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# In the 'Lógos' of Love: Promise and Predicament in Catholic Intellectual Life

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Walker Percy suggested old con idence was gone but new beliefs had not emerged to replace it. One possibility—that love and truth go together (*caritas in veritate*) and mutually undergird intellectual work—seems like an ancient (even outdated) idea but has significant new possibilities. The history of the past 50 years of the Catholic academy needs to be reconsidered in light of preceding centuries. It could open the door to reconnecting theology to other disciplines (especially philosophy). Building on the tradition of modern Catholic social teaching, it could spur fresh reflection on the connection between the value-neutral ethos and intense specialization of the natural and social sciences and the clear need for academic and intellectual work to serve the human community. Ironically, it may be most useful to confront the future by mining the past, in approaching this question afresh. Despite crises internal and external to Catholicism, the resources of Catholic intellectual life are both more accessible and more urgently needed than ever before.

Walker Percy love in truth history theology Catholic social teaching Catholic intellectual life  
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## 1 The Cliff and the Tower

Reflections on the Past Half-Century in Light of the Past Half-Millennium (Or So)

Una M. Cadegan

Introduction

“In the *lógos* of love’: Promise and Predicament in Catholic Intellectual Life,” the title of the September 2013 conference cosponsored by the Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies at the University of Southern California and by the University of Dayton, was inspired by a somewhat unlikely pair: Walker Percy and Pope Benedict XVI. The *lógos* of love, according to Benedict in his 2009 encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, is where “[t]ruth opens and unites our minds . . . the Christian proclamation and testimony of *caritas*”—that Latin word inadequately translated into English as “charity” but which refers to the fullness of love made possible in and by God’s love (sec. 4).

Walker Percy articulates the “predicament” of the conference’s title:

One sign that the world has ended, the world we knew, the world by which we understood ourselves, an age which began some three hundred years ago with the scientific revolution, is the dawn of the discovery that its world view no longer works and we find ourselves without the means of understanding ourselves.

There is a lag between the end of an age and the discovery of the end. The denizens of such a time are like the cartoon cat that runs off a cliff and for a while is suspended, still running, in mid-air but sooner or later looks down and sees there is nothing under him.<sup>1</sup>

If we accept at least in part Percy’s diagnosis—that a progressive worldview buttressed by faith in the scientific method to put reason at the center of human affairs for the good of humanity was so decimated by the catastrophes of the twentieth century as to be irremediable—do we have anything more to say in response to his questions 60 years on, or are we still suspended helplessly, legs spinning?

Reflections on US Catholic intellectual life from the mid-twentieth century to the present do not usually begin with Walker Percy’s predicament, his conviction that we no longer know how to talk about “man.” Much more often the narrative has been arranged around a different question from a different intellectual—historian John Tracy Ellis of the Catholic University of America. His 1955 essay, lamenting the lack of intellectual achievement among US Catholics, launched a thousand responses, agreeing and disagreeing in nearly equal measure. His was a largely pragmatic accounting—totaling degrees, awards, tenured positions achieved, and publications produced.<sup>2</sup> In comparison, Percy’s more abstract, less empirically demonstrable description of our “predicament” may seem more idiosyncratic and therefore less useful. But is it?

In Ellis’s terms, American Catholics have arrived. The gap between Catholics and other religious groups in terms of intellectual achievement has all but disappeared. At the same time, the present moment in Catholic intellectual life is one of great anxiety. Given the tremendous accomplishments of the Catholic community in the twentieth century, why, as Percy asks, do we feel so sad?

Perhaps a historian takes up a novelist’s question at her peril. John Tracy Ellis’s ground is safer—count the degrees, compare the starting salaries, tally the number of seats on the Supreme Court. It is much more difficult to see where we—“we” defined for present purposes as anyone with a stake in the liveliness and integrity of Catholic intellectual life—are in terms of Percy’s predicament. But, by locating this conversation within the orbit of “the *lógos* of love,” we reveal our hunch that there is in our project something like a response to Percy’s dilemma. Not an answer, certainly not a solution, and definitely not a panacea. Maybe the hunch is this: taking seriously the linkage of love and truth is a radical recasting of the modern intellectual project that will, if we are good at it, get us into all kinds of trouble. But there is little else that is really worth bothering about.

1. Walker Percy, “The Delta Factor,” in *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has To Do With the Other* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), 19.

2. John Tracy Ellis, “American Catholics and the Intellectual Life,” *Thought* 30 (Autumn 1955): 351–388.

For those involved in conversations about Catholic intellectual life, the story of the last century long had a clear and familiar shape. Whether it is a narrative of triumph or decline, and who its heroes and villains are, depends on the stance of both teller and listener. At the last century’s beginning, the Vatican condemned Modernism, which was, among other things,

the attempt of a number of European Catholic intellectuals to grapple in good faith with the profound philosophical shifts of the preceding two centuries. This condemnation caused US Catholic intellectuals to develop a defensive and inward orientation that prevented full engagement with intellectual modernity. Deep currents in Church life in both Europe and the United States, however, especially *ressourcement*—the retrieval and reconsideration of sources from the early Church—led eventually to the wide-open windows of *aggiornamento*—the hopeful name given to the atmosphere in which the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) was called, held, and received.

