

# Living Conversation: Higher Education in a Catholic Context

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I intend first to lay a theological foundation for what I'm going to say and then to build upon it four points that I consider to be very important for people engaged in higher education within a Catholic context to consider.

## The Foundation

I'm convinced that any theology that pretends to be Christian must show its rootedness in two central doctrines: the Trinity and the Incarnation. If what a theologian says cannot be shown to be rooted in these two doctrines, it may be very interesting, valuable, and true, but it is not Christian theology. Anything claiming to be Christian theology must necessarily relate to those two doctrines.

To begin, what do we mean within the Christian tradition by the word "God"? "God" is not anyone's name. There is not some person out there someplace, much older, much wiser, much more powerful than you or I whose name is "God." God is not the name of a class of which there happens to be only one member.

The word "God" is a bit of shorthand, a stand-in which functions in Christian theology almost as "X" functions in algebra. When working an algebraic problem, one's concern is "X." But "X" is the stand-in for the thing one doesn't know. That is how God functions in Christian theology. It is the name of the Mystery that lies at the root of all that exists. We must never forget that we are talking about mystery. That is a salutary reminder, by the way, for anybody doing theology, since our temptation is to natter on as though we know what we're talking about.

Now we must be clear about what I mean my Mystery. I do not mean the mystery in Agatha Christie, the "Murder-She-Wrote" sense of the word. I am not talking about mystery as a puzzle for which we do not have all the pieces but which, if we could find all the clues and juggle them into the right order, would click into place. Then we would know that the butler did it, and the mystery would be solved. No, the Mystery that I mean is much more like asking you who you are.

Who are you? That's a very puzzling question, because as we all know (on excellent authority) "a rose by any other name would still smell as sweet." So when I ask who you are, I'm not asking you for your name. I'm not asking when or where you were born, who your parents are, whom you are married to, where you went to school, what you do, or where you live. That is all description, and I'm not asking for a description but for a definition. And the definition I want is not that of a *human being* but of *you*.

Who are *you*? And of course, the more one thinks about it, the more one discovers that one does not have an adequate answer. Indeed, most of the questions for which we do have adequate answers are relatively trivial. When we come to the great questions, the central concerns of our lives, we find that we are at a loss to answer them fully and finally. I mean questions such as why you married the person you married? You might well reply that it was because he or she is good, kind, loving, patient, and a host of other wonderful things. But here, I retort, are 356,812 good, kind, loving, patient, *et cetera* people. Why did you choose this one rather than one of these others? It is very difficult to say this is the reason, isn't it?

I am frequently asked why I became a priest. And my standard answer is that to dig I am not able, and to beg I am ashamed. In fact, I can't give an answer to that question. Certainly there is nothing more important in my own life than my decision to be ordained, but I cannot tell you with any definiteness why I made that decision. Was it twelve percent my mothers influence, ten percent my fathers, seventeen percent the time and place that I was born, eight percent the example of this

pastor, six percent the work of that teacher? I don't know. In fact, I'm still uncovering the reasons why I am a priest.

What I am aiming at is a Mystery that is mysterious not because it is so distant that it is hard to draw an angle on it, so remote that we cannot get the data needed. If you are as nearsighted as I am, you will understand at once that something can be impossible for me to read if it is too far away from me. Without my eyeglasses, everything from the elbow out vanishes into the mist. But some thing may also be unreadable if it is held too close. If I bring a book up to my nose, the print is as unreadable as if it were at arm's length. And the Mystery I mean is rather like that. It is mysterious because it is too close, too intimate, too central to us. It is in this sense that God is Mystery. God is Mystery as you and I are mysteries.

