

Trinitarian University

I would like to first salute and congratulate our new graduates on this auspicious day. We are proud of you and happy for you on this prestigious day in which we recognize your collective accomplishments. I also would like to thank the Master of the Order, Fr. Gerard Timoner, III and the Socius for Intellectual life, Fr. Pablo Sicouly, for their presence here today. Finally, I want to thank in a particular way our staff and faculty for their amazing commitment to our university during the time of the pandemic when we have all had to brave new conditions and make new sacrifices for the sake of the university and our common mission. Thank you sincerely! I speak with hope and perhaps a touch of optimism in saying that I believe we have made it through the worst of the trial of this epidemic and can now seek to live in a new period of restoration and public life, including study in person and common prayer. Deo gratias!

I would like to talk to you today very briefly about three themes: communion of persons, universality, and theology for a missionary Church. In each of these, I want to underscore a common thread: the university, which is Catholic in origin, is Trinitarian in character. The university is from the mystery of the Trinity and for it, and marked inwardly by its impulses.

Communion of persons

In the beginning there was a communion of persons. Christianity teaches this as the ultimate, metaphysical “secret” of the cosmos. The world is created by a Trinity of persons, in communion, and it is created for the communion of persons, in the spiritual life of grace in Christ, in the Church. We know this idea is far from obvious. Today we live in a world where the meaning of life is constantly contested, so much so that, in fact, many have

grown indifferent or callous to the very idea of an ultimate explanation. The very idea can seem like the mere imposition of a given cultural tradition or priestly caste, trying to impose a given point of view on others arbitrarily by a collective will to power, animated by the sincere but naively fundamentalist view that seeks to render absolute one's own intellectual traditions. Many in our time think it is best under the circumstances of modern pluralism to remain circumspect about fundamental religious truth claims and to seek refuge in a healthy dose of agnosticism, the politics of libertarian tolerance, and the psychology of benign mutual acceptance. And yet the very conversation about freedom, truth, and tolerance conducted among agents of freedom is a conversation between persons, who are moved by the promises of human love and justice, animated by longings for the truth and for mutual happiness, and capable of genuine, profound, communion with one another. Human beings cannot easily escape the call to the truth and the corresponding call to communion with God and one another without abandoning their nature or their own personal inclinations. In fact, it is a kind of temptation to seek to escape the vocation to seek the truth and to adhere to it when we discover it, including the truth about God, his revelation, and his Church. Indeed, it is our Lord who has told us that "the truth will set you free." (John 8:32)

We know the Church is often not only a place of serenity and consolation but also a place of controversy and conflict. Those who value stability often accentuate the idea of the Church as an institution: dogma, sacramental stability, institutional authority. These features of tradition are rightly noted to conserve the life and truth of the Church and advance or transmit that life and truth from age to age. Those who value engagement and the tangible relevance of the Church to the world around us often accentuate the idea of the

Church as a process of historical life. The Church progresses through history by reading the signs of the times and engaging with the intellectual, ethical, and existential questions of the age. What lives must change and progress in various ways if it is not to die but also to adapt and grow, or at least survive.

Both these instincts have their place, but they are also both relative to a deeper truth. The Church is first and foremost a communion of persons, a mystical body that lives in Christ, animated by the grace of the Trinity. The saints in heaven are persons, or personal souls, for now prior to resurrection, most fully alive in God. Grace elevates persons to know and love the Trinity and to live in communion with the Trinity. It is because of the unchanging identity of God as Trinity, and of the human person made in God's image, called to eternal life, that the dogmas, sacraments, and institutions of authority in the Church serve perpetually to draw us up into the life of sanctification and mystical union, in the truth, and in the full exigencies of love. It is because of the living potential for the communion of persons with God in every age and culture that our missionary life in the world must be dynamic and must progress, to go to new lengths, depths, heights, and breadth, animated by the truth and the love of God.

As persons in a community, a communion, that is a university, we all have strengths and frailties, nobility and struggle, and we are all called, individually and collectively, to sanctity: to union with God. This union may be discreet, but it is what is most profound and present in our lives. Sanctity is achieved for each of us not only through the pursuit of justice, affability, and friendship but also through forgiveness and mercy. It occurs not only through the communication of the truth but also through the long patience of seeking,

learning, and welcoming the insights of others. That is a challenge but it is a beautiful challenge for people made in the image of the Trinity and for communion with the Trinity.

