

Salve, Alma Mater | BY GOTTFRIED OOSTERWAL

The history and significance of the term *alma mater* is one of surprising relevance in today's religious atmosphere. What many do not know is that the term embodies the issue of the relationships between faith and science and the church and the university. It also speaks of a view of the eternal gospel and the meaning of the 1,260 years in Bible prophecy.

Dictionaries and encyclopedias all agree on the basic meaning of the term *alma mater*. It is described in the *New*

of studies?" Or did it happen first at the universities of Salerno or Orleans or Paris, founded in the second half of the twelfth century? The one thing certain about the issue is that the University of Paris, one of the earliest universities (if not the very first), consciously chose to apply the term to its institution. Other universities followed in its footsteps and modeled themselves after it. In 1389, for instance, 24 years after it was founded in 1365, the University of Vienna received its statutes which were modeled



Bologna: town and university; right: seal.



University of Salerno; next page, seal.

International Encyclopedia as "A name applied to a university or college, and expressing the relation between the institution and the students who have been educated in it. The term is one of affection and suggests a mutual dependence of university and alumnus upon the other."¹ Other dictionaries still add as a second use: "the anthem (or fighting hymn) of an institution of higher learning."² Some encyclopedias mention that the term first came into use in the first half of the fourteenth century, though no certainty exists about which university first applied it to its institution. Was it the University of Bologna, the world's oldest continually-running institution which still carries in its motto the words *Alma mater studiorum*, the "nurturing mother

after those of the School of Liberal Arts (*Facultas artium*) of the University of Paris, *pia matrix et alma mater omnium facultatum*, or "the pious nourisher and honorable mother of all Schools."³ The same holds true for the University of Cologne, where in 1388 Pope Urban VI founded a university "on the model of Paris," and where four years later the new statutes spoke of *alma mater universitas studii Coloniensis*.⁴ Similar developments have been documented for the universities of Heidelberg (1386), Erfurt (1393), Leipzig, Cambridge and Oxford, all referring to the University of Paris as *mater nostra universitas parisiensis*, "our mother the University of Paris."

Why did the University of Paris play such a significant

role in establishing not only the use of the term *alma mater* for institutions of higher learning but also in giving it the particular meaning it attained in fourteenth century Europe? At the time, the University of Paris was not only considered the *parens scientiarum*, or “the mother of the sciences”⁵ made famous by its star professors whose fame came to rest on the university. The university was also the scientific flagship of the Catholic Church, the “eye apple of the pope,” the bulwark and great defender of the faith,⁶ and later the instigator and leader of the revolt against the papacy in the call for reform.

The Flowering of a New Worldview

The most characteristic hallmark of the fourteenth century lies in the rather sudden decline, fall and collapse of the papacy,⁷ which until then had dominated all levels and aspects of life, from family to the economy, the sciences and education, and all social and political spheres. In the thirteenth century, the papacy had reached the pinnacle of its power, especially under such popes as Alexander III

second sword representing all secular power, embodied by the state, which shapes people’s social, economic and political life. Both powers, in their fullness, belonged to Christ who had given it to the apostle Peter, and through him, so the theory suggested, to the successive popes. However, while both swords, both powers, belonged to the pope, he gives one temporarily in loan to earthly rulers. In exchange for that loan—and only a loan it is!—kings and other worldly authorities and institutions had to pay homage to the pope, obey his authority in all things, pay tributes and defend the realm of the Church. There was no higher authority.

In matters of science, dogmatic theology was considered the “queen of the sciences.” It determines what is true science and what is false science—what scientific findings and discoveries may be acceptable and which ones should be rejected and condemned. Governed by one and the same worldview, society was characterized by relative harmony, social order and the integration of faith and knowledge.



Orleans, town, cathedral



The seal,

(1159–1181) and Innocence III (1189–1216). They truly embodied *plenitudo potestatis*, “the fullness of power.” Emperors, kings, universities and cities were all subject to them, from the Hohenstaufens in Germany to the kings of England and France, Poland, Hungary and Bohemia.

