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**Quod vitae sectabor iter?
Salamanca between city paths and humanity in the path**

Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the façade and staircase of the historic building of the University of Salamanca as an expression of the relationship between philosophy, theology and art in the Spanish Siglo de Oro, and will try to provide a new perspective on the sculptural elements present in both spaces of the university. There are few interpretations on this subject, but they all converge on understanding sculptures as an expression of the myth of the Spanish monarchy. This essay, instead, will show how those same elements can be read in relation to the moral and anthropological needs of 16th century humanity and, thus, that the relationship between university spaces and the people who frequent them is even closer. To enter a space, according to such an interpretation, does not simply mean to use it, but to frequent it and understand in it and from it reflections for everyday life.

Keywords: Façade, Staircase, School of Salamanca, Siglo de Oro, Ethics and Justice

Introduction

Artistic representations over the centuries have often helped to convey in some way the thoughts of those who lived in the background in which representations arose. It is no coincidence, nor rhetoric, that from the very results of artistic genius is possible to reconstruct the culture in which an artist lived. This is also the case of the Salamanca *Siglo de Oro*, historical period between the first decades of the 16th and 17th centuries, in which the artists of the Iberian town expressed through their creations the feelings of the philosophers and theologians with whom they came into contact and collaborated. A result of such interactions are, for example, the façade and staircase of the historic building of the University of Salamanca, the façade of the convents of San Esteban and Clerecia or the structure of the Plaza Mayor.

The aim of my paper is to show how some of these artistic representations, particularly those of the university, are a vehicle for the spread of the philosophical and theological culture of the time. Culture to which few had access but which, thanks to the close relationship between culture, art and its results, assumed universal value communicable to all those who, with a single glance, "read" the founding thought of those representations.

1. Philosophy, Theology and Art in the Siglo de Oro of Salamanca

Ausonius, a 4th century Latin poet, wondered what path of life was ideal for human beings who live in the world and know what surrounds them, and asked in *Idyllus XV: Quod vitae sectabor iter?*¹ This question crosses the centuries and reaches the men of the Iberian *Siglo de Oro*, who questioned how the men of the New World and their thousand-year-old cultures could peacefully integrate with those, equally thousand-year-old, of the Old World.

Antonio Royo Marin OP, in his 1952 text *Theologia de la perfeccion Cristiana*, underlines the double tension of European man towards himself and the new peoples and points out the *Siglo de Oro* as a period in which man is simultaneously challenged and put into crisis. He is challenged because the infinite horizons standing out before him call him to theorize new subjects and disciplines, such as international law; from another perspective, he is challenged because the elevation to the supernatural order proper to Christianity meets the indigenous religions of the New World and, for this reason, he needs to perfect his own instances and make them understood by peoples who had never come into contact with such systems of belief and thought. In fact, being a Christian in the *Siglo de Oro* means combining animality, rationality and grace, all converging towards a single goal: justice.

Theoretically speaking, the authors of the *Siglo de Oro* begin this interesting journey towards the understanding of justice through two authors who, over the decades, become true *auctoritates* together with that of the sacred texts, Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. Aristotle's definition of justice presented in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is taken up by stating that

¹ "What path of life shall I pursue?" This expression is explicitly analyzed by René Descartes in his *Discourse on Method*.

we see that all men mean by justice that kind of state of character which makes people disposed to do what is just and makes them act justly and wish for what is just; and similarly by injustice that state which makes them act unjustly and wish for what is unjust. (...) This form of justice, then, is complete virtue, although not without qualification, but in relation to another (...) and proverbially 'in justice is every virtue comprehended' (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1129a 1-5)

Basically, Aristotle codifies justice as the virtue that indicates a righteous disposition of character, through which a human being is led to act correctly. It differs from injustice because the latter describes all the behavioral states in which a man does not act correctly. This definition is taken up by Thomas Aquinas, who in *Summa Theologiae II-II* (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II q.57, *respondeo*), broadens and perfects it, elaborating the concept of justice as observed and revised by the authors of the *Siglo de Oro*: If one wanted to reduce this definition to the normative form of a definition, he could put it this way: "Justice is the habit in accord with which someone, by a steadfast and perpetual will, gives to each individual what is the right for him."

