The Heart Has Its Reasons

Robert P. Imbelli

At heart it’s a love story. As Robert Wilken writes in his splendid study, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*:

“The church gave men and women a new love, Jesus Christ, a person who inspired their actions and held their affections. This was a love unlike others. For it was not only that Jesus was a wise teacher or a compassionate human being who reached out to the sick and needy, or even that he patiently suffered abuse and calumny and died a cruel death, but that after his death God had raised him from the dead to a new life. He who once was dead now lives. The Resurrection of Jesus is the central fact of Christian devotion and the ground of all Christian thinking.”

And Wilken continues: “After the coming of Christ, human reason had to attend to what was new in history, the person of Jesus Christ.”

The Catholic intellectual tradition is the two-millennia effort to ponder the meaning and implications of that new reality and to investigate its relation to other facets of human experience. It addresses the new questions that arise from humanity’s ongoing discoveries in the realm of science and the ever more pressing encounter with the other great religious traditions. The Catholic intellectual tradition is the joyful celebration and the continuing exploration of what St. Augustine called the “beauty that is ever ancient, ever new.”

It should be noted at the outset that the word “intellectual” is not used here in a narrowly academic or merely conceptual sense. Augustine’s invocation of “beauty” is a clear signal that the aesthetic enjoys equal rights of citizenship with the conceptual in “giving an account of the hope that is in us” (1 Peter 3:15). St. Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae* stands side by side with the great Gothic cathedrals whose soaring architecture inspired him. Raphael’s frescos draw liberally from both the sacred Scriptures and from secular sources. The poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J., breathes the same air of truthful discovery as do the stupendous revelations of contemporary astronomy. Indeed, one of the salient contributions that the Catholic intellectual tradition can make to our contemporary conversation is to resist reducing reason to the merely pragmatic or technical and to restore our sense of wonder at a universe “charged with the glory of God.”

Already at the dawn of modernity Pascal cautioned against a reductive understanding of reason with his stirring affirmation: “the heart has its reasons which reason does not understand.” Pascal, great mathematician and philosopher, was certainly not countenancing irrationalism, but insisting, with Shakespeare, that “there are more things in heaven and on earth” than are dreamt of in a narrowly rationalistic philosophy or a merely utilitarian science.

The essays that follow explore multiple facets of the priceless diamond that is the Catholic intellectual tradition: its varied expressions in theology and philosophy, natural law and morality, scientific research and artistic creativity. There also emerges from them an enhanced conviction of the responsibility incumbent upon the Catholic university to steward and advance that tradition.
One can, of course, rightfully distinguish sub-traditions within the great tradition, like branches arising from the mighty river. Franciscan and Dominican, Benedictine and Ignatian sensibilities can complement and even compete with one another. Both contemplative and active commitments, concern for justice and care for the earth, can find there ample resources and generous hospitality. The various sub-traditions surely sensitize to features essential to a fuller understanding of the Catholic tradition and are omitted at the peril of an only partial vision. Indeed, one constitutive meaning of “catholic” is “comprehensive;” embracing the whole. And a Catholic university has the crucial responsibility of incorporating the richness of diversity within the common search for truth and wisdom that constitutes a distinctive community of mind and heart: an “alma mater.”

The Gift of Incarnation

However, though there are multiple strands of the Catholic intellectual tradition, multiple ways of bringing it to expression, there is an underlying “depth grammar” that each particular representation must embody and exemplify. Many of the essays gathered here speak explicitly of this depth grammar, referring to it as “incarnational” and “sacramental.” They celebrate “a sacramental vision of reality,” a sense that material reality, the body, the flesh (though always prone to being distorted by sin) is fundamentally good, because created by God.

But the Catholic intellectual tradition goes further yet. “Incarnational” and “sacramental” are not just ideas, abstract principles. They are rooted in the concrete, indeed in a person. For the overarching confession, the article upon which the whole tradition stands or falls, is its confession of the Incarnation. God’s eternal Word entered fully into the human condition, into human history with its hope and joy, its suffering and pain. The “incarnational principle” is founded upon the Person, Jesus Christ.