However, the hope was largely displaced by subsequent events. Rapidly changing sexual mores in both the United States and Europe, and the Vatican’s response to those changes, caused a rift in American Catholic thought and polity that was deepened by the increasingly destructive partisan polarization in American political life. The damage to Catholic intellectual life was worsened by the recurrent waves of revelations of clergy sexual abuse and the inadequacy of the response to it by Church leaders at every level. The sense of alienation and the crisis of authority were further heightened by Vatican efforts in the 1980s and 1990s to clarify the mission of Catholic higher education. Although the document that resulted from the process aimed at this clarification, the Apostolic Constitution *Ex corde ecclesiae*, contains a compelling vision of the intellectual life and a sturdy defense of the importance of academic work for the life of the Church and the world, some elements of its implementation in the US context raised old suspicions about the compatibility of Catholicism with American traditions of free inquiry and academic freedom.

One clear effect of *Ex corde*, however, was to jump-start a renewed concern with what it means to do intellectual work as Catholics and to house, even embody, that work in institutions whose members share a common mission. Given another quarter-century’s perspective and experience, how has the long view changed?

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There is much that could be said here about institutional change and growth, demographic patterns, and surveys of religious identification and practice. The present essay, however, will focus on three shifts in perspective, less tangible but no less consequential, with implications that significantly resituate a Catholic politics of knowledge. In other words, Catholic intellectual life remaps intellectual modernity, in ways that affect where it does and should stand in relation to the uses of knowledge in the contemporary world. This remapping puts Catholic intellectual life at odds with other inhabitants of the same territory—it can’t acquiesce, for example, to the idea of nature as consisting only of materiality (and the resulting consequence for intellectual work that only the material can be studied and known), it can’t accept the idea that knowledge can be separated from the uses to which it is put, and it can’t measure success and failure by profit or prestige. We will consider each of these feuds in turn.

First, ground on which Ellis was too pragmatic to venture, and which Percy may have thought irretrievably lost: for Catholic scholars, those consciously engaged in Catholic intellectual life, the world was never not “charged with the grandeur of God.” The image is from the poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins, which takes the damage done to creation by industrial modernity and the general human capacity for destruction fully into account, but it asserts unequivocally that still “morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs.” Despite the widespread conviction among intellectuals that the world had been “disenchanted” by some

combination of capitalist growth and Lockean empiricism, Catholics went on believing that God's spirit was present in the world, and that pursuing the truths about the world available to the methods of scholarly research was one means of discerning and honoring that spirit.

What did this belief look like in practice? For one thing, it meant that Catholics could study natural science not in spite of but because of their religious commitment. This, to put it mildly, is not part of the received wisdom about modern intellectual history. It is true that the condemnation of Galileo has reverberated down through the ages (not always in its most accurate version), and that Darwin's work initially raised serious objections from Church authorities, but it is also worth asking how many of those who know of these two cases also know that pioneering nineteenth-century geneticist Gregor Mendel was an Augustinian friar or that cathedrals played a major role in the development of solar

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observatories?<sup>3</sup> The clashes and obstruction were real, certainly, but for centuries during the ordinary course of scientific work, the Church supported the belief that if the methods of science revealed truths about created nature, they were at the same time revealing something of the Creator.

The question was more fraught in areas in which method and result were less empirically verifiable. As the prestige and authority of science grew, so did the divergence of intellectual work by Catholics from the academic mainstream. Moral philosophy, politics, economics, human behavior, history, art—vast areas of human culture and experience that had been incorporated into a unified intellectual vision for centuries became off-limits to nonempirical investigation.<sup>4</sup> Catholics did not stop studying them, but they either included them under the umbrella of theology (ethics, metaphysics, or Church history), or they studied them in Catholic institutional contexts where the main point often was differentiation from, rather than harmony with, mainstream intellectual life.

This divergence was both marginalization and separatism. That is, Catholic approaches to knowing—belief in the knowability of truth beyond the empirical, insistence on the interconnectedness of increasingly separate realms of study, the existence of an extra-intellectual institutional authority that claimed the final word on truth—were undoubtedly excluded from the main stages of academic life throughout most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But Catholics also maintained separate institutions for tribal purposes—protecting the faith of students (and faculty) whatever course of study they pursued—and out of something like altruism—the belief that the world was on the wrong course, and that Catholic approaches to knowledge and intellectual work would eventually be recognized as essential and mutually beneficial.

