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Contemporary Trends in Catholic Thought

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Contemporary Trends in Catholic Thought

Cover Page Footnote

This talk was delivered at Sacred Heart University on April 21, 1988 as the first annual Bishop Walter W. Curtis Lecture.

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*Contemporary Trends in Catholic Thought**

I will begin with some reflections on Cardinal Newman and the Catholic sensibility, and move then to some further reflections on the plurality of the Catholic community, and I hope by that structure of the lecture to give reflections that are fitting for the first lecture in honor of Bishop Walter Curtis.

Americans have always puzzled Europeans by managing to be such a genuinely religious people in such a highly developed modern culture. The emergence, for example, of peculiarly American Catholic forms of spirituality and theology is a step forward, even Europeans would admit. Here too, in fidelity to the very diversity of American Catholicism itself, the spectrum ranges widely. Consider, for example, how many American Catholic women have led the way for all American Christian theology as well as for world-wide Catholicism in fashioning new retrievals of forgotten or often repressed aspects of the tradition. Consider as well the eruption of what are now called people's theologies and how they have fashioned new ways in ever-different circumstances of theologizing in and for particular groups in American society: from the new American liberation theologies of the base communities in the South Bronx through the forging of new narratives in new theologies from San Antonio to Tucson to Monterey.

Theologians in more traditionally academic settings like myself have also tried to work out new methodology for theology. There are characteristically American experiential approaches which have proved their fruitfulness, it would seem, for theological methods both here and in Europe and in Asia. Many other theologians have aided the wider pluralism by their constant retrieval of the classic resources of spirituality in various theological traditions — the Dominicans and the Franciscans and so forth — within this ancient two thousand year-old tradition. To read the proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America or journals like *Theological Studies*, *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, *Horizons*, as well as the

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many excellent Catholic journals of opinion on American Catholic life should, I think, be sufficient warrant for my belief that American Catholic religious life and American Catholic intellectual life are without exaggeration strong and entirely promising for the future.

American Catholic intellectual life and religious life, which unite in a church-related university, are alive and intense, ecumenical, pluralistic, and honest in their willingness to face both the promise and the ambiguities of our own American cultural heritage and our own Catholic religious tradition. What Von Hugel once called the mystical and the intellectual elements of any great tradition — what I'm calling the religious elements and the intellectual elements of American Catholicism — are, in a word, flourishing. The third element, the institutional in American Catholic life, I think a fair-minded observer can also judge positively. The American bishops, as many have observed, have filled an invaluable role for our culture and our country and indeed for the church universal through their efforts on the pastorals, especially on nuclear war and the economy. It is interesting to note that the very way the bishops perform this remarkable service to the public discussion of these crucial issues in our culture was as admired and in my judgment as admirable as the substantive results: a listening to different views, a way of speaking both to the Catholic community, the wider Christian community, and, in a way that can only be called remarkable, to the wider public on grounds of reason that would be acceptable in principle to that public. In sum, the bishops have clearly attempted in these now-famous pastorals to persuade, and to persuade both the Catholic community, the wider Christian community, and the wider American community.

It is for these reasons, however briefly stated at the very beginning, that I remain one who has great hope for American Catholicism. I realize that there are many others who have different readings of our situation, either pessimistic or optimistic. But it is well perhaps for all of us to remember that optimism and pessimism alike are, religiously construed, natural virtues or natural vices. Indeed, whether we construe optimism and pessimism as vices or virtues depends largely on our assessment of their intellectual accuracy and usually also on our own temperamental proclivities, as when someone defending pessimism describes a pessimist as a former optimist with more information. Theologically, however, hope is

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quite another matter. *Hope, as Thomas Aquinas insisted, is not a natural but a strictly theological virtue, and the promise and indeed courage that genuine hope elicits as a gift is the virtue in my judgment most needed today as the pluralism and also the struggles in American Catholic life intensify. For Catholicism in the United States is by any fair-minded appraisal too strong, too pluralistic, and in the true sense too Catholic to concede the field to either easy optimism or easy pessimism. Rather it continues to be a moment for genuine hope.*

It is for that reason that I would like to turn to what seems to me a distinctly Catholic sensibility, a sensibility that was represented in the Second Vatican Council, that was represented before to the English speaking world in John Henry Cardinal Newman, and as I said at the beginning of my remarks it seems to be representative as well of many Catholics including the one in whose honor this lecture is, Bishop Curtis. Newman continues to attract many of us, I think, for one finds here inevitably a curious and subtle Catholic insistence on both unity and diversity. Newman's reflections, in my judgment, show with exceptional subtlety and with the refusal of either easy optimism or easy pessimism how there must inevitably be many ways within the one way, for there are so many kinds of individuals and peoples living in such different cultures and classes, with such different temperaments, with such different levels of intellectual, moral; and religious development. At the same time, all these ways are grounded in and spiritually responsible to the one way of God's revelation in the Word of Jesus Christ, as that Word is mediated to us in the great tradition of scripture, doctrine, symbols, and sacraments.