The theological basis for this fullness of power was found in the two-swords theory, formulated by Hugo of St. Victor and based on Luke 22:38, which reads: “And they said, ‘Look, Lord, here are two swords.’ And he said to them, ‘It is enough.’” The theory holds that the two swords represent the fullness of power: one sword representing the spiritual power which satisfies man’s need for salvation and which is embodied in the church; and the

All this rather suddenly came to an end at the beginning of the fourteenth century. In 1302, Pope Boniface VIII in his famous bull *Unam sanctam* reiterated again that fullness of power is ultimately given to the pope and the church, for which reason the state and the sciences are always subject to the church and to church teachings, and for which reason laymen are always lower than the clergy and must obey them absolutely in order to receive salvation. There are, in fact, two kinds of Christians, so the bull suggested: the laity and the clergy, with the latter always superior, and the former of a lower order, as they were involved in secular affairs, such as marriage and having children, the sciences and the professions, which were all

thought to contaminate people as spiritual beings. In all things, the secular was always inferior to the spiritual, so the thinking went, and therefore needed to be guided by the spiritual. *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* was the saying: “Outside of the church there is no salvation.”

A proud man, Boniface loved to dress in ornamental habits and outfits and proclaim to the gathered crowds: *Ego sum Caesar; ego sum imperator*: “I am the ruler of the world.” What a blow it was to him and the papacy when a year later (September 7, 1303), during another conflict with the king of France Philip IV over the issue of whether the state could raise taxes from monasteries and the clergy, a handful of armed Frenchmen men led by minister William of Nogaret entered the pope’s castle in Anagni and took him prisoner. A few weeks later, Pope Boniface died, deeply wounded in his pride, broken by his total loss of power and brought down in shame. And with him died the notion of papal universal power.

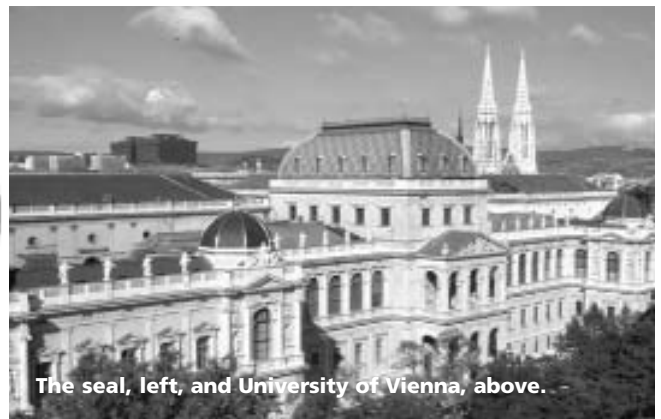
During the next few decades, the papacy stood under the control of France. The seat of the papacy was even

time that the University of Paris became the great leader and center of the movement for reform under the guidance of two of the greatest scholars of the time, Professors Pierre d’Ailli and Jean Gerson, both also chancellors of the university. This even led to the Council of Pisa, where both popes were urged to abdicate and where a new pope was elected, the Greek Alexander V. During this council both popes, one in Rome and one in Avignon, refused to give up their relative positions. With the addition of Alexander V, there were now three popes, each one condemning the others. The Great Schism ended in 1429 only after the Council of Constance (1414–1418) had affirmed that general councils are superior to popes, and, when one pope was taken prisoner, another was forced to resign, and a new pope, Martin V, was elevated to the Seat of Peter.

This deadly blow to the papacy reverberated throughout Europe and beyond. Cities and whole countries rose against papal rule and made themselves independent from the church. Everywhere, and not just at



left, and University of Paris, above.



The seal, left, and University of Vienna, above.

moved to Avignon, France, where the popes endured their “Babylonian captivity” (1309–1377) under the dominance of the French king who forced them to declare Boniface VIII a heretic. In 1377, Pope Gregory XI moved the papal seat back again to Rome for political reasons, though his decision was spurned by the prophetess Catherine of Siena who in her summons constantly spoke of Avignon as “Apocalyptic Babylon.” But that made things even worse, for Pope Clemens VII (1378–1394) decided to stay in Avignon. This led to the Great Schism in which the Church had two popes, each one claiming to be the one and only true Vicar of Christ on earth and each condemning the other as the antichrist. It was at this

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The University Becomes the *Alma Mater*

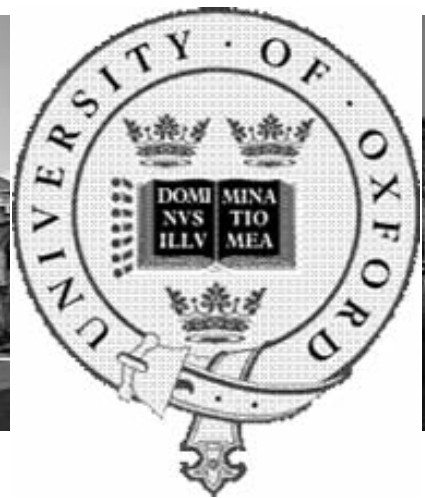
In the midst of this struggle for freedom and liberation from ecclesiastical rule and abuses, a group of students and some of their professors began to refer to their university as their *alma mater*, instigated by the University of Paris. That was in itself quite a revolutionary step, an act of defiance and of reformation. By this time, the term *alma mater* was not a new term at all. It had been in use for centuries, not as a designation for the university, but as a term that belonged to and was exclusively applied to the Church, the *Alma Mater Ecclesia*, "the holy mother the Church." The term was the theme of ancient hymns and used in official church documents and papal bulls. Pope Boniface VIII, during his pronouncement of the year 1300 as the first year of Jubilee, specifically refers to the Church as the *Alma Mater Ecclesia*.⁸ Not one university was ever spoken of or referred to as *alma mater* before the first half of the fourteenth century. Yet from then on it became the university's very designation, its title and its calling.