Having heard that, you may well say to yourself "Well, if that's so, that God is Mystery and therefore you cannot finally speak about God, then sit down and shut up, Himes!" But, like any great religious tradition, the Christian tradition does think that, while it cannot say everything about Mystery, it can say something, even if falteringly. And what is it that the Christian tradition claims about the absolute Mystery that we call "God"? What is the fundamental metaphor that Christianity offers as the least wrong way to talk about God? I say "the least wrong way" because there is no absolutely right way. The least wrong way to imagine God, the Christian tradition says, is to think of God as love. The New Testament documents repeat this over and over again in parable and preaching, but it is said most forthrightly in one of its very late documents, the one we call the First Letter of John. In chapter 4, verse 8 and again in verse 16, we read that "God is love," but a very particular kind of love, for the word chosen in the Greek text is *agape*. It is not *eros*, which is a love that seeks fulfillment in that which is loved, nor *philia*, which is companionable love or friendship. *Agape* is a purely other-directed love, a love that seeks no response and demands no return, a love centered totally on the beloved. Because the English word "love" carries so many meanings, I prefer to translate *agape* as "self-gift," the gift of oneself to the other without any regard to whether the gift is accepted or returned. And the First Letter of John maintains that God is self gift. Now I could demonstrate at length that this metaphor is fundamental to the New Testament; I could cite text after text, example after example, to show that it appears again and again in the core documents of the Christian tradition, even if not as succinctly as in I John 4:8 and 16. But for brevity's sake, I ask you to accept that *agape* is the fundamental Christian metaphor for the Mystery that is God.

Let me point out something very odd about that fundamental metaphor. Notice the first letter of John does not say that God is a lover. It does not claim that the least wrong way to think about God is as one who loves. Rather, it says that God is love. Love, however, is not the name of a person or an agent, but of a relationship. It is more like an action than an agent. In other words, within the Christian tradition, the word "God" is really more of a verb than a noun, the name of something one does rather than of someone who does. It is the name of a relationship.

"Ah," you say, "we've been willing to listen to you this far, Himes, but what are we to make of this silliness about God being a relationship?" Well, as it happens, Christianity has made this claim again and again. The problem is that most of the time we don't take it seriously. That, alas, is too often the case with religious claims that we repeat again and again, especially religious statements about absolute Mystery and most especially religious statements that we address to absolute Mystery in prayer. Indeed, if we stopped to listen to some of the things that we say when we pray, we might cease to pray at all because we would find ourselves unsure of what our words mean. One of the things that we say in prayer most often is that what we are about to do is done "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." There you have it: we are talking about a relational God, not the One but the relatedness of the Three. That is what we mean by the doctrine of the Trinity. I think I can say, without too great an exaggeration that the entire doctrine of the Trinity is an enormous gloss on that phrase in the First Letter of John that God is self-gift. From that metaphor spins out the whole of Trinitarian theology.

Unfortunately, most of us don't take the Trinity terribly seriously. For most Christians, including most Catholics, the doctrine of the Trinity functions as a sort of divine, test of faith, as though God were saying, "I'll tell them I'm one God in three Persons, and if they can believe that,

they can believe anything.” The Trinity doesn’t make much *difference* to people. I have often remarked to students that if I and my fellow preachers mounted our pulpits some Sunday and announced that we had a letter from the Vatican saying that there are not three Persons but four, most people in the pews would simply groan. “Oh, when will these changes stop?” But to most of them it would cause no problem other than having to think about how to fit the fourth one in when making the sign of the cross. And that is a tragedy, for we are dealing with the deepest claim that Christianity offers about the Mystery that undergirds our existence, that is least wrongly named as the relationship of self-gift. That claim shifts everything. It is a unique way of thinking about reality. What we say about the Trinity affects the way we live marriage, raise children, choose professions, spend money, vote and, I hope, teach. You have noticed, I am sure, that the Trinity is not an item in the creed but rather the basic form of the creed. We do not say that we believe in the Trinity along with a number of other doctrines. Instead, we say that we believe in the doctrines of Christianity in terms of the Trinity: “We believe in one God the Father who . . .” and then we profess faith in the doctrines of creation and providence, “and in the Son who . . .” and then we proclaim the incarnation and redemption, “and in the Holy Spirit who...” and then we affirm the Church, the sacraments and the eschatological doctrines. We never actually say that we believe in the Trinity. The Trinity is not a doctrine next to other doctrines of the faith; it is the *only* doctrine, and all the others are expansions and explanations of it. The Trinity, which is the unfolding of the fundamental Christian metaphor that God is self-gift, is the clue to everything.