This peculiarly Catholic sense for spiritual diversity amidst spiritual unity and the need always to discern both in an ever-shifting situation finds, I believe, further expression in Newman's many reflections upon and defenses of the central objective realities of all Catholic spirituality: a rooted sense of tradition, a sense of the need to listen to the wider community, a firm affirmation of doctrine as objective, a sacramental envisionment of all reality — of ordinary reality as well as the extraordinary reality in the Eucharist and the other sacraments — by understanding the fuller significance for everyday life of a sacramental vision. These fundamentally Catholic religious affirmations, as historians of religion and sensitive Catholics alike have noted, lead a Catholic figure like Newman to insist that the

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modern emphasis, for example, on personal experience in ever different forms can be fully at home in a generally Catholic spirituality, for doctrine, community, traditions, and sacrament are the sure ground of any Catholic spiritual experience. As such, they do not impoverish, they enrich the personal religious experience of every form of spirituality in the great tradition by providing a secure ground which helps the seeker to focus now on inner Christian grounds on the great dilemmas of a spiritual life in a tradition as diverse and as unified as this. The meanings of conscience, the vagaries of emotion and feeling in everyday life, and above all perhaps for Newman the gradual accumulation of probabilities into a firm certitude religiously and theologically affirm that one can after all be spiritually certain that here one has found the way.

Newman insisted, you remember, that English persons like himself would be unlikely to find the exact same forms of piety as the Italian persons of his period. But they are no less Catholic for that, for they are equally grounded in the same realities of doctrine, sacrament, tradition, community, a sacramental envisionment of all reality. It is perhaps, for me at least, Newman's reflections on the reality of the church that bear a distinctly Catholic mark. When he appealed to the "idea" of church any late twentieth-century person might be tempted to think that by "idea" he meant something different from the concrete reality. But actually Newman meant an "idea" as one's deepest sense of the concrete whole and its constituent parts at once. Like so many in his age, "idea" for Newman meant not an abstraction from reality but the reality itself, the reality here of church as spiritually sensed by anyone who understood it as "idea," and partially but never fully understood. Catholic Christianity itself, in Newman's essay on the development of doctrine, was such an organic idea. One might say so is America the same kind of idea that you either understand or you don't understand, but it's not a pure abstraction: an idea meaning that reality that was sensed, felt, understood, and yielded itself to partial, incomplete, but true understanding as it developed through the centuries. The church for Newman as an idea was the objective reality. Church, in his language, familiar traditional language, was the body of Christ: that was an idea that expressed that reality. It was constituted by the life of the Spirit of Christ. This is why only the truly spiritual person could understand this idea — church — and why the Christian experienced

and understood Christ and the Spirit in and through this mediation of the church.

The idea of church was never for Newman a mere idea, but it was also the actual polity which is the church that happens to exist here and now, at this place, at this time: the one that Catholics live in and whose gifted reality, as well as its acknowledged human faults and constant needs for self reform, is always there. It is a part, therefore, I believe, of Newman's Catholic spirituality — and here he speaks with a great tradition behind him — to sense and understand the church and its unity and its distinct parts, parts which can never efface the antecedent divinely-graced unity. It is also part of Catholic spirituality for the Catholic always to struggle to discern what part of the church now needs strengthening or development or correction or reform. There are temptations of any member of the church where ever that member might be, for example what Newman calls the temptations of theologians to rationalism or of those in institutional office to power, or those in other situations to superstition. Each temptation at every moment needs spotting and, if possible, healing. The temptation of each part, each way within the greater way, is to think itself the whole church and this for Newman demands constant spiritual discernment by the whole community.