It may appear that, in appealing now to the “Incarnation,” I depart somewhat from the opening of the essay that stressed Christ’s resurrection. But my suggestion is that we might better consider the Incarnation not as a mere point in time, an instantaneous happening, but as the entire process of God entering fully into the human condition even unto death and new life. Thus, Incarnation culminates in resurrection, in humanity fully transformed in the Glory of God. Resurrection is the goal of Incarnation.

Moreover, the Good News is that with the resurrection of Jesus, humanity’s own destiny is both revealed and enabled. Jesus not only shows the way, he creates the way in his own risen body. In one of his last poems, “That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection,” the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins exclaimed:

“In a flash, at a trumpet crash, I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond, Is immortal diamond.

This robust sense of Jesus’ Incarnation, culminating in his resurrection from the dead, stands at the very heart of the Catholic wisdom tradition. It has been powerfully reaffirmed recently by the Canadian Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor.

At the conclusion of his monumental work, A Secular Age, Taylor writes that Christianity “is the faith of the Incarnate God.” But he adds, perhaps surprisingly, that we need “to struggle to recover a sense of what the Incarnation can mean.” The question thus arises: Why the struggle? Has not the Catholic intellectual tradition over the centuries clarified in carefully honed doctrines and decisions its meaning? I think it fair to say that Taylor is not so much speaking of doctrinal clarifications as concrete implications. What does incarnation faith call us to? What are its challenges to us, particularly in a secular age?

The Threat to Incarnation

From its very beginning the Catholic intellectual tradition confronted a significant threat to its incarnational faith. The movement known as “gnosticism” maintained that God would never contaminate himself by entering fully into the human condition, taking on the burdens of the body and the horrors of history. Though the name can sound esoteric, gnosticism remains a potent and perennial temptation. Charles Taylor has helpfully provided a term that suggests, by way of contrast, this perennial threat to faith in the Incarnation. He calls it “excarnation.” Excarnation is humankind’s inveterate tendency to shun matter in its messiness. It represents the contemporary form of gnosticism. Thus, it disparages the body and the consequences of embodiment, such as history, community, and the physical environment. This excarnational attitude denies the need for, even the very intelligibility of language about “solidarity” and the “common good,” which permeates and orients Catholic teachings about social justice and environmental concern.

Taylor has further aided our coming to grips with the challenge we face by contributing another term: the “buffered self.” The buffered self is one that resists relationships and commitments, prizing its individual autonomy above all. Such a self is ever
more constricted and confined, the very opposite of catholic.

If excarnation truly characterizes much of the contemporary individual and societal mind-set and behavior, then the challenge of faith in the Incarnate God, as articulated in the Catholic intellectual tradition, is bound to exhibit a countercultural dimension. It will advocate a fundamental option for the needy and dispossessed, the biblical “widow and orphan”: those who have no “buffer,” who enjoy no privilege. In resisting the culture’s excarnational tendencies, the Catholic intellectual tradition (and its bearer: the Catholic university) will echo, to some degree, St. Paul’s injunction to the Romans: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind; that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12:2).

But the Catholic tradition offers still further insight. It traces the excarnational forces operative in humankind to the dread of its vulnerability in the face of death. Thus, we erect defenses and concoct stratagems to ward off threats, both real and imagined. In so doing the paradoxical result is that these control strategies can quickly turn death-dealing: violating relationships, scapegoating, ultimately eliminating the other who is feared as an enemy. Humanity’s history, from Cain to the atrocities of the 20th century, bears abundant and depressing witness to where the “logic” of excarnation finally leads.

The Cross as the Tree of Life

No wonder, then, that the cross stands as the privileged Christian symbol. For the Incarnation, the entrance into the human condition of the Son of God, could not bypass death. The tradition marvels that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, and the Son so loved us that he gave himself for our salvation. The cross represents this wondrous love that does not deny death, much less inflict death, but enters into death in order to transform it. Jesus’ cross incarnates God’s supreme Word of love: “my body for you.”

