and so force them to adapt and render more pertinent to the realities of our country's needs, the training they provided to the students. I invited the government to make greater use of the expertise that lies idle in the university. It was also proposed at the time that students themselves should be called upon to render direct service to the community, not only in part-employment for the privilege and benefits of a university education which the community provides, but to familiarize themselves also with the realities of our nation.

In my third address, I emphasized the primordial role of the university in the training of its students in the scientific method by carrying out research. Research remains the ideal yardstick by which to measure the quality and the value of a university. Its teaching or pedagogic value cannot be surpassed because it often incites the students and all who participate in research to find out and to learn for themselves new knowledge which no set of lectures can ever hope to provide. And no university teacher through lectures alone can in any way provide the students with all the knowledge that he should know for life. In any case, the facts taught in some lectures have a limited half-life, sometimes too short to be worth receiving. It is the ability to find out new information of one's own – in short, the ability to do research which is the hallmark of a well-trained graduate. Research moreover helps to solve problems, and developing countries such as our own have so many unsolved problems crying out for solutions that it would be heartless for those who have the skills to do research to remain insensitive to these problems. Whilst it is true that love makes the world go round, it is also true that it is research that makes it go forward. In contrast to secondary schools which transmit known facts often to be remembered, a university has the important mission of uncovering new knowledge so that the nation and mankind can move forward. I have in the past invited the government and the business community – and I do so again today – to invest research. It is good politics and good business to support university research.

I know that there are many difficulties both financial and material which make research in our environment difficult. These facts, notwithstanding, I persist in inviting my colleagues, the academic staff, to endeavour to do some research. A persistent and determined application to a given problem may in the end force nature to yield some small piece of its precious secrets! Let us remember that some of the greatest discoveries were made under modest and, in some cases, extremely difficult conditions. Whilst we cannot all aspire to discoveries that shake the world, a little fact discovered here and there provides one more useful piece that fits into the jigsaw or mosaic – which is the picture of our world and renders it more intelligible and more amenable to further the benefit of all of us. A discovery may be made by one man or a group of men and in that sense, belongs to them, but the knowledge discovered and its application belongs to mankind as a whole! Ease and an over-abundance in all things breed laziness and mediocrity, whereas the challenge of a little hardship, such as we have, awakens and stimulates latent or dormant capacities! I have already appealed to our government and our businessmen and I repeat that we need more, infinitely more help financially even to climb up to, and reach, that take-off point which I have euphemistically referred to above as a little hardship.

In my last address I spoke about the role of the university in the moral training of our youth – those who are destined to be the leaders of tomorrow. I indicated quite clearly that the best training in morals which a university could provide for its students was the example which its staff, especially its academic staff, set before their students. Integrity, honesty, justice, fair play and a strict adherence, in all dealings, to those qualities which make up a perfect gentleman in the old-fashioned sense of the word – these are the qualities which all university teachers, especially Professors should, at all times, endeavour to inculcate in their students, not by moralising lectures, but by the example of their own lives. We can admit that we are only human beings subject to the failings

of the human species. What is important, however, is that as leaders of the united community, exposed to the vigilant and often critical eye of our students, we should make every effort that we can to overcome our human failings and not give the impression that our shortcomings are perfectly normal. We should not, in other words, institutionalize our human failings.

An immoral or corrupt teacher in his own home may corrupt his own children but the same behaviour in a university may corrupt a whole generation of youth and, so, set into motion the processes that may ultimately lead to the destruction of the nation. If this point of view seems an exaggeration, reflect on the present state of our society and the world in general and you will be forced to admit that some of the ills of the world are due to this fact that university graduates who hold leading positions in the society and who should serve as models in their community serve instead as bad examples. "Science without conscience is" in the words of a great Frenchman Rabelais "the destruction of the soul."

All I have said so far concerning the various roles of the university may be summarized as teaching the student the skills - and the cynics may say the tricks and clever turns of phrase - which will enable him to earn a living. Earning a living is one thing, actually living is yet another. It is on this second aspect of life that I now wish to speak very briefly.