Thus could Newman always attempt to appeal to experience in history, when, for example, he insisted on the need often to consult the laity and to defend the sense of the faithful as a truly ecclesial sense. One finds in Newman, I suggest, in the modern period a clearly Catholic spirituality, even a distinctively Catholic one, where these realities of doctrine, sacrament, tradition, community and above all this idea of church as mediation of Spirit in Christ can form, inform and transform the individual spiritualities of different individuals, cultures, and traditions. Such formation takes place in a manner that there is a great diversity of spiritual ways. But there is also a common mind, a common ability to discern together on the central reality of the Spirit's in-dwelling presence to the individual soul in communion with church as the spiritual presence of Christ. Newman's exceptional sensitivity to the need for such diversity and great powers of discernment by individuals in the entire community in the ever-shifting historical and theological reality of church in ever new and different cultures made his spirituality, I think, deeply influential for many modern Catholics as both unmistakably Catholic and clearly

modern. That same kind of spiritual sense pervades the rootedness that one senses in him and in other Catholics in a tradition and the openness to the good of other religious traditions as well, and to the best of modernity in the major decrees of the council that has been called Newman's Council, the Second Vatican Council. Post-conciliar Catholic spiritualities at their best seem also to be deeply informed in their diverse ways by this same inclusive Newmanian spirit of diversity in unity.

In my judgment one of the most remarkable developments that is going on at the moment, and one that Newman would have approved of even though it was not so emphatic in his own period, is what I and others have called the effort in several different ways in the Catholic community and other communities to unite the prophetic and the mystical spiritual ways. It is, I think, this need that one sees in particularly acute forms in the various new forms of spirituality in our tradition as well as the demands to recover ancient and often forgotten spiritual and theological traditions, like the traditions of the great mystics like Eckhart, as well as the insistence of an Eckhart or an Eusbruck on the mystic's commitment to the world and the struggle for social justice. But before speaking of the particularly Catholic, I would like to continue this reflection by recalling for you how this spiritual and theological struggle seems to be occurring across the great religious traditions in the last twenty or twenty-five years. At least as far as I can see, in all the major religious traditions there is a profound search for new ways to unite the mystical and the prophetic trajectories of each tradition. In the major Western monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the debates are particularly intense. Recall the continuing conflict in our period in the Islamic tradition, on the relationship of Sufi mysticism to the prophetic core of Islam, or note the debate in Jewish theology spurred on by the great pioneering work of Gershom Scholem on the Cabala to try to find a less than marginal place in traditional Judaism for the outburst of the mystical and the return often even to the archaic and the various expressions of cabalistic Jewish mysticism.

There are many analogous discussions in Christian theology, especially in Catholic theology: especially in Catholic liberation, feminist, and political theologies centered around the need — a need

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which I believe in — to try to rethink the relationships of the great contemplative traditions to the action-oriented political and liberation theologies. There are for example, the new discussions of the phenomenon of popular religion among the Latin American liberation theologians, as prophetically oriented a group of theologians as one can think of, who initially dismissed popular religion fifteen years ago through traditional prophetic critique as just enforcing a *status quo* and leading to dolorism and so forth. Now there is a rethinking of the importance of popular religion in Latin America. In the United States, for example, in Catholic and Protestant black theologians one can see the new analyses of the archaic roots in the mystical-political actions of American black gospel, spiritual, and blues music as appropriated anew by black liberation theologies trying to find the same union of the mystical and the political. Many feminist theologians meanwhile are recovering the wisdom traditions, the *sophia* traditions, the language and practices of women mystics who have been so often marginalized, even forgotten in the tradition, to unite these mystical trajectories to the fundamentally prophetic ethical and political great feminist theologies of our period.

At the same time that these kinds of struggles are going on in the Western religious traditions there are, I find, many thinkers in the great Eastern traditions, so at home in the mystical orientations, who have been attempting to incorporate more social, ethical, and political liberation-prophetic perspectives in their thought, their spirituality, their way. The influence of Gandhi on neo-Hindu thought is merely the clearest example among many of this drive to incorporate prophetic political concerns into the mystical ways of Hinduism. In modern Japanese Buddhism, for example, both Zen and Pure Land, the rethinking of how the profound Buddhist notion of compassion for all living beings is to be rethought in relationship to justice is a clear example of the same kind of development. Indeed, as Hinduism, Sikhism, and Buddhism in their many forms become more and more live options also for Westerners, this prominent tendency is likely to increase, for the attempt to unite the mystical and the prophetic, whether one starts from a fundamentally prophetic-oriented religion like the great scriptural religions of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, or from a more mystically-oriented religion like Buddhism or Hinduism, is no longer confined in our period to

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the exceptional self-transcending individuals in the different traditions, as classically in Gandhi's Hindu re-reading of Tolstoy's interpretation of Christianity and reciprocally Martin Luther King, Jr.'s and Thomas Merton's Christian re-reading of Gandhi.