This separatism was never absolute. The majority of Catholics who pursued higher learning did so outside the context of Catholic higher education. Catholic scholars in nearly every field interacted with, learned from, and also likely influenced mainstream academic work. But it is also true that two distinct streams rejoined in the opening that characterized

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the era of the Second Vatican Council. In the generations since, Catholics involved in intellectual work have enjoyed a new sense of freedom deriving from their Church's support for their entry as full members into the contemporary academy. What might be different now

from the earliest years of the postconciliar era is a growing confidence that there are contributions Catholic tradition can make to contemporary intellectual life well beyond the bounds of Catholic institutions.

For example, there is rigorous work being done in the philosophy of human rights that is asking difficult questions about whether they can be grounded in anything other than a religious understanding of the human person.<sup>5</sup> Certainly not uncontested ground, and there is unlikely to be a consensus anytime soon, but the long Catholic history of thinking about the relationship between faith and reason is proving to be a resource in this discussion. On a more pragmatic level, whether intellectuals believe the world to be disenchanted or not, the last few decades of world events have made clear that religious belief, practice, and difference are going to be relevant global factors for the foreseeable future. Scholars knowledgeable about and conversant with religious traditions as something other than remnants or epiphenomena have a crucial role to play in this area.

Beyond this renewed (and by many unexpected) role for scholarship rooted in religious traditions, and in Catholicism in particular, there is a second major implication in a renewed recognition of the world's persistent enchantment: the enormous intellectual project of freeing theology as a discipline from carrying the burden of so many fields for so long. The extension of the Lockean scientific view of knowledge into universities over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries resulted in the dismemberment of Catholic intellectual life, as learning in theology and philosophy was severed institutionally from learning in other disciplines that had been studied in tandem with theology since before the birth of the university. Seemingly inexorably, history, languages (including literature and rhetoric), and the ways of knowing aspects of human experience that would come to be called the social sciences were folded into the model that bracketed religious belief out of the disenchanted world.

One key task of contemporary Catholic intellectual life is to somehow repair this rift, which is not a task only for theologians, anymore than

sensitivity to historical context is only for historians or a working familiarity with science only for scientists. There are daunting obstacles. The contemporary academy has very little in the way of space for theology per se (as distinct from the study of religion, for which it barely has space), so that even theologians who want to interact with the academy have a hard time finding willing interlocutors.

In addition, the insights and knowledge that have developed within disciplines other than theology and Catholic philosophy have sometimes been so thoroughly co-opted by secular disenchantment that they are in deep conflict with Catholic teaching on the nature of the human person, the natural world, and the purposes of human society. For example, some work in history recognizes only power as a factor in any given context, making religious belief entirely ancillary. And some work in psychology treats religion as a crutch for an immature personality, unable to function as an autonomous agent. At least as often, however, the insights developed in these disciplines outside the Catholic academy have something profound to offer Catholic intellectual life and tradition—they may need translating and even “baptizing,” but those committed to fostering Catholic intellectual life need a stance of hospitality and a default attitude of reintegration, rather than the resistance and even mutual

hostility that have characterized some of what goes under the heading of Catholic studies. This could be one of the clearest implications of the call to link love and truth.

In one key area this work of reintegrating theology and the insights of other disciplines is already underway, with interesting possibilities both for the future of Catholic intellectual life and for the collaboration of Catholics with scholars of other and no religious tradition. Modern Catholic social teaching grew out of an increasingly urgent need that the Church respond to the changes in European society brought about by industrialization, particularly the intense, horrible consequences of modern industrial work for those who experienced its worst disadvantages with no social protections. The tradition of modern Catholic social thought is in continuity with a long history of concern for and action on behalf of the poor that traces all the way back to the Gospels and to the Jewish heritage of the Christian church. But its impetus in its particular historical moment came most directly from the threat posed by socialism. Socialists' clear concern for the material situation of the poor contrasted in many places with the indifference of the Church's wealthier members and much of its clergy.

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The founding document of modern Catholic social thought, Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, resolved one key question about the future of the relationship between Catholicism and capitalism—it declared that private property was legitimate and that the state had the responsibility of safeguarding it. In other words, it rejected the most radical calls for the abolition of private property and the sharing of the goods of society in common.

But *Rerum Novarum*, for those who have never read its full text, and who have the historical and ecclesiastical spectacles to perceive the high drama in the ornate and formal nineteenth-century papal prose, presents challenges that, it is fair to say, have never yet been taken up in their full strength by those living in the societies to which it was most immediately directed. Fully understood, it presents a challenge to *laissez-faire* capitalism that would certainly earn the epithet of “socialism” in the binary economic framework unofficially operative in early twenty-first-century US political discussion (i.e., anything that isn't *laissez-faire* capitalism is *de facto* socialist).