The university does not give courses or diplomas on how the student should live. We leave him to find out that for himself as best as he can. In fact, no university can give courses to its students on how to live since such courses cannot foresee all possible situations in life. But the university can and should inculcate into the student a certain attitude or approach to life which should be the hallmark of a university graduate.

Attitudes as you know are often based on internal principles that are intellectual as well as spiritual. I will attempt to mention only a few examples. Rationality and the preeminence of reason as a basis for our actions must be so evident that it might seem as an insult to your intelligence to mention it. Yet so many of the tragedies of our lives, as individuals and as a nation, and indeed of the whole world in general, arise because people at all levels - both high and low - either are incapable of logical rational thinking or refuse to undertake it before deciding on their course of action. I know that some refuse to prosecute the process of reasoning for fear that it might lead to unpleasant conclusions or those that oppose their own vested interests and so they shy away altogether from undertaking it. Yet it is a fact of life and of history that in trying to avoid the minor unpleasant consequences of a decision based on reason, the other route leads to greater tragedy which affects or even destroys innocent third parties who would not normally have been concerned if the original decision based on reason had been taken. It should be evident that, from the point of view of consequences, the effectiveness of a decision that is based on reason is always better in the long run than that based on mindlessness. It is such circumstances, that, because someone claims, as indeed everyone does, that he indeed has the rational basis for his action, it necessarily follows the Nazis gave for attempting to exterminate the Jews was that the Aryan race is superior to the Jewish race. And, likewise, apartheid claims that the black is inferior to the white. As advocates of these two irrational acts will claim, as

indeed they have always done, their decision was, or is, based on sound logic or reason! They felt justified, even sanctimonious, in their action! So it must be obvious that for reason to serve as the basis for action, it should start from sound reason and a thorough understanding of the problem. Again, this last requirement of a sound and a thorough understanding of the problem may seem academic or even naive and unrealistic. Yet, how often are we presented with decisions which on the face of the matter seem logical and rational but which, on closer examination, were based on the wrong premises. Thus identifying the real and not the false problem is indispensable to its solution. If, for example, the elimination of smoke seems to be the problem, one will never solve it until one gets to the fire that produced it. The immediate problem should be traced back to its source. At that level, if the correct question is correctly posed, the solution will not be as difficult as that. Solutions no matter how detailed or expensive they may be, will never solve the wrong problem! They are usually a waste of time and energy and may be even dangerous.

One of the factors that is important in posing a problem correctly is to appreciate its importance. The importance of a problem depends on the perspective or the point of sight from which it is perceived. Perspective, as you know, is important to artists who paint landscape pictures. They make objects in the foreground larger and clearer than those in the background and it is this relative size of objects or perspective which gives the illusion of depth and solidity to a flat canvas and enables the artist to make a representation of nature which we admire as beautiful! To the artist and to ordinary observers, the relative size and its relative importance depend on the distance from which we see the object and perspective, therefore, is to do with distance which, in turn, determines the size and so, in turn, the importance of the object seen. As an illustration, the CNR building in Yaounde when seen from 10 meters away seems a very tall building indeed and a villager who has never seen tall buildings before will almost certainly tell his friends back in the village that he saw a building that reached to the skies! Yet from the 737 Boeing jet as it comes in to land, it is quite a small building really! The twin World Trade Centre buildings in New York look like they reached to the sky if you stood at their entrance, yet from the jumbo jet or concorde, the same skyscraper of 110 floors looks like two little fingers pointing to the sky! Our planet earth must have looked no bigger than a football when Neil Armstrong and his crew first saw it from the moon! One could multiply many examples of that.

A third example - a housefly seen under a hand lens or microscope looks like a monster and a lion seen from the wrong end of a telescope or binoculars may look like a mouse. It is the point from where they are seen that makes a fly a monster and a lion a mouse.

What is true of physical objects in the world must also be true of the world and its problems as a whole. The figurative distance from which we see an event may render it excessively larger and very important, or minuscule and unimportant.