The Buddhist case perhaps is especially illustrative here, for as Buddhism has also become not only an Eastern but a Western religion, the shifts in Buddhist self-understanding to try to relate compassion and justice, to try to develop a mystical political position, is as striking as the similar shifts in Buddhist history from its origins in India to South East Asia, to Tibet, to China and to Japan. The Christian case is at least as striking. As many have observed — in my opinion justly — Christianity in our period in the late-twentieth century is going through the greatest change since the change from being a small Jewish sect to entering into the Greco-Roman world and becoming the European religion, for we are losing our Euro-centric form as the only form of Christianity and becoming truly a world religion, a world Christianity.

As these new forms of Christianity emerge one can not help but notice, especially in the African and Asian forms, how there are new ways of uniting the mystical and the prophetic in these new great forms of Christianity. The resurgent interest in the phenomenon known historically as Neo-Confucianism, still alive in much of Taiwan, Korea, and elsewhere, is also illustrative of this new orientation, for the exceptional historical success in China and East Asia of Neo-Confucianism has been its ability to unite the civic, political, ethical concerns of classical Confucianism with the more mystical orientations of classical Taoism and classical Zen Buddhism.

These internal debates within each of the great religions, moreover, are complicated and intensified by one of the outstanding facts of late-twentieth century religious life: the increasing impact of inter-religious dialogue on all the great traditions. I have been privileged to be a part of the Jewish-Christian dialogue for many years and of the Buddhist-Christian dialogue for the last five years. I have now committed myself to the Jewish-Christian-Islamic dialogue for the next five years. In all of these dialogues, one of the things that I have found most striking is that when one really takes the other as other seriously one also at times discovers or even rediscovers one's self or aspects of one's own tradition, one's own way, that have been somehow quietly forgotten, marginalized, even repressed. I do not,

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for example, hesitate to say that it is dialogue with the Buddhist that has helped me to retrieve, to recover, to reread some of the radical apophatics like Meister Eckhart or Pseudo-Dionysius. It is often, indeed, by serious attention to the other that one even begins to understand the complexity, the diversity, the richness of one's own way.

Our way, the Christian or Catholic way, to return now to this issue also with Newman, allows us to see anew, I believe, that this extraordinary diversity was there from the very beginning. From the very beginning there were attempts to put together the mystical and the prophetic readings of the common Christian belief and narrative of Jesus Christ. For why after all is it Christians who have this peculiar genre called gospel, a genre which unites a proclamation of belief with witness and with telling a story: the story, the narrative, the narrative of this Jesus of Nazareth who *is* the Christ? Amidst the diversity of narratives within the four gospels and elsewhere in the New Testament, it is of course the Passion-Resurrection narrative that is the principal way by which the early Christian community tried to render its understanding of who this Jesus of Nazareth, proclaimed to be the Christ risen, really is. It is undoubtedly an exaggeration, but I think a useful one, to say that the four gospels in a sense are four Passion narratives with extended and different introductions. The reason why this statement is an exaggeration is that the introductions are more accurately described as different genres which construe the common Passion-Resurrection narrative differently. There is to be sure a noticeable difference between the genre which can only be called something like an apocalyptic drama that is employed by Mark and the genre of the realistic narrative employed by Luke, or the genre of the meditative mystical narrative employed by John. These genres helped to produce the readings that the Christian community found necessary in different situations. They provided distinct readings of the common notice — again with Newman, both the unity and the diversity — of the common belief in Jesus Christ, in the common belief that one will find out who one is and who God is by following this narrative and adding one's own story to the story of Jesus Christ.

Still, the reason why the comment that they are a different introduction to the common narrative is a useful exaggeration may

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also be noted: namely, that the Passion narratives and their relatively history-like realistic character, despite their otherwise important differences, are the common Christian narrative. If one wants to know who Christians are, one must know who this Jesus Christ is for these Christians. The Passion narratives are the first place to look, for there one finds in realistic and history-like narrative fashion the central Christian story of who this Jesus, confessed to be the Christ, is and even why he and he alone is thus named. Through this reading of the singular identify of this Jesus as the Christ in that narrative, Christians also discover their principal clue to who God is in Jesus Christ and who human beings therefore are commanded and empowered to become by joining in this narrative. The Christian understanding of who the self is at all is disclosed in these great narratives as an agent with sufficient freedom to be responsible to the God disclosed and to others through the neighbor, through the power of this Jesus the Christ.