ticism in which science and faith were integrated into one coherent system of thought and brought about the separation of science and faith as two independent-yet-equal ways of approaching reality.

No doubt the great stimulator (*venerabilis inceptor*) in this new movement, which would give rise to a whole new development in both the sciences and philosophy (theology), was William of Ockham. Ockham was an English, Franciscan monk who first taught at Oxford, and later at the University of Paris. He and his followers argued that Reason and Faith have separate ways of understanding reality, with their own methods and their own language. The methods of the one cannot be applied to the object of the other, and vice-versa. An affirmation of the Faith and its objects by Reason is not possible. Faith must therefore seek its own affirmation and understanding, based on the Bible alone (Martin Luther would later call himself a "fierce Ockhamist," and his teachings on the relationship of the state to the church bear evidence of Ockham's tremendous influence on the reformer).⁹



University of Cambridge, above, and seal, left.



Oxford

The shift of the term *alma mater* from the church to the university indicated a whole new way of thinking. The decline and fall of the papacy was not only reflected in the church's almost absolute loss of authority, but also in the loss of the vast majority of papal lands, with only a few remaining in Italy at the time. It was reflected in the decline and fall of the Gothic style of architecture and art, in painting, in literature, song and music, all dominated by the church until then. It caused a change from a natural and feudal economy to one based on money and a democratic capitalist system, and it opened the way for a new way of thinking that was independent of the church and the dominance of the clergy. It spelled the end of scholas-

With the papacy deprived of all its power and authority, the church was heavily criticized by its own prophets (and prophetesses such as Bridget of Sweden and Catherine of Siena), as well as by professors, poets and artists (Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio). With its teachings and traditions doubted, and at the parish level often ignored, who then could be trusted to educate and nurture people and society, feed the young, guide the believers? This was the question raised by students and faculty alike gathered at reunions and discussions. Who is our real mother, our venerable and honorable and trustworthy mother to guide us in our lives, point out the way, offer insights into reality, supply us with the truths and the moral fiber that make living possible?

The church or the university? It was at this point in time that students and faculty alike chose the university to be their *alma mater*, their nurturing and holy mother. And the students thus nourished or nurtured were called *alumnus*, if male, or *alumna* if a female, meaning “nurseling.”

Their choice did not mean a revolt against God or a rejection of the faith. Rather, their choice indicated a new freedom, a new power and a call to become involved in a reformation and a revival of true godliness. By choosing the term *alma mater* for their body of students and faculties and corporations, the universities (many of them newly founded in the middle of the fourteenth century) embarked on a new path of faith that centered not in the church but in a higher authority revealed in scripture and open to reason. And science, liberated from the tutelage of the church, had its own way of opening eyes to the divine realities of God’s creation. University and church, science and faith, each had its own domain, and each came directly from God, so was the meaning inherent in the shift of the term *alma mater* from the church to the university. The

(1131–1202) at this time. Joachim had predicted, based on his use of the prophetic-historical method of interpreting the book of Revelation, that soon the final period in the history of humanity would begin, a period which would lead to the return of Christ, the day of judgment, the resurrection of the dead, and the ushering in of the kingdom of God in glory. He called this period the period of the “Everlasting Gospel.” First there was the period of the Father, which coincides with the time of the Old Testament. Then the period of the Son, and finally the period of the Holy Spirit, characterized by the end of the rule of the pope and the clergy, and the beginning of an age of freedom in which through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Everlasting Gospel would be proclaimed in all of the world and then the end would come.

That period would start around the year 1260 A.D., based on the interpretation of the 1,260-year period or 42 months referred to in the book of Revelation as the time set aside for the dominance of pope and clergy. Joachim’s followers in the fourteenth century clearly saw that period



University, above, and seal, left.