If that is true then it is also the answer to that whopping good question that students seem so often to ask and that Martin Heidegger maintained was the origin of metaphysics: why is there being rather than nothing? The Christian response to that question is based on its fundamental claim about the Mystery that lies at the heart of all that exists. Christianity answers that the reason that there is something rather than nothing is that it is loved. All that exists is loved into being. All that exists, *everything* as well as *everyone*—you and I, the chair you’re sitting on, the pen you’re holding, the podium that I’m standing at, your pet cat, the farthest supernova, and the rhododendron outside the window—all that exists is loved *absolutely*.

Why absolutely? Because that, you see, is how God does things. God, being God, does not do things partially. What God does, God does *as God*, which means absolutely. Everything that is loved by God—and that is everything there is—is loved totally, completely, perfectly, absolutely. And that is why it exists. Not to be loved by God is not to be damned; it is simply not to be. The opposite of being loved by God is not damnation, it is nonexistence. Saint Thomas Aquinas (always a good source for a Catholic theologian to trot out) raised the question: if God is everywhere, is God in hell? His answer is, yes. God is in hell. Then, with his usual rigor, Thomas asks the next question: what is God doing in hell? And he replies that God is in hell loving the damned. The damned may refuse to be loved and they may refuse to love in response, but the damned cannot cause God not to love them; they cannot make God be not God. They exist because they are loved and loved absolutely.

One way I like to put this is that from God’s “point of view” there is no difference between Mary and Satan. God loves both perfectly. The difference is that Mary is thrilled and Satan hates it. From God’s perspective, everything is loved. As chapter one of Genesis insistently tells us, “God looked at it and saw that it was good.”

Now, there is a traditional theological name for this agapic love that undergirds all that exists, a name for the self-gift of God out side the Trinity: *grace*. Grace is the love of God beyond the Trinity. To quote the most important Catholic theologian of the twentieth century, Karl Rahner, there is “grace at the roots of the world.” The universe is rooted in grace. It exists because it is loved absolutely.

## **Sacramentality**

The first point that I wish to draw from the claim that every thing exists because it is engraced is that to appreciate anything in its depth is to see it as revelatory of grace. Illustrating this there is a wonderful story told of Teresa of Avila, the great sixteenth century Spanish mystic and reformer. The story is, I must admit, probably apocryphal, but a good story is a good story

nonetheless. The tale is that later in her life, Teresa was seated in the courtyard of one of the monasteries she had reformed with a group of younger women gathered around her. They were asking her questions about prayer. One of these younger nuns said, “Mother, you have written so much and so powerfully about contemplation and I simply do not understand it.” What, she asked, was she supposed to be contemplating—a verse from the scripture, an incident in the life of Jesus, a mental image, a statue or picture? Teresa picked up a brown and withered leaf that had fallen from a tree in the court yard and replied, “if you really knew what it meant to say this leaf exists, you could contemplate it for eternity.” Truly to know what it means to say something exists—because there is no intrinsic reason for its being, because it is held in being at this instant by the perfect love of God for it—is to encounter a miracle that can be contemplated eternally.

This is a very powerful claim, and Catholic theology has a name for it: sacramentality. I am not now speaking of the seven great sacraments acknowledged and publicly celebrated by the Christian community. Those are powerful communal sacramental moments. But I am speaking now about sacramentality on a wider and deeper level, one that encompasses but is not exhausted by those seven communal sacraments. For anything—any person, place, thing, event, any sight, sound, taste, touch, smell—anything that exists *can* be sacramental *if* one views it in its rootedness in the grace of God. So, how many sacraments are there? How many things are there in the universe?

Here I must quote a great Jesuit poet, in his sensibility Catholic to his fingertips, Gerard Manley Hopkins. One of his most frequently anthologized poems is “Hurrahing in Harvest.” Thinking about the changing of the seasons, Hopkins realizes that he had not truly observed the natural glory around him. In the next to the last line of the poem he writes, “These things / These things were here and but the beholder wanting.” I don’t know a better and certainly not a more beautiful statement of the Catholic ideal of sacramentality than that. Grace is here. What is needed is someone to see it. What is wanted is the beholder.