My claim in other words is as follows: what I called the Newman unity in diversity, what I call by recalling the question across the traditions of the need for new mystical-prophetic readings, can be found in Christianity not only in the late-twentieth century but from the very beginning. For the plurality, the diversity, and the unity in the common narrative, in the common belief in this Jesus the Christ, is there from the very beginning of the different Christian self-interpretations. The problem is there more exactly not just in the obvious differences in the New Testament between the anthropology, let us say, of the letter of James and Paul of Romans and Galatians. The problem is also there in the different readings from the very beginning of the common Passion narrative in the four Gospels and even in the abbreviated narrative of Paul of First Corinthians. This I believe yields a promise of what Newman was looking for in the late nineteenth century and many are looking for in the late twentieth, namely the promise of a unity in difference, of a unity in diversity that may find ways that are more complementary than sheer conflict in the common belief and narrative.

Significantly different readings of the common Passion narrative recur in the different Gospels. Mark's apocalypse drama, as literary critics now note, is, I think, more like a highly modern narrative: note its curious interruptions, its gaps, its fissures in the text, the curious non-closure of the text, even the curious undecidability in Mark's

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portraits of the disciples' almost consistent failure to understand what Jesus says and does, as well as the curious ending or non-ending of this most peculiar of the four Gospels, the apocalyptic, interruptive Mark. Contrast Mark — and notice how clearly he appeals especially to those trying to recover the apocalyptic or the crisis-orientation of our age — with the kind of narrative one finds in Luke or more exactly Luke-Acts, with its rolling-along, history-like realistic character which recalls the great nineteenth-century realistic narratives or the more usual kind of novel, with clear characters and an orderly plot, not interrupted like Mark.

The situation is even more complex when the Christian notes that there is also this most peculiar of narratives, John's gospel, a meditative narrative, a narrative whose brilliant use of contrasts, light-darkness, truth-falsehood, has what can only be called a rhythm-like character, where reading it, especially reading it all the way through, makes it more like hearing a great oratorio like Handel's *Messiah* than it is like reading a realistic or even a very modern interruptive narrative at all.

In all these differences as well as in the most puzzling of all, Matthew, one may find a clue that there are at least from the very beginning two different but related readings of the common Passion-Resurrection narrative. In general terms I call these readings, with others, the prophetic and the mystical. It is sufficient to note that the prophetic reading in Luke highlights the need for the self to have responsibility and agency: the ethical-political self. That highlighting in our period is best represented, I think, by the insistence among many liberation, political, and feminist theologians on the importance of the notion of self as personal agency and responsibility to the historical struggle of the marginalized and the oppressed. It finds its most natural New Testament partner in Luke-Acts, where the history-like narrative of Luke aids the insistence on Jesus' actions for the outcasts of society and the need for freedom as not merely private but also political.

It is true perhaps, as has often been observed by historians, that when prophecy fails, apocalyptic takes over, and it is true perhaps that the contrast between Luke and Mark is the contrast between a basically prophetic reading and a basically apocalyptic reading of the common narrative, as Mark's apocalyptic drama, with its interruptive narrative, yields a reading of history and our responsibility to action

— ethical, political action — in history as far less continuous, far less optimistic than that promised by Luke. Yet even here, as the political theology of Johannes-Baptiste Metz, the German Catholic theologian, shows, apocalyptic need not mean a retreat from the struggle for freedom in history, however interruptive history is now construed. Rather, apocalyptic can also become in Mark an amazing insistence on both God as the agent in history and the human subject as commanded and empowered to act freely and deliberately politically even in these desperate apocalyptic times.

The alternative reading from the very beginning to the prophetic reading of the common narrative — or perhaps it would be better to say the prophetic and the apocalyptic — is equally clear. For the great gospel of John, the meditative, the mystical rereading of the Passion narrative, occurs in such a manner that there is a new construal of who the self is: this self as the one who could live a life of love, this self who understands, as in the first letter of John — I think really the first commentary on the gospel of John — that God is love, that God as the love manifesting God's self in the sign Jesus Christ first occurs to the Christian consciousness. The mystics always knew this. The mystics — whether they were the great love mystics, the image mystics, like Gregory of Nyssa, even the radically negative apophatic mystics — always went instinctively to the Gospel of John and that reading, that meditative mystical reading of the common narrative. The same question recurs for both the Jew and the Christian when they take seriously the fact that the Old Testament includes both the wisdom tradition and its more meditative character, and the prophetic traditions. As all the great mystical traditions in Western Christianity, especially in Catholicism, make clear, one finds these traditions justified not just in later history as many suggest, when Christians began to read Plato. One finds them justified in realizing that from the very beginning there are four gospels, and one of the great readings from the very beginning is John's reading, John's mystical, meditative narrative where the sign becomes an icon, where even the cross becomes the disclosure. In John, as Augustine said, in this love intoxicated Gospel one senses how right the mystics were to see that that reading too is proper and clear from the beginning, as clear as the prophetic reading of Luke, as clear as the apocalyptic reading of Mark, as clear as the community-oriented, new-order reading of Matthew.