Hence the Church’s liturgical tradition acclaims that Christ, by his cross and resurrection, has conquered sin and death and set humankind free. And the Catholic intellectual tradition, from Augustine and Aquinas to Charles Taylor and Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI, has sought to give a reasoned account of the hope that the Christ’s life-giving death and resurrection to new life has revealed, and to ponder its implications for persons and for society.

PRAYER OF ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

O Lord my God, grant me understanding to know You, zeal to seek You, wisdom to find You, a life that is pleasing to You, unshakable perseverance, and a hope that will one day embrace You.

As mentioned earlier, great works of art can communicate as effectively, and certainly more affectively, than the necessarily abstract renderings of philosophers and theologians. Dostoevski’s The Brothers Karamazov is the magnificent unfolding, through the heights and depths of human relationships, of a single verse from the Gospel of John that serves as epigraph to the novel. “Amen, amen, I say to you: unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (Jn 12:24).

But no work of art depicts this Paschal Mystery more vividly than the resplendent 12th-century mosaic that fills the apse of the Basilica of San Clemente in Rome (image on page 2). It depicts the cross of Christ as the Tree of Life. The face of the crucified Christ radiates peace. At the foot of the cross stand the Mother of Jesus and the Beloved Disciple, in rapture at the redemption wrought. They are both concrete individuals and symbols of the Church that arises from Christ’s sacrifice. Perched on the cross the 12 doves, representing the 12 apostles, ready themselves to fly off, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to proclaim the Good News to the four corners of the world.

But the extraordinary vision of the anonymous artists is yet more catholic. From the cross flow streams of living water and from them springs a verdant acanthus bush. Its swirling branches enfold and fondle humans in their multiple activities: farming and shepherding, building and studying. Women and men, monks and laborers, even pagan gods are gathered into a holy communion: sacred and secular united in harmony. The crucified and risen Christ reconciles and recapitulates not only humanity, but all creation.

Splendid as the masterpiece is it only serves as backdrop for the altar upon which the Eucharist is daily celebrated, extending Christ’s life-giving sacrifice in space and time. Here art cedes to reality: The bread and wine, fruit of the earth and work of human hands, become the very body and blood of Christ.

It is quite possible, I like to think probable, that Dante Alighieri paused to contemplate the mosaic and to participate in the Eucharist at San Clemente during his stay in Rome. The experience may have sustained him on his own transformative journey that gave birth to the Catholic intellectual tradition’s greatest poem. The Divine Comedy is certainly the story of an individual learning how to love truly, purged of self-centeredness and freed to love generously. But it tells a tale
that transcends the individual and history itself. It sings a love song that is cosmic in scope, because the Triune God it celebrates is recognized, in the final ecstatic verse of the poem, to be “the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.”

The Incarnation of God’s love is not primarily a fact of the past. The risen Christ is present in the community gathered in his Name, present in the Word proclaimed, and especially in the Eucharist celebrated. It is for this reason that Robert Wilken insists: “The Resurrection of Jesus is the central fact of Christian devotion and the ground of all Christian thinking.” One often hears that there are three great religions of the Book: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. There is much truth in that perspective; but it risks slighting a unique distinctiveness. Catholicism certainly gives pride of place to both Old and New Testaments in its liturgy and theology. But Catholicism in particular is far better described as the religion of the one to whom the Book points: the person of Jesus Christ.

The Catholic intellectual tradition, in its multiple forms, is the quest to explore the significance and implications of the inexhaustible Mystery of Jesus Christ, to give expression to the reasons of the heart. As the following essays show, that quest continues today. The essays represent, if you will, tesserae in the many-splendored mosaic that is the Catholic intellectual tradition.

ROBERT P. IMBELLI is the editor of this issue of C21 Resources.


“Late have I loved you, Beauty ever ancient and ever new; late have I loved you! For you were within me, and instead I sought you outside. In my unloveliness I lost myself in those lovely things you created. You were with me, but I was not with you. The lovely things kept me far from you, yet if they did not have their being in you, they would not be at all.

You called and cried out to me and shattered my deafness. Your radiance shone upon me and dispelled my blindness. Your fragrance caused me to draw in my breath, and now I yearn for you. I tasted you and now hunger and thirst for you. You touched me and I burn for your peace.”

—St. Augustine, Confessions, book 10