Acting correctly, according to Aquinas, means attributing responsibility for actions to the human being according to the dispositions that the human being himself possesses. Following the combined evaluation of the actions with the provisions it is possible to conclude on the possession of the virtues by a human being, according to his being *stabilis, voluntarius et firmis*.

In support of the authoritative sources of theology and philosophy, the authors of the *Siglo de Oro* helped each other with the words of the sacred texts and, in particular, the words of *Psalm 8*, also depicted in the famous *Cielo de Salamanca*, dome of the ancient library of the city, are particularly significant²:

What is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?
You have made them a little lower than the angels
and crowned them with glory and honor.
You made them rulers over the works of your hands;
you put everything under their feet:

² An interesting investigation on the *Cielo the Salamanca* is presented in Frías 2006.

All flocks and herds,
and the animals of the wild,
The birds in the sky, and the fish in the sea,
all that swim the paths of the seas.

Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas and *Psalm 8* thus become the pivotal points through which to orient and guide human beings in order to understand the right path of life and how to direct one's actions according to the principles of justice. They represent the first guidelines through which the authors of the *Siglo de Oro*, particularly in Salamanca, begin their investigations into justice. This beginning proceeds according to three fundamental questions: 1. What is just? 2. How to be just? 3. Through what strategies does man order himself and the world around him? These questions, given the international research issues of the scholars of the *Siglo de Oro*, must be answered not for a close group of intellectuals, but for the salvation of all humanity. In this sense, then, how can this social program be realized?

The philosophers and theologians of Salamanca understand and realize that this program cannot simply take place through the dissemination and diffusion of texts, but needs stronger elements, which immediately affect the mind of man. For this reason, they conclude that the only attractive strategy is that of artistic representation, intended as a vehicle for the diffusion of philosophical-theological messages, accessible in this way to all men, educated and less educated, who cast their eyes on such representations. In particular, here, I intend to deal with the *fachada* and the *escalera* of the historical building of the University of Salamanca. They represent, in some way, the point of arrival of the relationship between philosophy, theology and art, developed through the centuries since the foundation of the studium at the city's cathedral on the Tormes, dated 1150. The fruitfulness of this relationship is demonstrated by three important studies conducted by Ana Maria Carabias Torres, Thomas Duve and José Luis Fuertes Herreros. The first, in *La Escuela de Salamanca. Perspectivas de investigación*, emphasizes that in Renaissance times the city of Salamanca became the focus of all artistic activities related to the spread of the philosophy and theology of the School of Salamanca and this in the Iberian context is a fundamental novelty and is often ignored; the second, in a study entitled *La Escuela de Salamanca: ¿un caso de producción global de conocimiento?* also indicates the relationship between humanism and art as the interpretative key to understand why the authors of the *Siglo de Oro* become a reference for the whole world and not only for the cultured or noble elites. The third, in

Salamanca antes la "Escuela de Salamanca", argues that it is impossible to understand the philosophical and theological production of 16th century Spain if we don't realize how those authors lived the city that welcomed their lives and studies on a daily basis.

2. The Façade of the Old Building: Be Virtuous or Weak?

Of all the artistically relevant spaces, the scholars of Salamanca refer mainly to four places: the old cathedral, built between 1110 and 1733 and place of the university between 1218 and 1415; the historical building of the university, built between 1411 and 1533 and new place of the university since 1415; the convent of San Esteban, *alma mater* of Francisco de Vitoria and built between 1524 and 1610 and the Jesuit college, *alma mater* of Francisco Suárez and built between 1617 and 1754. For our purposes, the spaces of the historic building of the university are particularly interesting, more precisely the façade and the internal staircase leading to the library.