Cathedral and town of Cologne, above; seal, left.

one was not superior to the other; both needed each other to understand the totality of reality. Both complemented each other and corrected each other. In matters of scientific discovery and scientific truths, however, the church needed to limit itself to what was clearly revealed in the Word of God and to be open to learn from what the sciences discovered in their domains and by their specific methods. That is the ultimate meaning of the shift of the term *alma mater* from the church to the university.

It is understandable and rather significant that the transition of the notion of *alma mater* from the church to the university played a significant role in the revival of the teachings of the prophet Joachim of Flora (Fiore)

beginning in their time, after 1,260 years of the absorption of power and persecution of the saints by the pope, the end of papacy, new freedoms for God’s chosen people, new revivals inspired by the work of the Holy Spirit, and a powerful proclamation of the Everlasting Gospel that would lead to an ushering in of the kingdom of God in glory. In this final period of history, also described by Joachim as the era of *plenitudo intellectus* (after the periods of *scientia* and *sapientia ex parte*), the universities would take a leading role in making the “Everlasting Gospel” known to all mankind.¹⁰

Of course, the church did not see or experience it that way. It did all it could to claim and defend and limit the

term *alma mater* for itself. It also powerfully persecuted the followers of Joachim. After all, who and what really shaped people's thinking was at stake, what determined their norms of life and behavior, the definition of truth, and what constituted true science. Two powerful arguments were then presented by the curia to preserve the title *alma mater* for the church only. The first was the argument from history that insisted that the term *alma* can only apply to a holy object like the church as in the ancient Roman practice of referring to their gods as *alma*. Secular institutions or objects of life were never referred to as holy. The scholars at the universities responded to this argument by declaring that the whole division between secular and sacred is a non-biblical division, and that all of God's creation and all work done to the glory of God must be considered holy. The term may therefore well apply with the same force to the sciences or to the university, they claimed, in the meaning of honorable or blessed or venerable, all good translations of the ancient term *alma*.

The second argument had more teeth, at least at first

has not yet given birth.¹¹ Of these passages, one of the most well known is found in Isaiah 7:14: "Behold, a young woman (or virgin) shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Immanuel."

In the Jewish community this text is seen as the promise of the birth of a messiah. Christians, on the other hand, have applied this word to the virgin Mary and the birth of her son Jesus, our Lord and Redeemer. The term *alma mater*, then, so these curial scholars said, referred to the virgin Mary and literally stood for "Blessed or Holy Virgin Mother." She therefore deserves the name *Alma Mater* in the first place, as was common practice in poems and hymns written during the Middle Ages. And through her, the virgin Mary, the church alone deserved that title. University scholars again replied that the Latin epithet *alma* bears no linguistic or etymological relationship to the Hebrew noun *almab*. The thought remained with the defenders of the curia, however, and continued to shape the meaning of *alma mater* as applied to the virgin Mary and as the rightful title for the Church.



"bite." One of the blessings of the end of the tutelage of the clergy over the sciences was that the result of the events following the decline and fall of the papacy in the fourteenth century was the flourishing of a whole new set of sciences, long neglected as a result of clergy dominance. One of these was the study of ancient languages, among them Hebrew, the language in which the Old Testament was written and which had almost been lost in the Latin-speaking western church. It was then discovered that there exists also in Hebrew a term *alma* (or *almab*), not as an adjective as in Latin, but as a noun. Seven times the word is used in the Old Testament where it stands for a girl, a young woman, a virgin or a married woman who

A Shift from *Alma Mater* to *Abba Pater*

Sometimes it appears as if the two opposing parties fighting over the ownership of the term *alma mater* and what it stands for find a compromise, a solution even. This happened as a result of a movement that at the time powerfully affected both the universities and the church, the laity and the clergy: namely, mysticism. Amidst the decline and collapse of the official church, the aim of the movement was not to despair but to keep the faith, not as something external, but as an inner strength that finds its center and core in a life of devotion to and a unification with God. The emphasis thus shifted from the debate over who the nourishing

and venerable mother was (*alma mater*) to the question, How do I find and stay close to God, our heavenly Father? (*Abba, Pater*). Famous leaders in this movement were Meister Eckhart, John Tauler, Henry Suso and John Van Ruysbroeck. The movement attracted thousands of people, clergy and laity, nobility and ordinary folks, at universities and monasteries, cities and rural areas. In spite of its distortions of Biblical truths, it led indeed to that revival of primitive godliness that debated the nourishing mother (*alma mater*) and made place for an honest search to be united with God (*Abba Pater*).