The entirety of Catholic liturgical life—indeed, of Catholic spiritual, intellectual, and ethical life—is geared toward producing sacramental beholders, people who see what is there in its full depth. This should sound familiar to educators. Is it not true in every field, whether we teach philosophy or chemistry, literature or finance, that we strive to lead people to see what is there to be seen? I am suggesting that the Catholic sacramental principle supports this with the conviction that what is there to be seen in its depth is grace. Consequently, to teach any discipline or field is a holy activity. All teaching can produce sacramental beholders, even when the teachers do not know that this is what they are doing. And I suggest to you that sacramental beholders are what Catholic universities and colleges are supposed to be producing.

Before I move on to my second point, I must clarify this statement about Catholic education with the help of one of the most remarkable Catholic intellects of this century, Frederick von Hugel. Von Hugel, who despite his Austrian name was an Englishman, was invited to address a group of religiously interested students at Oxford in 1902. In the course of his talk, he referred to the person whom he regarded as the most extraordinary example of asceticism in the century that had just ended. It must have startled his hearers to learn that von Hugel’s example of asceticism, which most of them undoubtedly associated with fasting, penitential discipline and mortification, was Charles Darwin. And why Darwin, of all people? Because, Baron von Hugel said, Darwin had been willing to submit his wonderful intellectual powers and his great energy over a long period of time to the patient and painstaking observation of the development of barnacles, to the shapes of pigeons’ beaks and the varieties of organisms. For asceticism is not about self-punishment; it is the gradual stripping away of the self so that one can see what is there. Not to see what one would like to be there, or what one hopes is there or fears is there, or what one has been told by others is there, but to see what is, in fact, there. My favorite way of putting this is that asceticism is learning not to look in the mirror long enough that one might begin to look out the window. That is, we stop seeing what we would like the world to be or fear the world to be and see instead what the world is. That is why Baron von Hugel thought that religious people ought to take Darwin as their example of ascetical practice: to learn the discipline of submitting themselves to reality.

If this is so, then it is impossible to educate people in the sciences without training them in asceticism. Most scientists, I suspect, do not see themselves as ascetics. But if they are any good as scientists, they are. And scientific asceticism is a necessary training for sacramental beholding, for seeing what is there in its full.

### **Whatever Humanizes, Divinizes**

The Christian tradition claims that absolute *agape* (which is the least wrong way to think about the Mystery that we name God) is fully, perfectly expressed in human terms in the life, death, and destiny of one particular person, Jesus of Nazareth. We call this claim the Incarnation. In the Incarnation, absolute *agape* has taken flesh and walked among us. In the life, death, and destiny of Jesus we see what perfect *agape* looks like in human terms. I cannot overemphasize how important this is to the whole Catholic intellectual tradition because in it we maintain that, if one takes the incarnation seriously, God, the absolute Mystery, does not act human or pretend to be human or take on some aspects of humanity: rather, we maintain that the absolute Mystery is human.

Indeed, I doubt that this has ever been given more radical expression than in what is quite possibly (as far as we know) the earliest expression of the Christian faith. In St. Paul's letter to the Church at Philippi, Chapter 2, he quotes a hymn. Now, recall that Paul's letters predate the gospels and that in this instance Paul seems to be citing a hymn that predates his letter. Thus it may very well be the first expression of the Christian faith which we still have. The hymn, at the point at which Paul begins to quote it (Phil. 2:67), says, "Although he [the eternal Logos] was in the form of God, he did not think being equivalent to God was anything to be held onto, so he emptied himself, taking on the form of a servant and becoming like all other human beings." That is unquestionably the most radical statement of the dignity of the human person that has ever been made.

Notice: the Christian tradition does not say human beings are such immense dignity that God really loves them. It does not say that human beings are of such dignity that God has a magnificent destiny in store for them. Nor does it say alone that human beings are of such dignity that they have been fashioned in the image and likeness of God. No, the Christian tradition says something far more radical: human beings are of such dignity that God has chosen to be one. God does not think being God is anything to be grasped; God empties himself and becomes human like all other human beings.