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It is this, I think, that many in our own day are now struggling to recover again, both the great spirituality of the tradition including its most intense mystical forms and the need for the prophetic commitment to justice. Think, for example, of one characteristically American Catholic expression of this, the wonderful spiritual leader, mystical-political leader if I may call her that, Dorothy Day. Think of how it was always for her a passage in Dostoevski's *The Brothers Karamzov* that summarized why the Christian, the Catholic, needed to be both mystical and political:

Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared with love in dreams. Love in dreams is greedy for immediate action rapidly performed and in the sight of all. Human beings will even give their lives if only the ordeal does not last long but is soon over with all on-looking and applauding as though on the stage. But active love is labor and fortitude. Just when you see with horror that in spite of all your efforts you are getting further from your goal instead of nearer to it, at that very moment you will reach it and behold clearly the miraculous power of God has been there all along as the loving and mysteriously guiding hand.

It is that kind of sense of the heart of the matter as both mystical and prophetic that seems to me to be occurring more and more in our Catholic tradition and, as I suggested earlier, across the traditions. It is this same sense perhaps that occurs also, as Newman also insisted, in the church-related university. As Plato taught us, a life of inquiry has its own demands, the demands of what Bernard Lonergan nicely called the pure, detached, disinterested, unrestricted desire to know. But there is a further insight which the community of faith also has to teach, for the eros of inquiry, as Augustine reminded the Platonists of his day, is driven finally by our commitments, our faiths, our loves. To know the truth of Augustine's great insight "amor meus pondus meum" — "my love is my weight, what draws me on" — is to know what ultimately drives also the life of reflection in a community of inquiry rooted in a community of commitment: our ideals, our hopes, our loves. For the community of faith, the church is that

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community in which despite its faults, even sins, God's word is yet preached, God's sacraments are rendered present anew, God's people attempt to live out in action and commitment, in lives that are mystical and prophetic, a life of faith working through love and justice. In the community of faith each person individually and the whole people as a community attempt, now well, now poorly, to make God's own story — the story of God's pure unbounded love for all creation disclosed in the story of the people Israel and that Jesus who is the Christ — become our story as well. The life of the mind cannot live alone. As Aristotle insisted, only gods and beasts can do that. Rather, to think is to converse with all the classics of the tradition, to converse especially with those which have been forgotten, marginalized, even repressed. To converse with the classics, to find new ones, is always to join the community of inquiry of the living and the dead. It is to acknowledge that we too can and must become part of that conversation, for in truth we are that conversation.

Nor does the life of faith live alone. Any of us live that life only because past communities of faith passed it on to us. Christians know this decisive narrative of Jesus the Christ and the mystical and prophetic readings from the very beginning to our day because our tradition has seen fit to pass along, hand over, this healing, transforming, gracious possibility to us. As my historical colleague Martin Marty has written, "Christianity is always one generation away from extinction." We too must acknowledge that what conversation is to the life of the mind — conversation with all the great classics of the tradition — solidarity is to the life of action, in spite of differences. For the community of faith, after all, is a tradition which has lived by this shared narrative, this shared belief, this shared mediation through sacrament for almost two thousand years. Christians find with Newman or Dorothy Day that those shared meanings have expressed themselves through the centuries in an explosively diverse number of ways as each generation attempted to think and live them as its own. And in retrieving that reality each generation added some new insight, new witness, new way. The great moments of life, I believe, include those which once seemed a mere accident of being born at a particular time or place or among a particular people but then become appropriated, as one begins to understand one's life in the light of this narrative of Jesus Christ, not as a fate or an accident but as a destiny and a providence. In every life

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there are such privileged moments, such special places, such special acts. I thank you for the opportunity to be in this special place, this place that honors in the lecture this evening the founder of this place where the community of commitment and community of inquiry are joined. As Hannah Arendt said in reflecting on Augustine, "Human beings are born so that there may be a new beginning." In this place a new beginning was made. It was made by the person we come together in this lecture to honor.

Thank you.