The universities acknowledged that the purpose of all education, and the aim of all scientific endeavors, was to seek and acknowledge God as the Father and Creator. The church, too, acknowledged that the very purpose of being the church was to make known to the world that there was a God in heaven who is the true Father. Though tensions inevitably remained between the university and the church, both acknowl-

ed that a fruitful interchange could and must take place between the two, each working within its own sphere with its own methods and objectives.

Unfortunately, however, the differentiation between science and faith first propagated by Ockham and the *via moderna* in the end led to a total separation between the two and even to a devaluation of the faith under the impact of the developing sciences. But the church, too, shares in the blame. Instead of listening to science as an equal partner under God, it began to reiterate church father Cyprian's famous dictum, "Nobody can have God as his father if he does not have the church as his mother."

The conflict reached a pinnacle when scientists began to explore the notion that the earth circled around the sun and not the other way around, a theory that was promulgated by the church. It worsened when historians and literati laid bare the history of the church "as it really happened at the time" instead of wrapping it in holy narrative (hagiography).

Suddenly, we find ourselves transported seven hundred years into the future where we are experiencing again the very same challenges that called for students

and faculties to decide who and what their *alma mater* was. Will we succeed this time in keeping the balance between our innermost desire to be united with God our Father and our mission to make him known to the whole world, and our scientific calling to explore and explain the intricacies of our cosmology? And will we recognize now honestly and openly what really happened in our history, warts and all? Who deserves our praise as our *alma mater* in this respect, the university and science, or faith and the church? Of course, the truly mature person is most likely the one who has had the privilege of growing up and being educated by both religion and reason, faith and science, church



and university. Happy the person who finds them both together at work in a Christian university, separate yet together, respecting each other's true nature in its differences and competencies, but together producing that mature *alumnus* or *alumna* who excels in science to the glory of God. To that university I shout: "Ave, alma mater!" "I greet you and praise you." ■

Notes and References

This article is based on a baccalaureate address given on April 25, 2009, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the class graduating from Battle Creek Academy at the SDA Tabernacle church in Battle Creek, Michigan. The address was titled "From Alma Mater to Abba, Pater."

1. *New International Encyclopedia*. (Cambridge, MA: The University Press, 1926).
2. *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American language; The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*; 4th edition. (New York, NY: Houghton, Mifflin, 2000).

tanta lectorum diligentia tanta denique scientia scripturarum, ut in modum Cariath Sepher merito dici possit civitas litterarum. (Happy city where the sacred scriptures are being studied with so much zeal, where its mysteries are being revealed by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, where the dedication of its readers is so great, so great also the knowledge of the Scriptures that she rightfully like [the Old Testament town of] Kirjath Sepher can be called "City of Letters.")

7. Schnuerer, Gustav. *Kerk en Beschaving in de Middeleeuwen*; Dutch translation of his monumental study on *Church and Culture in the Middle Ages*. Vol. 3, pp 1 ff. (Haarlem: De Spaarnestad, 1950). See also: L.Elliott-Binns. *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Medieval Papacy*. (Hamden, Conn: Archon books, 1967). For details on times and dates, see: Karl Heussi. *Kompendium der Kirchengeschichte*. 10th edition.

8. Wagenvoort, H. *Alma Mater*. (Groningen: J. B. Wolters, 1956).

9. Berkhof, H. *De Geschiedenis der Kerk (The History of the Church)*. (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1950).

10. For detailed studies on Joachim of Flora see: H. Grundmann. *Studien ueber Joachim von Floris*. (Leipzig, 1927). Or E. Benz: "Die Kategorien der Religioesen Geschichtsdeutung Joachims," *Zeitschrift fuer Kirchengeschichte* 3, Folge I (1931): 24–111.



3. The most detailed and authentic study on the history of the universities in Europe during the Middle Ages until the year 1400 is given by Heinrich Denifle: "Die Entstehung der Universitaeten des Mttelalters bis 1400"; 1883, 1956. Denifle is also the scholar who published the *chartularium* of the University of Paris. See also Hastings Rashdall. *The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages*. 3 vols. Vol. I. Eds. F. M. Powicke and A. B. Emden. (Oxford: University Press, 1936).

4. Denifle, Heinrich.

5. Denifle, Heinrich.

6. Heinrich Denifle makes mention of a letter written by Philippe Harvengt sometime between 1154 and 1181 in which the city of Paris is spoken of as "*Felix civitas, in qua sancti codices tanto studio revolvuntur, et eorum perplexa mysteria superfusi dono spiritus resolvuntur, in qua*

11. These passages are found in Genesis 24:43; Exodus 2:8; Psalms 68:26; Proverbs 30:19; Song of Songs 1:3 and 6:8.

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