That statement opens up the truth of the observation made by G.K. Chesterton, that if one truly understands Christianity, only one good reason exists for not being a Christian: it is too good to be true. And sometimes, to be sure, it does seem difficult to believe that human beings are as important as Christianity insists that they are. If one makes this claim of the Incarnation—and it is one whopping great claim to make—then this principle inevitably follows: whatever humanizes, divinizes. That is to say, whatever makes you more genuinely human, more authentically, richly, powerfully human, whatever calls into play all the reaches of your intellect, your freedom, energy, your talents and creativity, makes you more like God. This is how we encounter God in our incarnational tradition: not "out there" somewhere, but here being human along with us. Whatever makes you more human makes you more like God.

If one accepts this, it becomes perfectly obvious why Christianity had to give rise to universities in the Middle Ages. How could it not? It is perfectly obvious why Christians had to be concerned about health care, about feeding and clothing and housing people, and of course, about educating people. Because in reverencing humanity we reverence what unites us with God. Whatever makes us more richly human makes us more like God.

Let me give a remarkable example of this from the second century, an example made more remarkable because it is so early in Christianity's history. In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin Martyr describes Christianity as living in accord with the Logos—the Word, which he identified with the Word of which the Fourth Gospel spoke in its prologue: "In the beginning was the Word." We Christians, Justin says, live in accord with the Logos, we are "logical." Therefore, Justin maintains, anyone who is "logical" is, in some sense, Christian whether or not he or she ever claims that title. Thus, he can write, not only were Abraham and Moses and Elijah Christians because they lived

“logically,” so too were Socrates and Plato and Pythagoras. Isn’t that astonishing? By the middle of the second century, a mere hundred years after Paul wrote, Justin already lays claim to the whole of classical antiquity as being Christian at its best and wisest. How? Because anything that makes you more genuinely human makes you more like God. So, if philosophy makes you more human then it is “logical” and, therefore, Christian. Extraordinary! Saint Thomas Aquinas described theology as *sacra doctrina*, a “sacred” science. And so, of course, it is. But so too, in the deepest sense, are biology and economics, history and literature and chemistry. For whatever expands the mind, opens the imagination, frees the will, enlarges our capacities as human beings makes us more like God. And if *that* is not what makes a *doctrina* to be *sacra*, I don’t know what does. Whatever humanizes divinizes.

In passing, let me advance here a strong claim. I do not hesitate to tell undergraduate students in my theology courses that I am perfectly aware that many of them are at Boston College because they want to study chemistry or business and that they find themselves studying theology and wondering “why in God’s name am I studying this junk?” But, I remind them. Catholic universities need not justify the teaching of theology nor the requirement that all students study it. We’re not the new kids on the block. We’ve been around since Salamanca and Paris and Oxford—the schools that don’t require theology. They’re the ones who have to justify themselves. They’ve only been around for two hundred years. Those of us who have been around for a millennium wonder how one can pretend to talk about the ultimate issues engaged in human experience and not deal with theology. We wonder how anyone can imagine that students can be introduced to the history of the western world and not talk about the great religious issues, images, ideas, and symbols that have motivated the Jewish, Christian, and, in large part, Islamic communities for the last three thousand years. It does seem to be rather like saying “We run a fine university here, but we don’t teach physics.” Well, then, there is one whopping great hole in your curriculum. And the same is true if you don’t teach theology. Catholic universities have nothing to be embarrassed about in proclaiming our religious affiliation. But other universities have a lot of explaining to do.

### **The Continuing Conversation**

What enables someone to become more fully, richly human? Hanging out with human beings. You recall Aristotle’s discussion in the *Nicomachean Ethics* of virtue as lying between two vices? Thus, generosity is midway between prodigality and miserliness, courage midway between rashness and cowardice. But if that is where virtue is to be found, then Aristotle obviously is confronted with a problem, namely if all these good qualities are found in this “golden mean,” what is the virtue that enables a person to find that midpoint and how is that virtue acquired? Aristotle suggests that this virtue is prudence. But, of course, one cannot say that prudence is found by locating the point midway between two vices, because that begs the question. Aristotle’s solution is wonderful. It is, “Find a prudent person and hang out with that person.” The way to find the virtue that enables you to determine other virtues is by living with virtuous people. To become virtuous, live among the virtuous and imitate what they do. And I suggest that the way to become authentically human is to live among the authentically human.