Understanding the historical background here can help resituate Catholic intellectual life in two ways. First, at the risk of overstatement (“No generalization is worth a damn,” Mark Twain is supposed to have said, “including this one.”), the origins of modern Catholic social thought are just that—modern. The conflict between socialism and liberalism in the aftermath of the era of revolutions is one in which US academia is steeped, and it makes for a fruitful starting point to introduce Catholic intellectual tradition more broadly to those unfamiliar with it. Catholic social teaching is certainly (both as a matter of fidelity to tradition and *de facto*) in continuity with the long tradition of Catholic moral reasoning. But historically, many of the other strands of Catholic moral thought, especially those having to do with sexual morality, have their origins in medieval scholasticism, which is inherently alien to the contemporary academy, and much harder to talk about in ways that engage colleagues unfamiliar with Catholic intellectual tradition. Within scholastic thought, it is necessary to articulate first principles and *a priori* starting points, and to reason from there. Catholic social teaching can function in practice much more pragmatically because it looks much more familiar to contemporary scholars. This difference may help account for the apparent contradiction many people (Catholic and non-Catholic) see between the positions that Catholic tradition upholds on issues having to do with sexual morality and those related to

The study of Catholic social thought can help cultivate new common ground in another way. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the social science disciplines were just becoming institutionalized. Sociology, anthropology, political science, economics, and psychology—all first appeared as separate departments and established separate professional associations in the decades after 1870. This development has sometimes been seen from the standpoint of Catholic intellectual tradition as a misguided attempt to limit the understanding of the human person and human community to what can be measured by natural science. But it is at least as important that the founders of these departments and these associations saw the same damage being done to people by industrial society as did those responsible for the emergence of Catholic social thought (and some were also equally concerned about the power of socialism to co-opt American democracy) and believed social science to be a potential tool for identifying and remediating that damage.

More than a century later, the comfortable late nineteenth-century compatibility between high moral purpose and social science research is less comfortable. Pressure is great in all these fields to separate moral commitment from research design and results. Yet many practitioners feel the discomfort that results from the complete separation no less than from the overfamiliarity. That is, social scientists can both agree that research requires a certain appropriate autonomy from ideological commitments and that complete purity is not only impossible but also not entirely desirable. Not all, but many people involved in the social sciences still begin study and research in this area because they want to aid human flourishing in some way. Catholic moral reasoning at its best and most contemporary (which presumes deep familiarity with history and tradition in conversation with the present moment) can function and in some surprising ways already is functioning as an intellectually credible means by which to retrieve the founding heritage of the social sciences in ways that preserve the integrity of research while making clear the connection between scholarship and the needs of the world and its people.

3. J. L. Heilbron, *The Sun in the Church: Cathedrals as Solar Observatories* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

4. James Turner's *magisterial Philology: The Forgotten History of the Humanities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014) makes clear how recent and consequential the disintegration of this unity really is.

5. Michael Perry, *The Idea of Human Rights: Four Inquiries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

## Interlude

My focus thus far on the past two centuries, and particularly on rethinking key aspects of the intellectual history of modernity, runs the risk of making it seem as though I am considering Catholic intellectual life primarily as a tool for economic analysis and social policymaking.

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That is not my intention. Being present and attentive in the world as it is means these are the conditions we begin from. Nothing about contemporary Catholic intellectual life can be about nostalgia for an imagined organic past—though there is much we can learn from the longing for such a past that manifests itself in ways as diverse as best-selling chant records and Harry Potter novels. But if we're not about nostalgia, we are about things that make the past much more important: memory, and history, and tradition. Nostalgia wants to create a refuge—history is a howling chaotic wilderness where we are even less oriented than we are to our own time. But participation in tradition requires connection in so far as possible with the past on its own terms.

Suggesting the need for a fresh look does not imply reinvention, which would be neither possible nor Catholic—tradition builds on what comes before. But it does suggest that revisiting reveals new things, as visiting a friend can result in a conversation in which you find out things you did not know before, or as a liturgical encounter with a text heard dozens or hundreds of times can result in a new experience of grace and understanding. We need more people reading classic texts. We need more people reading classic texts in the original languages. This sounds like a restorationist prescription, but it is anything but—nothing revivifies a canon like young people encountering it for the first time. And renewed encounter with classic texts leads to ones that have not yet been granted that honorific, since new readers will follow lines of inquiry previous ones dismissed or ignored or simply did not have time for.

More than that: we need people reading classic texts in the original languages who are in conversation with other readers of classic texts in the languages of the world's other great intellectual traditions: Chinese, Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic. In the long sweep of human time (far longer than the brief two centuries we've been focusing on here), these traditions have encountered each other on a global scale only in the last half-millennium—largely in a context of conquest, subjugation, and warfare. Even given the enormous achievement of exemplary scholars of the past and our own day, widespread understanding of the emergence and growth of Judaism and Christianity in the context of the other great traditions is many scholarly generations down the road.