The façade, sculpted in Spanish Plateresque style typical of the period between 1516 and 1519 by an anonymous author, represents a real *vademecum* for those who wanted to understand what culture and universities were in the *Siglo de Oro*. The structure is very simple: on two twin doors with segmental Gothic arches, a vertical surface limited by two pillars develops. It is divided into three horizontal registers, organized around a large central arch and two smaller, symmetrical niches. It has four levels of analysis, corresponding to the three horizontal levels and the vertical reading level of the façade. These levels correspond to the actual division of the sculpture, which has three horizontal levels each independent of the other and a vertical level that recalls the most important anthropological elements for a 16th century man who, seeing the façade, wanted to understand what the university was and why he wanted to contribute to the salvation of all humanity.

The first level, the upper level, presents seven characters divided into three groups: Bacchus, Caesar, Octavian Augustus and Alexander the Great; Venus and Hercules; the Pope. The latter performs his classical function as the earthly representative of God and, placed in the highest part of the façade overlooked by the *tiara* (he is the father of kings, rector of the world, vicar of Christ), ideally protects the rest of the figures and all those who cross the threshold of the university. Next to him are Venus and Hercules, who represent vice and virtue. Venus, with her sinuousness, calls man to a dissolute life and to the practice of vices which disqualify human dignity; Hercules, on the contrary, urges man to practice the virtues and to fight so that his life may be better and better every day. These figures

correspond to the two entrances to the building of the actual university: Venus insists on the left entrance, which always remains closed, as to indicate that those who enter the university can only walk the way of Hercules, placed on the right side perpetually open, which pushes to the outer and inner fight for the elimination of all difficulties and promises to those who enter the building the way to be proficient in this fight. Surrounding Venus are the sculptures of Bacchus and Caesar, which suggest to the "reader" of the façade two examples of individuals who did not take full advantage of the opportunities that life had given them, and had lost their dignity due to disturbing elements of their existence. On the other side of the façade are the figures of Octavian and Alexander. These characters, their biography suggests it, are examples of men who faced their own difficulties, overthrown the vices that could have caused their ruin and fought to affirm what they believed to be just. Apart from the historical evaluation of their work, to be like Octavian and like Alexander means to be like Hercules, constantly searching to maintain dignity and to overcome limits, constantly respecting the others. The first level of the façade, therefore, already indicates quite clearly a lifestyle, with the protection of the Pope and the indication of being strong. To confirm this indication, this level is completed by the representation of the four cardinal virtues, in the order justice and temperance on the left and prudence and fortitude on the right, which explicitly establishes the practical ways in which man can be like Hercules and flee from Venus.

On the second level belong, precisely because of their centrality, the sculptural elements that refer to the Spanish monarchy, its origins and its importance for the whole world. At the center of the level appears the herald of the Spanish monarchy which, placed under the sculpture of the pope, indicates, on the one hand, the divine protection of the monarchy and, on the other, its centrality as temporal power, which immediately follows the divine power of the pope. On the sides of the herald appear, in the usual order two on the left and two on the right, the representation of a Sibyl, Trajan, Marcus Aurelius and Scipio. Their role is mainly that of embodying a mythical and glorious past, which allowed the Spanish monarchy to take inspiration for its kingdom. This interpretation is confirmed by the figures of Charles V and Isabella of Castile, who intend to be the heirs representing that past, in view of a future in which the Spanish government, protected by the Pope and inspired by those four characters, takes on the problems of humanity and globally restores its dignity.

The last level is probably the expression of the maximum realization of the combination of divine power and temporal power indicated in the two previous levels. In this level,

the lowest and closest to the street path, appears a shield with Ferdinand and Isabella of Castile, *los Reyes Catolicos* who, according to the sculptor's intentions, embody the ideals displayed in the other levels. They are surrounded by an inscription in Greek that reads "the kings at the university, and this one to the kings", as if to approve an intimate relationship between faith, politics and culture, manifested in practice by the University of Salamanca itself, its teachers and students.

The fourth level, the vertical level, seals the indications of the three horizontal levels and presents, in sequence, the pope, the herald of the monarchy and the Catholic kings. This order returns the points of reference that, once entered the university, guarantee the success and preservation of studies. This order seems to recall what Fernan Perez de Oliva writes in his *Dialogo de la dignidad del hombre*:

Now the order by which you, Aurelius, guided me, requires me to say of the state of literate men; so first listen to what Solomon said in his Proverbs: Blessed is he who found wisdom and abounds in prudence; better is his gain than that of gold and silver, and all things exceed that can be desired.