But how is that done? Let me refer once more to G.K. Chesterton. On one of the many occasions when he was asked why he had become a Catholic, Chesterton replied that he became Catholic because Catholicism is a community with a deep and rich sense of tradition. And, he said, belonging to a community with such a sense of tradition is extremely important because only then can one be freed from the most degrading of all forms of servitude—of being merely a child of one’s time. That is, I think, immensely wise. Being part of a tradition means that you do not have to speak with North Americans alone; you can speak with South Americans and Africans and Europeans and Asians and Australians. It also means that you are not confined to speaking only with late twentieth-century people; you can converse with Plato and Emily Dickinson and Mozart and Teresa of Avila. You can speak with Dante and Madame Curie, with Newton and Euclid and Jane Austen. You can talk with all sorts of people who are not of your own age and clime. You are freed from being merely a child of your time and place. In the Catholic tradition, we call this the communion of saints. That

communion or conversation has been going on for a very long time—and you and I are invited to participate in it.

Let me share with you my favorite image of teaching. (I teach theology, but the image applies as well for any field, I think, in the sciences or humanities.) One of the sorriest inventions of the twentieth century is the cocktail party. There are three elements to a good party: eating, drinking, and talking. At a cocktail party one can't do any of them effectively. Trying to converse while balancing a glass and a little plate of canapes—it is the antithesis of a good party. But for purposes of my image, put aside the quite understandable complaints about the form, and imagine yourself arriving at a large cocktail party. There you are at the door of a room in which hundreds of people are milling about. You are wondering how you can possibly enter into this sea of humanity. And then over to you comes the host or hostess whom you will never forget and says “Wonderful to see you! So glad you could come! Now let me introduce you to soandso, a very interesting person who is involved in suchandsuch. And here's someone else, the well known whatever. And this is yet a third who has recently been engaged in . . .” And after you have begun to talk with enough people who lead you to still others, the host or hostess can leave you to make your own progress deeper and deeper into the crowd and can return to the door to begin introducing someone else. Well, it seems to me that teachers are the hosts and hostesses at what is at this point a four-thousand-year-old cocktail party'. Students are the newcomers standing at the door wondering how, to begin the conversation, and we are the ones who take them by the arm and say, “Wonderful to see you! Let me introduce you! Here's Socrates—fascinating fellow, you're going to love Socrates. And this Shakespeare—what a character! And Einstein—great with numbers! And Emily Bronte! And Bach! And Kant! And Augustine! And . . .” We introduce people into an enormously immense conversation with people of different places and extraordinarily different times. One of the richest elements in the Catholic intellectual tradition is its notion of the communion of saints, and within the Jesuit educational tradition one of the richest elements is the insistence on engaging in a transtemporal as well as a transspatial conversation. Our students desperately need such traditions so that they are not limited to their own contemporaries for companionship. This is a very important issue for those of us who teach in those traditions to consider: how do we introduce people into a living tradition, whether within the sciences or the humanities (and, I hope, both)?

### **Social Activism and Reflection**

I am inclined to think that one of the wisest principles of education that I have ever come across is what William James used to tell his students at Harvard at the beginning of this century. He called it “the pragmatic principle.” As James summed it up, the pragmatic principle is “if it's true, it makes a difference; if it makes no difference, it's not true.” Every term I urge my students to make that the measuring-rod of everything I say, they say, or we read together in the courses I teach. If, for example, you can't possibly imagine what difference it makes that God is triune; that is, it makes no difference to anyone, anywhere, anywhen (as James liked to put it), then effectively it is not true. One has to be able to see or, at least, to imagine, what difference any statement makes in order to declare that statement true. This pragmatic principle, I suggest, is bred into Americans, we get it with our mother's milk. And therefore it must be taken with great seriousness in the Catholic intellectual tradition as that tradition is lived out in this country. Thus, we cannot allow the formation of future intellectuals (and whom else are we teaching?) within the Catholic tradition to remain simply theoretical. For what we say to be seen as true, our students must see the concrete difference that our statements make. They must test out what we teach them. What we say to them about the value and dignity of human life must be experienced by them as making a difference in fact to someone, somewhere, somewhen. And it is certainly not enough for us to say, “Oh, well, there is the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, and there are various summer service projects in which the students can go off and do all sorts of swell things for others.” We cannot allow that divorce between the lecture—hall and their concrete experience. When students return to our campuses, they must find opportunities—and not in a few isolated courses—to reflect critically and, if at all possible, in a multidisciplinary way on their experiences in service and in other cultures. We cannot permit ourselves or them the