We need also to identify and contextualize texts neglected by earlier definitions of "classic." More than half of all the manuscripts of the medieval era have never been printed, never mind translated. Perhaps many of them have been consulted by earlier generations of scholars and dismissed

as uninteresting or minor by the standards of the day (which, of course, is all any of us has to go by). But one of the clearest lessons of the half-century or so in which women's history has been coming into its own in the academy is that looking back through materials that have been dismissed as uninteresting or irrelevant is one of the most crucial tasks in writing the as-yet-unwritten history of women.<sup>6</sup>

And let's be clear: this is using the tradition to recover the history of women as a matter of justice, but it is also and will also be a source for revivifying the tradition itself. Imagine what might change if we take seriously the observation of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: "It is possible to philosophize while preparing dinner. As I often say on observing these little

things, if Aristotle had cooked, he would have written much more.”<sup>7</sup> The vast majority of human beings were not literate and left few traces in the documentary record. They did, however, have an intellectual life, and creatively using sources, both textual and nontextual, is an additional part of this grand intellectual project of continually mining and reminding the past in an attempt to more fully understand the development and the preservation of the tradition in which we say we participate.<sup>8</sup> Such work would be important for its own sake, but it would also cultivate skills and ways of seeing that could illuminate much of our own age. While the need for continued re-encounter with texts of the past will not disappear anytime soon, we also need a rethinking of how to understand intellectual life in ways that are less dependent on texts, or at least contextualize them more fully and effectively. Modern intellectual life emerged post-Gutenberg and has always been deeply dependent on texts, but before that and now in the image-heavy twentieth and twenty-first centuries the material and image context alters the understanding of texts. In an ironic twist to our story, the study and understanding of what has long been thought most arcane—the medieval—might be what most illuminates the age of social media,

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by reminding us of how humans thought in an era when image was more dominant than print.

It may sound slightly manic, recommending all this wildly idealistic scholarly activity when Catholic universities along with their secular counterparts are trying to recruit students to online MBA programs and cutting humanities departments in an effort to keep the doors open. And it would indeed be delusional to think this wave will sweep across US higher education any time soon. But it is a question of what fires you tend. Some of them will be burning brightly in a given historical moment and will need much of the fuel. But the job of the intellectual is to tend the fires no one thinks we will need, to keep them, at the very least, banked and glowing until they can be kindled into flame again.

So, in the context of Catholic intellectual life, to focus on the past two centuries and the immediate effects of modernity is to presume continuity and consanguinity with what went before, because we see what we see only because we stand on the shoulders of giants. And, while that phrase is most commonly associated with Isaac Newton and therefore with the leap from superstition to science with which he is most credited, its origins lie deeper, with, most likely, the twelfth-century Bernard of Chartres and the window in the cathedral of which he was chancellor where the Evangelists, the writers of the four Gospels, literally sit on the shoulders of the great Hebrew prophets, able to see what they see only because of their precursors. As a metaphor for our reliance on the past for everything we do, it’s worth considering.

6. For example, American historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich in *A Midwife’s Tale* (New York: Knopf, 1990) was able to discern an entire historical context in the cryptic diary of one Maine midwife—imagine what this might mean when we consider the reality that there were vastly more women’s monasteries than men’s across Europe for more than a thousand years we have long chosen to call “dark.”

7. Sor Juana, from “Response to Sor Filotea,” 1691. She was talking about the properties of eggs under different cooking techniques.

8. Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

## Act II—The Cliff and the Tower

In this essay, the continuing adventures of Walker Percy's cartoon cat, we have come to Act II. In Act I, we saw our hero at the bottom of the cliff from which he has fallen. The fall didn't kill him. It would be a little much to see this as an image of resurrection, but there is a kind of irrepressible hope here that can serve us as a resource. What we do know is that the view is different from there. In Act I we gave a brief sketch of what he sees. Stated even more briefly: another half-century after Walker Percy's observations, we have a fuller account of why human beings in the modern era have a hard time giving an account of themselves; we (as Catholic Christians) have also more fully accepted that this is where we live and have gone back to the work of crafting this new account.

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Before the cartoon cat decides on his next scheme, he takes stock. Even cartoon cats benefit from the long view, and a reminder of why they got into this racket in the first place. Finding ways for our new account (and not only one, of course—that is part of the newness) of humans in the universe to be in continuity with the one(s) that came before is an enormous, epochal challenge, so the more opportunity we take to make that continuity real to our minds and our imaginations (and those of our students), the more resources we have at hand for the task. That reminder of continuity with the deep past even as we contemplate the future was the Interlude.

But however long the stock-taking, the cartoon cat can't keep himself from getting into trouble. If we take love in truth seriously, neither can we. So what's our next escapade?

Historians get drummed out of the union if they predict the future, so in trying to describe the state of the question here I am neither trying to say what will happen, nor to bind up heavy burdens and place them on other people's shoulders. But the more I think and study and converse and read on this topic the more convinced I am of this: despite our own internal crises and temptations to despair, the resources of Catholic intellectual life are both more accessible and more urgently needed than ever before. Let's take this in four parts.

### Internal Crises

To those living through it, it sometimes seems as though there has been little else but internal crisis in the Church since somewhere between 1968 and 1973. As Leslie Tentler has shown both in her essay in this volume and in her book-length study,<sup>9</sup> one of the most lasting effects of the controversy over contraception within the Catholic Church is the collapse of a developing theology of marital sexuality to which lay people were significant contributors. The loss of this strand of contemporary Church life in the ensuing half-century is reflected in the polarization and inadequacy of most public discussion (including homilies preached in Catholic churches) of the issue today.