Great thing is, Aurelius, wisdom, which shows us all the world, and brings us into the secret of things, and leads us to see God, and shows us the paths of life.

It gives us courage and temperance. It teaches justice and tempers strength; by it kings reign and princes rule; and it found the laws by which men are ruled. (Perez de Oliva 2012, 99)

The "men of letters", the wise, are not only those who spend their lives forming themselves on books, but also and above all those who are guided by divine wisdom and act through the practice of the cardinal virtues. Through such guidance and practice kings and princes are able to govern and establish the laws with which they govern men. This objective seems to be also that of the anonymous author of the facade who, the sources unfortunately are silent in this regard, knowing the humanistic literature or helped by those who knew it, elaborated a sculptural system semantically complete and that really allowed man to be safe in their path.

This is accompanied by an "invitation" presented by a frog, which stands on a skull in the right-side pillar of the building. Usually, the tradition assigns to the frog the personification of luckiness but, properly speaking, it seems to recall a verse from Erasmus' *In Praise of Folly*:

Once again, I'm stunned with their croaking the frogs from the portal. What is being crazy more than having lost your head? The struggle to understand the right way is not only obstructed by Venus and the vices, but also by the frogs, which personify the worldly affairs, which distract from the journey towards the attainment of the virtues. (Erasmus 1901, 776)

3. The Staircase of the Old Building: Be Just or Choose Sin?

A bright example of that journey and very striking example of the relationship between philosophy, theology and art in Salamanca is given by the staircase of the historical building of the university, which in fact presents an excursus of philosophical and theological thought transposed into a sculptural element. The presence of those disciplines in the staircase is strategic, and bears within itself all the will of the intellectuals of Salamanca to keep philosophy and theology always present in their thought. In fact, it is located between the ground floor and the first floor of the historic building, the only access to the library, which was frequented by hundreds of people every day, who observed what those steps told. The story depicted on the staircase, built from 1512 onwards and sculpted on both sides of the handrail, tells of a journey of inner perfection, based on Christian morality, the union of biblical teachings, chivalric ideals and the teachings of the *Ordre de la Toison d'or borgognone*. The staircase tells of a path that leads to overcoming oneself and the conviction that the defeat of the disturbing elements present in the world, in favor of those that ennoble man, is necessary for all human beings to proceed correctly on the path of life³.

From a semantic point of view, the story told on the staircase can be divided into three sequences, each ending with the achievement of a higher degree of awareness than the previous sequence. The first part of the scale presents two figures of fundamental importance for the two following sequences: the pilgrim, on the inner side, and a jester, on the outer side. The pilgrim represents the man who, struggling with the vicissitudes of the world, recognizes that he has to undertake a journey of perfection and, as a wandering traveller, starts his journey. The traveler's counterpart is the jester, who represents the lasciviousness and lust with which man without morals leads his atheistic life.

³ To understand the explanation also visually, please visit: <http://www.fachadausal.com/escalera.php>.

Already from the beginning of the path of ascent is possible to get the double force that drives man in the conduct of his earthly life. On the one hand, the need to improve one's condition by perfecting the relationship with the world; on the other, the ease of a relaxed life, like that of a buffoon, which consists in contemplating the fleeting and external elements of life⁴. Confirmation of the stultification of the jester's life is given by the following passage of this first part of the staircase, which sees a lady sculpted with several jesters around her. All together they lead a *Danza Morisca*⁵, elaborated by the designer Israhel van Meckenem, a sign of the playfulness and superficiality of those who live a luxurious life.

The teacher, the student, the ordinary person interested in books, when he enters the university building, has immediately clear the choice he has to make in living his relationship with the world: to use what surrounds him to satisfy his earthly needs, without understanding the potential that nature can give him or try to begin the path of personal improvement, using the tools that that world, only if understood in its depth, provides him. The choice of the pilgrim or the jester goes well beyond the metaphysical discourse on the constitution of the human being, and directly intersects the daily life of man. He is confronted with a world that is hidden to him, but thanks to it and its capacity to be revealed, he can discover and reach in its depths.