The lesson to be drawn from these examples is that the real size or if you wish, the importance of a problem remains fixed. The importance we accord to it depends on the distance from which we choose to look at the problem. There is for every problem, therefore, the correct perspective or distance from which to see the problem which is why I said earlier that to solve a problem one should

first establish its importance by taking the right distance or perspective towards it. Not to do so would lead to catastrophe. A housefly seen through a lens microscope is a monster! It would be foolish and dangerous to kill a housefly with a machine gun in the mistaken belief that it is a monster. Yet in reality that is what some of our world leaders have the tendency to do. They tend to see their problem through distorted glasses and apply remedies which clearly must lead to disaster. You must yourselves know people who see all their problems from a figurative 10 meters away so that they all loom large and overwhelm them! There are others who see them figuratively from the jumbo jet or the concorde and to them nothing really matters. For each problem there is a right distance or perspective from which it should be seen in order that its true importance is appreciated, for it is this true or real importance that determines how we react to it and therefore how, and with what means, we attempt to solve it. Just as it would be foolish and even dangerous to try to kill a fly with a machine gun or a keg of gunpowder, it would be foolish to try to kill a fly with a machine gun or a wounded lion with a mosquito spray. Yet the distortion of a microscope may render a fly look like a monster and so justify the use of a machine gun to kill it! Each problem has its right and due importance which must be determined so that it can be solved with a minimum of resources and effort. Education, especially university education, whilst not giving specific courses on such matters must somehow train us in the art of appreciating a problem for its real value—neither exaggerating nor minimizing it so that the solution chosen will fit exactly the problem because if it is otherwise and is too much like the machine gun to kill a fly, it will create greater problems than it solves; if too small, it will not solve the problem at all!

Reason, I said, should be the basis of our actions and we must not be afraid of the consequences if our reasoning processes are correct. To do otherwise would lead to greater tragedy. But reasoning can only be correct if the problem is correctly perceived, neither exaggerated nor underestimated and a sense of perspective is indispensable to the correct perception of a problem.

I had said earlier that our attitudes to the world and its problems are based on internal principles that are intellectual as well as spiritual. I hope that I have shown, perhaps rather clumsily, that reason is the best intellectual basis for shaping our attitudes.

Time does not permit me and I do not wish to abuse your patience any further by going into the details of the intellectual arguments which justify those spiritual principles which should shape our attitudes to life and its problems. Suffice it to say that if we were to take a closer and a more careful look at the universe, and then if we were to consider ourselves as human beings who claim to be the highest form of life on this planet, and who, into the bargain, lay claim to the capacity to reason and to reflect on all manner of subjects, it should lead us to two reactions. First, we should ask ourselves the obvious questions: Why are we here? What is the purpose of life in general and our own life in particular. It is obvious that in order to live, in order to be alive, we have to earn a living and, therefore, earning a living is in itself only the means of ensuring that we are alive or that we live. We would agree that we are alive to help to develop the nation.

No one can possibly quarrel with that. I think myself, however, that over and above these legitimate and laudable reasons, we are here to serve one another. By serving one another I mean doing as best as we can that which we are

trained to do and offering that service or talent in a spirit of love and brotherhood to help relieve the human situation of our fellowmen. It is true that in general we earn our living by serving others. It would be a lot better for mankind if we thought and believed that we earn our living in order to serve others. There is in this point of view an apparently small but very important difference. For it makes the earning of a living, though necessary, secondary to serving others. Earning a living enables us to be alive in order to serve others. I know that this point of view may seem in our present-day world old-fashioned, and even naive, and there are many who would sneer at the very idea. But, in the final analysis, this idea is the only one that does make sense in life, which is not only interdependent on an individual basis, but is becoming more and more interdependent on a national, and even on a global, basis. If the reverse was the real purpose of life, that is, earning a living and not serving to one another, then all methods concerned would be justified. This unfortunate situation appears to be current situation in the world today and, in a great measure, explains the various strifes and crises which were mentioned earlier on. Each person, each nation, each group of nations, feels justified in taking whatever measures it deems fit, mostly unfair, if not downright dishonest, to ensure a greater share of the world's goods for himself or his country or his part of the world. We are all still a long way, perhaps many light years away if we survive that long enough, from the point where we will come to see that in serving our fellowman, we are fulfilling the purpose of our existence and by that very fact, we will earn the living that will enable us to do so satisfactorily without the strifes and the wars that characterize our present-day world.