More grave, and more gravely damaging, is the clergy sexual abuse crisis. It will probably

be another generation before the extent of the damage it has caused is clear, much less repaired, if repair is even

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possible. Why this should be a crisis not just for the church as a whole but specifically for Catholic intellectual life might not be readily apparent. Part of the reason is that it has come close to destroying the credibility of the authority not only of the bishops but also of the tradition of reasoning and teaching within which that authority functions—that it could happen, keep happening, in so many places and be addressed so ineffectually and deceptively, suggests that the much-vaunted resources of Catholic traditions of faith and reason are not much use when confronted with real trouble. The sheer amount of time and energy involved in coming to terms with the crisis and attempting to mend the damage could have been put to so many other uses.

The anguish occasioned in so many ways by the failure of Church teaching and authority on matters related to gender and sexuality is one of the crucial aspects of the second internal crisis: the significant decline in the number of young people self-identifying as Catholic and involving themselves in the practice of the sacraments. The trends are alarming, and if they keep moving in the same direction, they will be devastating. “Millennial Catholics are the first generation in American history for which women are less likely than their male peers to attend Mass. ‘I cannot tell you how ominous this is,’ [Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis’s Patricia] Wittberg said, ‘because if you lose the women, you lose the children.’”<sup>10</sup> The assumption has been for at least a generation that losses among Catholics of European heritage would be replaced by the migration of Spanish-speaking Catholics from Latin America. But the second generation of these immigrants is also leaving the practice of Catholicism in large numbers, so there is less reason to expect them to sustain the population of US Catholics into the next generation. American Catholics have been worrying about the loss of faith among the younger generations for well over a century. But in the past this was more likely to be a life-cycle phenomenon—that is, young adults leaving active practice of the faith for some years, usually returning once they married and had children—and it looks more likely now to be a cohort phenomenon—once this generation is gone, they (and their children) may be gone for good.

The usual diagnosis for this shift is the effect of the “culture”—individualism is fraying the relationships necessary to sustain community,

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consumerism is promoting instant gratification and making the ascetic demands of religious practice less appealing, and so forth. But anyone who works with young people on a regular basis knows that while there is some truth to these things, young people are also looking for many of the genuine wellsprings of human flourishing—meaning, care for persons, connection, radical grounding of their self-worth in the love of God—and finding them more readily and more authentically elsewhere than in the tradition that claims them as hallmarks. Those committed to Catholic intellectual life—to participation in it as part of participating in the broader tradition of Catholicism—know that it is impossible to hand on a living intellectual tradition if the connection of its thinkers to its sacramental and communal life is deteriorating or broken.

9. Leslie Woodcock Tentler, *Catholics and Contraception: An American History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

10. Ruth Graham, "What American Nuns Built," *Boston Globe*, Feb. 24, 2013, <http://www.bostonglobe.com/ideas/2013/02/24/what-american-nuns-built-what-american-nuns-built/IvaMKcoK8a4jDb9lqiVOrI/story.html>.

## External Crises

This list could be much longer, but let's stop there so that we have time to talk about external crises, as well, which can at times seem so intractable and so unyielding to any influence by intellectual work that they can be a genuine temptation to despair, if only under the guise of facing reality. These wider realities of recent history and the despair they evoke may be of a kind to which older generations (call it the long baby boom—those born roughly between 1940 and 1965) of those committed to Catholic intellectual life may be particularly susceptible.

In the decades following the Second World War (though this has been largely repressed by the sentimentalizing of the war that has characterized the passing of the World War II generation), there was widespread revulsion at the carnage of the two world wars and a kind of disbelieving horror at the creation of humanity's capacity to destroy itself through nuclear warfare. At the same time, however, there resulted—perhaps beyond any hope or reason—a commitment to international cooperation and human betterment, a belief in the urgent need to ensure basic quality of life for all people in conscious rejection of the kind of suffering the generations of the world wars had seen. In this sense, Pope John XXIII, though seen as a great surprise twist in the history of twentieth-century Catholicism, exemplified the spirit of the age. His 1963 encyclical letter *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth) is not solely addressed to the bishops of the Roman Catholic Church as the letters of earlier popes had been but also to the whole Catholic faithful and "*bonae voluntatis hominibus*"—to all people of goodwill. The urgent necessity of all the people of the world working

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together to prevent yet more mass destruction and suffering is a theme both of this letter and of the ecumenical council he had convened the year before and that would continue after his death later in 1963.