The second sequence of the story corresponds to the second stretch of the scale, which represents the next step on the path to perfection. The human being, once he has decided the path he wants to take in his life, finds himself in his mature age⁶, and his conduct of life can further improve or definitively succumb to vices and abandon virtues. Artistically speaking, this existential choice is represented by two scenes, that of the wasp and the spider and that of the two couples. The wasp and the spider represent the two ways of approaching knowledge of the world. The bee, in fact, approaches the world in a positive and altruistic way, because it collects the nectar (knowledge) from the flowers that it carries (the world) and transports it

⁴ The figure of the jester as a character representing lust is recurrent in the art scene until the first half of the 16th century (See Cortés Vázquez 1984).

⁵ The *Danza Morisca* is also a recurring motif of late 15th century art. The original drawing of the sculpture is the Dance of Israhel van Meckenem (1445-1503), discovered by Cortés Vázquez in 1949 at the National Library in Paris.

⁶ In the scale, maturity is represented by the representation of three heads of men and three heads of animals, representing Prudence and Time. This type of representation is also an expression of the artistic sensibility of that time. Think, for example, of the *Allegory of Prudence*, painted by Titian (1480-1576) around 1565 and depicting three heads of man and animal to represent this virtue.

(diffusion of knowledge). The spider, instead, has the sole purpose of capturing the prey and poisoning it, destroying the ecosystem to its personal advantage. With this metaphor, the designer of the sculptures of the staircase puts the "reader" in front of a choice. If man will choose in his life to control his passions and act prudently and patiently, then he will allow himself to progress in the knowledge (nectar) of the world (suggesting flowers) and to spread this knowledge to other men, i.e. to the rest of the world around him (transporting nectar). If, on the other hand, he is unable to control himself and succumbs to vicious inclinations, he will transform himself into a selfish being who is not interested in the opportunities that proper knowledge of the world gives him⁷.

The second scene that represents the choice of the man torn between vices and virtues is that of the two couples. Both depict a man and a woman. In the first couple the woman rides the man, in the second the man rides the woman. The meaning of these two particular representations can be found in a temporary shift of the man's path, from the world to inter-subjectivity. Up to this point, in fact, the pilgrim man had fought vices and virtues in a "corridor" that put him in communication with the world. Now, instead, the "reading" shifts to interpersonal relationships. It was clear that knowledge, once acquired, could and should be communicated to other human beings. Here again, the scale designer is aware that the relationships between man and the world do not end in such a relationship, but intersect others of an inter-relational nature. In particular, the choice falls on man-woman relations and assumes a dual role, social and moral. On the social level, taking up the typical themes of the medieval poem *Le Lai d'Aristote*⁸, the fact that a woman rides a man is a symbol of prostitution, or rather of the deviant female power to which the man voluntarily submits; from the moral point of view, it indicates the submission of the human being to the most miserable vices that the world can offer him, and that prostitution itself embodies as the clearest symbol. The

⁷ This double choice has become part of the Spanish collective imagination, since at the same time as the construction of the staircase, a proverb began to spread that referred explicitly to the scene of bees and spiders: *cuánto zuga el abeja, miel torna, cuánto el araña ponzoña* (when the bee is leaning, honey returns, when the spider, poison). On this theme see Gabaudan 2002.

⁸ *Le Lai d'Aristote* is a poem of 581 verses that collects stories and adventures typical of the oil language tradition. Famous since the 13th century, its attribution oscillates between Henri d'Andeli and, after 2004, Henri de Valenciennes. At the moment, there is no Italian volume collecting and analyzing this poem, but a short, exhaustive text on the subject can be consulted at: <http://www.fillide.it/tutti-gli-articoli/42-mattia-cavagna-la-figura-femminile-nel-lai-daristote-di-henri-de-valenciennes-1230-circa>.

opposite attitude, the man who avoids vices in order to perfect himself, is represented by a man who rides the woman; in this case too, the episode has a double social and moral value. The social value finds expression in the maintenance of the social order, typical of 16th century society, which expresses the man in command of the family, and the woman who helps him, in a sort of submission, represented, on a sculptural level, by the man who rides her. The moral value, on the other hand, is expressed in the achievement of the acquiescence of vices, which allows man to proceed on the path of peregrination towards righteous behavior in the world. If in the previous scene the vice, represented by female prostitution, got the better of the man who succumbed to it, now he is perfectly master of himself and is able to discern which of the stimuli of the world help him to improve his earthly condition and which divert him from his path.

