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IIECI: Basing Our Work on Humility, Gratitude and Gift

Today I would like to share with you thoughts about things which at first glance seem far removed from the strategy, plans, management, projects, success criteria, fund-raising goals, and priorities of the new Institute. However, for me it is important to share them with you and for you, I am sure, to hear them, because I am going to speak about certain principles on which the International Institute of Ethics and Contemporary Issues will be based.

Today, when information about the creation of the Institute is for the first time being made public, I would like to tie in my talk with a reflection on the phenomena of humility, gratitude, and gift.

I.

About a month ago, *The Economist*, in one of its articles on the Davos Summit, made a conclusion that seems to radically contradict the current political-business ethos (in fact, not only the political-business one).

I would like to focus on this thought expressed by *The Economist* journalist and to attempt to integrate it into the vision of what should become the backbone of the Institute's activity, and therefore a model and proposal that the Institute can share with others as it establishes itself.

In contemplating the issue of global leadership, the author of the article in a few final sentences formulates a short formula of leadership. He concludes by saying that in his opinion the secret ingredient of real leadership is humility.¹

For many this thought, I believe, sounds overly demanding and therefore seems to be unacceptable or, at least, somewhat controversial and unclear. It is generally accepted that a leader is perceived as one who primarily inspires, mobilizes, and organizes others through the strength and clarity of his vision, persistence in its achievement, decisiveness and courage in overcoming difficulties and challenges.

I believe I am not mistaken if I assume that humility in the minds of many seems antithetical to the energetic, action- and goal-oriented, transformational process of leadership.

Actually, the thought expressed by *The Economist* goes right to the point if one pays a closer look to the essence of the leadership. Authentic leadership presupposes a particular spiritual attitude, a stance towards the other and the world born from the profound feeling of gratitude and admiration for what is given to him or her.

One makes the first step on the road of humility by exactly accepting one's own existence here and now as it is, both in space and time, in all of its seemingly radically limited and constraining concreteness.

¹ See "Davos Man and His Defects" published in *The Economist*, January 26, 2013.

Often, unfortunately, those of us who try to make such a step may encounter a spiritual and mental trap, the essence of which is ironically well captured in the formula once expressed by one of Ukrainian presidents: “we have what we have.”

The problem with this statement, given the context in which it was made, is that in fact it was meant to invite a person to go in a direction opposite to humility, sooner or later arriving at apathy and indifference born by a pervasive egoism and self-complacency.

Thus conceived, the “We have what we have” formula is radically dissonant with expectations and vocations, which pervades a Christian spirit and which was formulated by the words of Patriarch Josyf Slipyi as “strive for the great.”

Only a humble person can really aspire to what is great and therefore also be a leader for others, whether we are referring to business, public space, art, marriage relations, politics, sport, or up-bringing of children.

An issue which immediately emerges in this context is the following: From where does a humble person receive the strength and inspiration not only to strive for great things but also to do great things? To inspire and guide many followers, rising to professional and spiritual heights?

Allow me to interrupt this train of thought and to offer one more perspective.

II.

If not all, then I do think that a great many of us like to tell others the most varied stories, and even more of us love to listen to stories narrated by others.

Our language is one of the most profound ways to express our innermost essence, to reveal and manifest ourselves to others while

at the same time inviting the other to a mutual openness and communication.

Therefore the personal story of each one of us is the history of our personal revelations; that is, on-going attempts and efforts to present and manifest ourselves to others, to reveal our presence as well as to share our experiences thereby witnessing of the reality we have gone through and relived. This is why one can say, with a certain sense of humor, that we humans are unavoidably “storytellers”.

By the way, therein lies the magnetism of the project of oral history on which UCU’s Institute of Church History has worked for many years, gathering the testimonies and stories of all those who went through the trials of the catacomb Church and the repressions of the anti-human regime of the soviet period.

Not that many of our contemporaries can imagine themselves reading thick academic philosophical or historical volumes. However, personal stories, heard or read by us, touch us more easily and deeply settle into our hearts and souls.

I would also like to tell you a story today. In fact, I already started narrating it. However, I do understand that, due to time constraints, I will not be able to tell the story as it should be done nor as is fitting for today’s occasion, in order to acknowledge and pay respect to all the involved personalities.

In truth, today’s establishment of the Institute has at least a 20-year pre-history. For me as its participant, these years have resulted in the history of fostering relationships of trust and friendship, empathy and solidarity, and mutual openness about the shared successes and difficulties.

For several of us, at that time still students of Lviv Ivan Franko National University, and then – in the now already distant year 1991 – a few spontaneous get-togethers during the Congress of Ukrainian Youth for Christ became an opportunity and an invi-

tation to initiate a trajectory of our friendships and collaboration that have continued to this day.

It gives me great pleasure to say these names: Taras Dobko, Yuriy Pidlisnyi, Andriy Kostiuk, Petro Husak, Andriy Turchynovskyy.

A positive energy and the toll of the catacomb Church then inflamed the hearts of thousands of young people. We were fortunate to be among those in front of whose eyes the empire was disintegrating, ideological walls were destroyed, a space of freedom was born and borders were opened.

For us, at that time 18 year olds, the experience of 1989, 1990 and 1991 became critically important in formulating our conviction and belief in the fact that impossible things were not only realizable, reachable and achievable, but that these were the goals to be set for oneself and nothing less was acceptable.