In retrospect, it can seem as though this determination barely had time to gather steam before it began to disintegrate. Beginning around 1980, those with living memories of the postwar resolve saw growing around them in American society a renewed zest for warfare; support for dismantling all structures, domestic and international, that help ensure some basic participation of all peoples in the world's wealth; and, most urgently, evidence of the damage that will be caused by climate change, and the complete inadequacy of current institutions to halt its growth before that damage is felt by the world's most vulnerable people. Even universities, which should be active agents in using knowledge to increase human flourishing in every possible way, became increasingly beholden to private instead of public money, and therefore to the imperatives of corporate capitalism and increasing pressures to think of students as customers, faculty as at-will wage labor, and research and curricula as profit centers and job preparation. Those who had hoped to see the postwar

world move in a very different direction often feel something very close to despair at what seems like failure and ineffectuality on many fronts.

But, as Paul writes in the letter to the Romans (8:24), “Now hope that sees for itself is not hope. For who hopes for what one sees?” And for the generation for whom the Second Vatican Council raised profound hopes that they perceive as gravely endangered today, a renewed understanding of theological hope is perhaps the appropriate virtue for the next phase of the cartoon cat’s adventure. For, as philosopher Josef Pieper notes, “it gives man such a ‘long’ future that the past seems ‘short’ however long and rich his life. The theological virtue of hope is the power to wait patiently for a ‘not yet’ that is the more immeasurably distant from us the more closely we approach it.” “God,” he, continues, quoting Augustine, “is younger than all else.”<sup>11</sup>

11. Josef Pieper, *On Hope* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 40–41.

### Accessible Resources

We know when we stop to think about it for a minute that having to analyze and strategize and organize around issues related to Catholic intellectual tradition is not a particularly good sign. If a tradition is healthy, its

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participants are just living it, not thinking about it. And the peril to what was long understood by the name tradition is real. But the alternatives are not simply preservation or eradication—there is also the possibility of transformation. Much of the anxiety surrounding the existence of Catholic intellectual life into its third millennium stems from the reality of pluralism—of the sustained and inescapable engagement between the Roman Catholic tradition and the other great religious and ethical traditions of the world. The change caused by this encounter is irreversible, as is everything that exists in historical time. One crucial aspect of it is the necessity to invite others to the enterprise (and to allow ourselves to be invited to theirs) for whom it is not a native language, which at this point includes also many of the baptized.

While the task is daunting, the tools necessary for taking it up are abundant and ready to hand, all obstacles notwithstanding. The riches of Catholic tradition—intellectual and otherwise, past and present and future, material and spiritual, textual and visual, personal and institutional, abstract and concrete—are more available to more people than ever before in human history, to the point where their very abundance has become its own new problem, as Vincent Miller’s essay in this volume notes. And the possibilities for the encounters of persons with one another—being able to see each other’s faces, whether in person through cheap and easy travel (not cheap for everyone, not devoid of environmental consequences, but far and away cheaper and easier for more people than ever before in human history) or via video links that put schoolchildren from around the world into direct daily conversation with each other—would have been beyond the imagination of our compatriots at the beginning of the twentieth century, who wondered how to foster the human sympathy beyond national borders that could make war less rather than more likely. We fret so much about the negative effects on attention span and focus that we sometimes forget what an

astonishing leap in human connection we are experiencing in real time.

This evidence of longing for connection should encourage us, give us heart. And if the task of the next generation is (as it appears now) to more fully understand the place of Christian tradition in its full global reality, surely Catholic intellectual life offers unparalleled resources. From the earliest moments of the encounter, now half a millennium old, between the Christian West and the New World, as well as the other ancient cultures of the not-so-new world, the Church was present. Its role, as we know too well, was not always benign—was, in truth, often destructive

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and allied against, not with, those for whom both the Hebrew and the Christian scriptures call us to provide the greatest care and solidarity. There is much here to mourn and repent and make reparations for—but there is also much yet to understand. The Church's long tradition of learning and its desire for truth (however breached in practice) stand as resources for this understanding. In addition, there is a nearly unbroken history of immersion in the existential realities of the global world on which Catholicism can draw. It is not unique in this among the institutions of the world (religious or otherwise), but it is close.

### Urgent Necessity

I find I can induce almost instant mental vertigo in myself by wondering which perspective here is more accurate: Are the signs of hope a temptation to us to put our heads in the sand and ignore the great collapse all around us? Or, when we focus on impending collapse, are we failing to notice and nourish the signs of hope to such an extent that we only increase the peril? The potential for self-referential paralysis is why (among many other reasons) we need a lot of people thinking about these things at the same time and, at least by some generous definition, together.

We can and do use a lot of energy lamenting the marginalization of intellectual life in the present moment. But it is hard to think of a historical era in which intellectuals have been at the white-hot center of action and hard to argue that, on balance, they should be. They guard goods that at least as often threaten money and power as enhance them, and sometimes pay dearly for doing so—Socrates was penniless and executed.

With notable and tragic contemporary exceptions, the place of the intellectual in the West is unimaginably privileged and secure, compared both with that of intellectuals in other societies in other times and places and with the situation of most people currently on the planet. It is also accurate, within a slightly narrower frame, to say that the dreams of the immigrant forebears who sent their daughters and sons and granddaughters and grandsons to US colleges and universities have come true beyond their wildest expectations. So it seems as though a question we have to ask ourselves is: What is our success for?