The inner clash between vice and virtue finds its definitive conclusion, corresponding to the conclusion of the second sequence narrated in the staircase, in the battle between man with a club and man with a bow, an allegory of the quarrel that afflicts man on his earthly path. Just as the spider and the bee were expressions of two different ways in which man had access to the world, so the man with the bat and the man with the bow represent two different attitudes towards the objects of the world. If the first is an expression of brute force, which has no interest in understanding in their complexity the objects that make up the world and which give it the impulse to act correctly, the second represents man with a marked intellectual finesse who, penetrating what surrounds him, is able to understand how to access the world and how to behave, even towards his fellow human beings. However, unlike the episode of the spider and the bee, in this case we arrive at a clash between the two opposing forces. The man with the bow, representing the pilgrim who refines his intellect in the path of perfection, gets the better of the man with the bat, that is to say all those attitudes that are not very virtuous and that would frustrate any effort of personal progress.

In this intermediate stage, the meaning of the pilgrim's path depicted at the beginning of the ladder is gradually becoming clearer. The pilgrimage is taking on the contours of a journey of discovery, which takes place on a double level: a) discovery of the world and the objects that form it; b) discovery of himself and the relationships that can be given in the world. The first level, the discovery of the world, is rather interesting because, although there are no precise indications of method, it gives a precise reference to the ways in which a man can know the world: there is no structuring of any metaphysical plane of knowledge, but the definition of an epistemological way of knowledge that is closely linked to the moral modus assumed in the choice of the way to face life. The jester, in fact, will have an imperfect and

incomplete knowledge of the world, since his way of approaching the world is cross-eyed. The pilgrim, instead, manages to know the world correctly, because correct is his way of approaching it, like a bee or an archer, who represent those who are predisposed to intellectual knowledge, accompanied by a moral right. The new type of man presented so far by the designer of the sculptures of the staircase, is well connected to the new ideas about man that have emerged from the second half of the 15th century, and testify how in Salamanca there was the aspiration to maintain this ideal, which will guide also those who will deal with the theory of knowledge.

In this sense, even more interesting is the third section of the staircase which, with its final sequence, presents the culmination of the pilgrim's journey. Aware of the way of knowing and being in the world, he is preparing to definitively overcome vices and to enter the final stretch of the route that will lead him to his final destination, the complete perfection of himself.

As Cortés Vázquez and Gabaudan indicate, the scene can be interpreted eminently from a moral and religious point of view⁹. The first scene to dwell on is that of bullfighting. The representation shows a man on horseback in the act of stabbing a bull. Allegorically, this scene is quite interesting, because once again it represents the clash, inside the human being, between vice and virtue. The bull, in fact, represents the man who acts immorally and with his brute force; the man on horseback, on the other hand, represents the condition of the man who, once he knows the world, understands it, knows how to act in it and acts in accordance with the moral laws he has learned along the way. In this sense, reason triumphs and the intellect become the instrument through which human beings can be defined as such, against animal instinct. Man has completely tamed his passions and understood his role in the world. The final scene, depicting a ride in full chivalrous style, represents the final rejoicing, in which man celebrates the defeat of passions and vices and is a being perfected and fulfilled. It is the world itself that has given him the chance to perfect and complete himself.

The last figure, which concludes the scale, is that of Friendship, a symbol of the *concordia* of men with themselves, with their fellow men and with God, who represents the One with whom one can reach the highest degree of friendship. The pilgrim has finished his jour-

⁹ In reality Gabaudan proposes a further interpretative plan, the political one, which is based on some stylistic elements that recall the chivalric order of *Toisón*, to which Charles V will be very attached throughout his life and which will influence some of his political attitudes. On the relationship between politics and some representations on the scale (See Gabaudan 2012).

ney, he has fought against those contingencies that risked distracting him from the straight path: he has become a bee, an archer, a knight and has come to express his potential to the highest degree.