It also proved significant that at several meetings within the framework of the Congress of Ukrainian Youth for Christ, there was present Borys Gudziak, a young Ph.D. candidate from a North American university, whom we then met – and who then did not bear any recognizable signs of the bishop of Paris.

Then, in the early 90's, our group met Professor Damian Fedoryka, a philosopher of Ukrainian background from the States, a father of ten children, a former president of Christendom College, who at that time was lecturing at Ukrainian universities.

Divine providence was clearly at work then and, after classes and conversations with Professor Fedoryka, two mathematicians, a classical philologist, a lawyer, a French philologist and an economist eventually understood that the time for courageous decisions had arrived and we became students of a philosophical academy in the Swiss Alps.

I don't know how spontaneous was the decision by Borys Gudziak to visit this group of ours around 1996, but he was

the only one out of many who thought that a short interaction with young graduate students on their “Alpine territory” could hold some possibilities.

In my memory, there emerges the following episode: we were hiking in the mountains and ended up admiring a valley vista which included the flowing Rhine River. There, enthralled by the landscape, our conversation turned to plans for the creation of our philosophical school in Ukraine. It would accentuate anthropology and ethics and would become an element of change and development in Ukraine, and for that matter, globally. Since then we knew where we were heading.

One can easily imagine the reaction of some serious academics from Ukrainian circles if they could – then in the mid-90’s – overhear our conversations. I don’t know, perhaps they would probably have laughed at our naiveté and our loss of reality. Finally, they would dismiss us, believing that after our five-year sojourn in Switzerland, we would hardly spend any time even thinking about Ukraine. After all, time should cure such fantasies.

The time was really blessed, full of interactions, thoughts and many gifts. A permanent stay in an international space gave us an opportunity to be at the crossroads of traditions and human fates and to discover for ourselves new academic, worldview and spiritual contexts.

Beginning in 2008, our team – having had an intensive ten-year administrative experience of work at UCU – began to take the first steps in the direction of our old philosophical dream.

Administrative duties and management on a general university level did not easily release us, and therefore we had to be creative and innovative in planting the first seeds for our philosophical field.

Our beginnings included: the website of the Department of Philosophy with an on-line journal of reviews, news and other

interesting columns; yearly summer schools with a national competition of 3 people per place; annual international conferences; a series of open interdisciplinary lectures by leading world professors; and our first publications.

However, most importantly, we were able to create a circle of alumni and participants of our programs throughout all of Ukraine. Right now it only numbers some 1,500 individuals, yet this is the environment that provides us with the strength and inspiration to move forward with new projects and initiatives.

Last June's visit of Charles Taylor became for us a certain landmark and a strong stimulus for the development of philosophy at UCU.

Our current task lies in assuring that philosophy at UCU, currently a phenomenon interesting to observe and to explore by scholars of world caliber, transforms itself into an environment in which they would like to be again and again and, eventually, even work here.

The creation of the Institute is a significant step in that direction. For me the guarantee of the success of this undertaking is that, long before the creation of the Institute, the cohort of its adherents and supporters has formed itself.

These are brilliant intellectuals with a fine sense of rhythm and context of the current world, open to the world of values and meanings, with a keen and insightful understanding of a person, human joy and human pain.

I am grateful to them for their agreement to become board members of the International Institute for Ethics and Contemporary Issues. Today you will have a chance to meet them and hear their presentations, and an opportunity to engage them into discussion. With great pleasure let me name them: Professors Peter McCormick, José Casanova, Alois Buch,

Edward J. Alam. Professor Czesław Porębski will also be joining the board.

I am deeply grateful to my UCU colleagues Oleh Turiy and Andriy Kostiuk who have joined the Board of the Institute as well.

Thank you all indeed.

III.

At the very beginning I announced that I would talk about humility, gratitude and gifts. You probably quickly realized that, as I was speaking, I got somehow diverted from the things announced as the intended objects of my reflection.

Yet, I was telling you the story with a true sense of gratitude for the abundance of the gifts shared with me by so many wonderful, loving and caring personalities most of whom I had not mentioned today, including also my wife Olesya, my children, and my parents.

Somewhere deep in my heart I am becoming more and more aware that everyone who in some important manner has entered into my life is better or more talented than I am. This understanding empowers and fills me with joy.

Let me conclude my presentation by sharing a couple more insights still trying to tie all these threads about humility, gratitude and gift into one knot.

I don't know if you often feel the kind of gratitude which wraps you in its warmth and fills you with clear and bright joyfulness. I suspect that you well know the feeling and the emotions which it gives us.

In this context permit me to pose a provocative question. Have many of you have had the opportunity to experience gratitude to yourself? How often do you, dear friends, thank yourself during the day?

In reality, our feeling of gratitude clearly testifies to the fact that we have entered a space of interaction with the other, namely into the space of gifts and gift-giving. Authentic humility opens before us the unspoken riches of the world and human interactions and prepares us for understanding and accepting gifts.

For a person who is proud and conceited, the feeling of gratitude (if at some moment it would break in and sneak into their spiritual interior) is a painful reminder about one's dependency and the lack of self-fulfillment.

For a humble person, the feeling of gratitude exhilarates, enriches, opens new horizons, inspires creativity and makes one akin to the Creator. And, most importantly gratitude immerses us in a sacramental relationship with others.

For me the topic of the Institute, the history of its creation and future activities – it is a reality which grew up and hopefully will develop further in space expressing itself in the abilities of being humble, in openness towards gifts and in gratitude.