To raise this question is to summon forth, for some, the spirit of instrumentalism, distorting the scholarly calling by putting it in the service of goals inimical to its nature. In the ordinary sense of the word, I have no intention of instrumentalizing, nor, God forbid, monetizing,

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Catholic intellectual life. It, and the best form of its secular counterpart and collaborator, is useful only if it is able to leave the question of usefulness largely to one side as it goes about its business. But if I am not instrumentalizing, I am very much afraid it is in part because it has already been done for me—in the “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,” sense of the word.

Catholic intellectual life has a telos, a goal, as does human life as a whole. Those from other traditions may not share the goal, may in fact think it distorts the intellectual enterprise, but clarity and rational presentation of these differences, in the context of sustained conversation and relationship, can enrich the whole scene.<sup>12</sup>

My emphasis here on the necessity to the contemporary world of the resources Catholic intellectual tradition has to offer, and on the sheer fascination on offer to a variety of scholars from a wide array of disciplines, may sound naive or triumphal or simplistic. It is simplistic only in T. S. Eliot’s sense in “East Coker”—“A condition of complete simplicity / Costing not less than everything.” It is triumphal only in the sense of the triumph of the Cross—conceiving intellectual life as an enterprise guided by the example of constant self-giving love and an open-hearted, open-minded skepticism, guaranteeing neither wealth nor fame but only that we will inevitably get into trouble. And I don’t mean to be lippant about the reality of that trouble. Those responsible for the stability of Catholic institutions, and for the prudent use of their financial resources, play a role that those who pursue the intellectual life more directly must respect and be grateful for. But what is naive is to think that our affluence and our strategic planning somehow insulate us from the cultural wreckage inherent to eras of significant change—which means, in effect, to nearly any historical era. The job—the calling—of the Christian intellectual (of any committed ethical intellectual, though they will ground their callings differently) is to live among the cultural wreckage, to study and learn from it, aware that we are a part of it, not above it or outside it or protected from it. We just know we live there, with Jesus, and guided by the Spirit.

12. In the words of Pope Francis, whose appearance on the scene was not remotely imaginable when the planners began imagining this conference: “And we all have a duty to do good. And this commandment for everyone to do good, I think, is a beautiful path towards peace. If we, each doing our own part, if we do good to others, if we meet there, doing good, and we go slowly, gently, little by little, we will make that culture of encounter: We need that so much. We must meet one another doing good. ‘But I don’t believe, Father, I am an atheist!’ But do good: We will meet one another there.”

## Conclusion

Even Catholic intellectuals, when asked to point to a model of critical intellectual practice, seldom first think of Mary. There is a long tradition of depicting her, Mother of the Word, with a book, and of linking her with the figure of Wisdom in scripture. But it is also worth thinking about her interaction with the angel Gabriel, as depicted in Luke’s Gospel, sent by God to announce to her that she would be the mother of Jesus, to be called the Son of the Most High. Her initial response is not, “Sure, no problem.” Instead, it is what can be thought of as a highly

skeptical question: “How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?”<sup>13</sup> The angel answers her to her satisfaction, leading to her agreement. Even in this most crucial moment in the incarnational history of salvation, God does not object to a little investigation of the circumstances under which something very unlikely might be possible.

Intellectuals often (tediously often) get accused of living in an “ivory tower,” a protected enclave set off from the demands and texture of “real life.” This use of the term emerged in the nineteenth century, with the growth of the German-influenced ideal of the research university. It has seldom been a compliment. Before that, the image was much more likely to refer to Mary. It is one of the titles given to her in the sixteenth-century Litany of Loreto, though it had been used at least since the twelfth century, and originates as a description of the neck of the beloved in the Song of Songs (7:5). It is, from one angle, a feminist’s worst nightmare—an image of purity, of women set-off from the work of the world and defined solely in terms of their sexual identity and history. But from another angle, maybe the vantage point of our cartoon cat, it is an image of strength and beauty, of protection, of stability and reliability. The tower is not a place where the people who depend on it go unless they are under the threat of death. Otherwise, it is the most concrete of reminders in the daily landscape of the dependability of protection while they go about their work.

In its insistence that the image makes sense only in a historical and cultural context not our own, Mary as the tower of ivory—*turris eburnea*—reminds us of our existence in time, of the inescapable historicity of membership in the communion of saints, at least on this side of the veil. This explicit awareness of the intervention of God in history—and the need for

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renewed and rejuvenated understanding that it elicits—may be one of the underappreciated gifts of modernity to Christian tradition. In addition, the tower reminds us that whatever trouble we encounter, Mary is not only refuge but also accomplice—since saying “yes” to God’s plan for humanity in the Incarnation is about as much trouble as any human person has ever gotten herself into.

13. Lk 1:26–38.

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