The second reaction that should be engendered in all thinking men confronted by our situation in the universe is one of humility based on the fragility of our very nature itself, the fragility of our planet, our apparent incapacity to understand it well enough to control it in a rational manner that will preserve and maintain it as a habitable biosphere. And if all this does not make us humble, the vastness of the universe itself and the order that prevails and regulates it should make us truly humble for all this should remind us that there is One infinitely greater, than the best of the greatest of Kings or Presidents, One who presides over our tiny planet with the same care and attention as that with which He presides over the Milky Way or some other galaxies in the vastness of the universe.

In summary, then, a University should give us skills to earn a living and develop our country but it should teach us to live, using reason and logic based on the correct assessment of any given problem as the basis for dealing with it; not to be frightened by the consequences of our action if the foundation and our reasoning processes are correct. Service to our fellowmen should be the purpose and the motto of our life and that service should be rendered in a spirit of humility in recognition of, and as an act of, thanksgiving to Him who created the universe and gave us a place in it. I thank you for your attention.

**"GOD - THE GREAT ACCOUNTANT"
AN OPEN LETTER TO MY SON**

My dear son,

Did I ever tell you that God is a great Accountant? He is the greatest that ever was, is, and will ever be! But before I attempt to show you how, let me remind you of some simple axioms, facts that are so true that they require no proof. Some may demand proof of what I am about to tell you, but you and I know that God created all of the Universe with its myriads upon myriads of galaxies, stars and planets. He has kept a good account of everything he created down to the last atom.

As you already know, our earth is only one of the many planets that exist, and all of us on this planet earth were also created by God. I cannot believe that God created only some people and that the rest were created by someone else - the Devil perhaps? Certainly not! Whatever you or anyone created them also, and that at the time of their creation, they were all good. Evil only came in later because God gave us a free will which is one of the qualities we share with Him, perhaps the only one which makes us a little like Him - "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them". (Genesis, 1, 27). ----- the ability to choose freely between good and evil etc. But the Devil exists, and by working on our free will, he misled us and continues to mislead.

But let us return to our first axiom that God created us all. He did so from his infinite love for us, for what other reason can there be for our creation, and it is difficult, indeed impossible to conceive of a God who discriminates or is a racist as some of our fellow human beings. He must therefore have loved us all equally at the time of our creation. That is our second axiom.

You may begin to wonder if he loved us equally, why he made some people white and some black, some tall, handsome and rich; others, short, ugly and poor. Before I attempt to answer that objection let me remind you that in addition to creating us all from his equal love for us, he gave to each one of us a purpose or mission. For God must have a purpose for everything that he created since we cannot conceive of a God who had no purpose whatsoever for all that he created. If he had such a purpose for the Universe, he must surely have a purpose for each one of us also. Just as the stars and the planets fulfil different functions in space, all of us on this planet have different functions or missions to fulfil. So we can conclude that although God created us, he gave each one of us a different function or mission to accomplish which because he loved us equally, must have an equal or equivalent value to him. You can understand that different things can have the same or equal value to him who owns them. A transistor radio although different from a watch, both may cost 50,000 frs each and thus have the same value to their owner. So we can assume that although we have different missions to accomplish, they have the same or equivalent value to him who gave us different missions. This is our third axiom.

Since we have different missions to accomplish you can easily understand also that we require different means or tools or talents to accomplish those

differing missions. If one is to be a great athlete for example, he does not require great ears but rather strong legs or muscles! So it is with God. He gives to each one the tools or talents necessary to accomplish or execute successfully, the mission assigned to him. To the artist, the talent for colour, form, harmony and beauty of design, etc.; to the musician, the talent for music-making; to the engineer, the talent for building; to the sportsman, strength and swift muscles; and to a good President, the wisdom to administer, direct, and lead his people in peace and harmony. That God has given to each, the means or talents to accomplish the mission assigned to each, is clearly an axiom, our fourth axiom.