mistake of thinking that “out there you do, in here we think.” Here we think about what is done there. We must lead them into critical thinking about their experience. And we should do all in our power to make certain that engagement in service for social justice is not limited to a few students or simply to those who choose to involve themselves in it. Indeed, those who do not choose it are most often precisely those who need it most.

Why is it so important? There are many reasons, but let me offer one that matters especially to a theologian. It has to do with what, with all due respect to Saint Anselm and Saint Thomas Aquinas, is the only effective proof for the existence of God that I know. There are many proofs for an “Unmoved Mover” or an “Uncaused Cause,” but that has nothing to do with the God who is least wrongly understood as pure and perfect self—gift. The proof of which I am thinking is found in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamozov*. Fairly early in the novel, Dostoevsky presents us with a series of conversations with Father Zosima, the wise and holy monk whose words continue to echo in the book long after he has died. The last of these conversations is with “a woman without faith.” An obviously distraught woman approaches Zosima to request his assistance with a problem that she says is destroying her. We quickly find out that she is in good health, prosperous, and seemingly untroubled in any obvious way. But she insists that something horrible has happened to her and that her whole life is being drained of meaning and purpose. She goes so far as to tell the monk that if he cannot help her, she thinks she will kill herself. She explains that, at some point—she doesn’t know how, for there was no great crisis—she ceased to believe in God. It happened bit by bit, and she herself was shocked to realize that she no longer believed. Now everything is colorless, tasteless, to her. Everything has become ashes. She says, quoting Pushkin, nothing is real save the weeds that grow on her grave. Zosima tells her that what she is experiencing is the worst thing that can happen to a human being, and that he thinks he can help her. She must go home and every day, without fail, in the most concrete and practical way possible she must love the people around her. If she does that, Zosima says, then bit by bit she will come to the point at which she cannot but believe in God. “This way,” he says, “has been tried; this way is certain.”

The whole of the novel is a commentary on this scene, a huge debate about Zosima tried and certain way. I think that Dostoevsky is right: the only workable proof for the existence of God is an experience, and that experience arises out of daily concrete and practical love for those around us.

After all, long ago, we were told by the author of the First Letter of John that anyone claiming to love God, whom he cannot see, while not loving the brother or sister whom he does see is a liar (I John 4:20). Not a liar in the sense of one who deliberately and knowingly tells an untruth, but rather one who speaks falsely because he doesn’t know what he’s talking about. He cannot know what the word “God” means because God is *agape*, pure and perfect self-giving love. If that is the least wrong way to think about God, then one cannot know who God is—and therefore *that* God is—if one never knows agapic love. After all, to compare absolute Mystery to self-giving love isn’t very helpful if one has no clue what self-giving love is. Comparing the Unknown to the unknown isn’t very helpful. One must have the concrete experience of *agape* to understand who God is and, more importantly, to experience that God is. And if belief in the existence of God—which is, among other things, affirmation of purpose and meaning in life—is central to one’s existence as a fully human being (and I cannot imagine how the question whether there is purpose and meaning in life is not), and if education is not merely vocational training but the development of a fully human being, and further, if the tried and certain way to belief in God is concrete and practical love of others, then direct engagement in social justice and service to others is crucial to our students and to our task as their teachers. Not just an important auxiliary—*crucial*. We cannot introduce others into the Catholic intellectual tradition without it.

And so there, in what I fear is absurdly too small a space, are the key issues that I suggest to you as hallmarks of education in a Catholic and more especially a Jesuit context: sacramentality, humanization as divinization, introduction into a living conversation that transcends time and space, and an insistence on social action and reflection upon that action. That is what we have to give to our students. To borrow a phrase from the greatest teacher of Christianity, “Do this and you will be perfect.”

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“Living Conversation” is a slightly edited transcript*