At the end of this path, it can be seen that he perfectly manages to collect the Scholastic and humanist ideals that the previous century and a half had developed and developed. The academic line, carried out by 15th century pre-humanist philosophy and theology, following Aristotelian and Thomist teachings, aims precisely at the study of man and his way of entering the world, no longer only from a metaphysical, but also from an epistemological and moral point of view.

4. From the Art to the Books: The Heritage of the Visual Representations

The humanist line aims to return to the true meaning of man, unhinging the theories that at the beginning of the 16th century were flattening and emptying the human being of meaning. Thus, the world is for man a set of objects and elements that he must use to increase and refine his reasoning, both from the point of view of pure knowledge of the world and of the moral action that derives from it. In this sense, is interesting a statement that Erasmus, already present in the façade in the skull with the frog, underlines in Epistle 329:

It is not logical to declare ourselves true Christians when we kill many men, but on the contrary when we save them; not to send several thousand ungodly men to hell, but on the contrary to convert them into pious men. They are men, too. Let them understand that they have met fathers and not tyrants, to bring them to conversion and not to slavery. (Erasmus 1901, 171)

Erasmus, taking up the casus of the evangelization of the New World, ideally suggests the resumption of the themes of *concordia* and just action, which guide man in the unfolding of his life.

This seems to have been the same spirit that animated the authors of the *Siglo de Oro*, in particular the major exponents of the Dominican and Jesuit schools. Taking up the legacy of classicism and humanism and the new needs of the human being, they elaborated numerous works in which the concept of justice is fundamental and is declined according to the intentions already presented in the artistic representations of the university. In the 16th century, Salamanca is a city that lives, full of people on the path and city paths marked by continuous references to ethical behavior, immediately appreciable by those who walk on its streets. By way of example, as a starting point for further research in this direction, we could refer, *inter*

alia, to the *Summa Theologiae* commentaries by Francisco de Vitoria (1486-1546), *De Iustitia e Iure* by Domingo de Soto (1494-1560), *De Iustitia et Iure libri sex* by Luis De Molina (1535-1600), *Decisiones de Iustitia et Iure* by Domingo Báñez (1528-1604) and *Defensio Fidei* by Francisco Suárez (1548-1617). All these authors lived in Salamanca and felt the inner travail of Renaissance humanity called to rethink the role of human being on earth. In their works, they seem to take as their model the indications of the façade and the staircase and inherit their objectives and main features. These scholars start from the concept that all humans, net of their religion, are on the way to allow their souls to reach salvation. Such salvation can be achieved through the recognition that all human beings are equal and, from this assumption, a concept of justice must be elaborated in order to guarantee such equality transversally.

Scholars of Salamanca accept the Aristotelian-Thomists *lectio* and argue that justice and the practice of the virtues are possible only through the voluntary acceptance of the other, which becomes the cornerstone of any ethical-political interpretation of the world. This need arises from the usury or simony practices so common in the city in the sixteenth century, which pushed these authors to abandon metaphysics and theology to which they devoted most of their efforts, to become researchers of the practice of the virtues. These are inscribed in the hearts of the so-called men on the path and only a return to these virtues can guarantee a full self-awareness of man's role in the world. To be like Hercules must be a natural instinct, which is indeed guided by grace, but which must first have reason as its protagonist. In this sense, it belongs to human law to allow men to live politically in peace and justice, which are the conditions for the adequate preservation of human nature. *Quod vitae sectabor iter?* This, therefore, no longer has the role of a simple formula that allows access to the study of classical literature; it is no longer a key to reading the past, but becomes a perspective of analysis of the present. If one does not understand which path of life to choose, one cannot be either just or virtuous. For this reason, Salamanca and its university tries to indicate a clear and instantly comprehensible path, so that the program of the new humanity is not confined to the perimeters of cultural places like an intellectual *experimentum*, but finds its dimension in everyday life, in those paths continually marked by human beings in search of themselves.

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