Some people abandon their assigned mission for other missions, or they misuse their talents for other ends because these seem to them more glamorous or more important! That is entirely theirs or their guardian's, fault who have exercised their free will incorrectly!

In the execution of our assigned mission, God has ensured that we derive the material and moral benefits that enable us to accomplish the mission as well as render our lives, if not entirely happy, at least possible, meaningful and worthwhile. Someone who is thus conscious of executing his assigned mission, and derives from it those benefits that make his life worthwhile, will have a feeling of fulfilment or contentment and will come as close as anyone can to being happy. If someone else were to deny us the use of those talents required for the accomplishment of our mission or in exercising those talents, deprive us of the material or moral benefits that derive from them, we would be frustrated and our lives would be meaningless, worthless and we would be unhappy. In thus denying or depriving us of the means to accomplish our assigned mission, the person concerned would have taken from us, that which is of no real value to him since God would have intended it to us never intended it for him but for us only. Such a situation would constitute a manifest injustice. Since God is a God of justice, our last axiom, he must correct the injustice. But how and when?

How? God alone gave us our talents and all that derives from it, he can also take away only that which he gave us. He is not really interested in what we have stolen or taken by force from others. It is of no real use to us and of no value at all to him. He must, in order to correct the injustice that we have committed on others, require us to give up either some of our talents or deprive us or deny us the benefits that derive from them. He will do so to the value that we deprived someone else of his. Since time is a factor of life, in order that justice should be properly done, God will charge us, the offender, in compound interest so that our loss in that which is special and dear to us because it was intended for our special mission will be much greater in value than that which we denied to someone else. Moreover, it was of no real value to us anyway. The net result is that we finish up poorer by the loss of some of our own special talents and their benefits and to that extent, our lives will lose some of its purpose and meaning and we must therefore feel that it is less worthwhile to live than before. Moreover, in being thus deprived or ourselves, the accomplishment of our special mission will be incomplete or at least put in jeopardy - a potential source for trouble later when we must give a final account of our special mission. Thus, on two counts, in deliberately denying or depriving others of their special talents or their benefits, we pay for it very dearly here and very likely hereafter also!

What about he who has suffered an injustice at our hands. Using the foregoing arguments, God must make it up to him, not by restoring that which is lost, but by granting him something new at least to the same value as that which was lost *plus compound interest!* This renders the sufferer, richer in the end. An act of deliberate injustice by A to B, renders A poor in all senses and B richer in the end.

The second question was when would God put the accounts right? Only God himself can answer that question. If he decides to settle the accounts shortly after the events, and so punish the one and reward the other, it should and will serve as a lesson to others! The law courts, social institutions and the person concerned himself can do something to restore that which has been stolen, although the value of what is restored would clearly be inferior to the real value of what was taken or denied mainly because social institutions cannot correctly judge the true value of a God-given talent. The damages awarded by the courts to a plaintiff are only a poor approximation of the compound interest which only God alone can charge since only he alone knows the rate of interest and the value of the item on which it is being charged. An attempt at restitution is nevertheless better than nothing and if the offending person makes a special and particular effort, perhaps it will come close to the real value of what he owes to the other.

If in contrast to the above, the accounts are not settled until after over a 100 years, then they can only be settled *hereafter* and the salutary lesson to the living will be lost! Once our mission on this earth ends, the talents and all that derive from them cease to have any real value and any settlement of accounts hereafter will have to be in a "new currency", that which is legal tender hereafter. Whatever that new currency may be, it is logical to conclude that the offending person will start his new career hereafter with a deficit and the offended person who suffered an injustice here on earth that was never corrected will start his hereafter with a credit balance. This might well be the meaning of the Lesson on the Mount, in particular Mathew Ch. 5, verse 10, which states "Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven".

A thinking man knows that because God is a God of justice and a great accountant, he will settle all accounts sooner or later. This knowledge should deter those who are tempted to misuse their position or power to impede, deny or deprive others of the use of their talents to accomplish their God-given mission.

God who is a Great Accountant keeps very good accounts. That my son, you must remember always!

Your father,

Victor Anomah NGU

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