Universities are for Universalism

As the British philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has noted in recent years, the university exists for universality.¹ The primary aim of a university is research into the nature of the truth understood as the structure or contours of reality, and its explanatory causes. The various specializations or branches of knowledge may have diverse subjects or objective domains, but these diverse forms of knowledge are all somehow united in that they give us deeper access to reality.

In the 13th century, when the first European universities were beginning, the simple fact that two young Italian friars, Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas, both from obscure new mendicant orders, moved to the University of Paris may have seemed insignificant at the time. After all, what did these two young mendicants have other than faith, a rich interior mystical life, and a great deal of natural brilliance? But each of them contributed in a seminal way to creating the very circumstances of the university as an institution since each of them sought, if in somewhat diverse ways, to demonstrate the profound harmony of the arts and sciences, with philosophical metaphysics and ethics, and with revealed theology considered as a science.² What is more, they joined their notions of distinct

¹ See Alasdair MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

² See in particular, Thomas Aquinas, commentary on Boethius's *De Trinitate*, *Expositio super librum Boethii de Trinitate* in *Faith, Reason and Theology*, trans. A. Maurer (Toronto: PIMS, 1987); *The Division and Methods of the Sciences: Questions V and VI of his Commentary on the De Trinitate of Boethius*, trans. A. Maurer (Toronto: PIMS, 1986). This is the perspective, for example, of Bonaventure in his *Collationes in Hexaemeron* of 1273, which defends the unity of Christian wisdom, against the idea of an independent philosophy, by an explanation of seven degrees of illumination, ranging from that of the natural philosophical sciences to those of faith, sacred scripture, contemplation, visions, prophecy, mystical rapture, and, finally, the beatific vision. Philosophical knowledge, therefore, is intrinsically teleologically ordered toward the

disciplines of philosophy and theology with a Trinitarian mysticism that understood the God of reason, known by philosophical avenues as the God of love unveiled in Christ, to whom we are united in charity and who we can contemplate theologically by scrutinizing the mysteries of faith.

Aquinas and Bonaventure sought to both distinguish and unite the various sciences under Trinitarian wisdom. Their confidence in divine revelation and their intellectual consent to faith led them to know the universal horizon of being personally: the Trinity, and this knowledge in turn invited their reason to its true homeland of universal explanation. As Aquinas shows in his preface to the commentary on Aristotle's metaphysics, the science of metaphysics considers being and the ultimate causes of being, in fact, that God is the first origin and explanation of existence received or given in all of creation.³ The study of particular facets of creation, in the sciences or history, leads to understanding the world God gives being to, but also indirectly bears witness to its author. At the same time, the revelation of the Trinity is the personal unveiling of the Creator, who is understood as a communion of inter-personal love. Theology needs philosophy so as to avoid degenerating into a pious description of religious subjectivity or moral sentiments. Philosophy needs theology so as to remain oriented toward ultimate things, first grounds of explanation. Without philosophy, theology can degrade into poetry. Without theology, philosophy can easily resign itself to mere study of the cosmos, divorced from God. It

beatific vision. See the analysis of Fernand Van Steenberghen, *La Philosophie au XIIIe Siècle* (Louvain: Éditions Peeters, 1991), 180–203.

³ Aquinas, *In Meta.*, prologue: "From this it is evident that, although this science [i.e., metaphysics or first philosophy] studies the three classes of things mentioned above [i.e., God, the intellectual substances, and being in general], it does not investigate any one of them as its subject, but only being in general. For the subject of a science is the genus whose causes and properties we seek, and not the causes themselves of the particular genus studied, because a knowledge of the causes of some genus is the goal [finis] to which the investigation of a science attains." [Commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, trans. J. P. Rowan (Notre Dame, IN: Dumb Ox Books, 1995).]

needs theology because the intellect is moved by love and by revelation, so as to remain stable in its ascent to the first truth and toward integral commitment to the truth. The mysticism of medieval mendicants like Aquinas and Bonaventure are as important for us as are their philosophies and theologies. The pursuit of the presence of Christ and the contemplation of Christ stabilize the mind and heart in the courage of conviction that the truth is worth living for. This is one reason we need to maintain the Eucharistic presence at the heart of the university, to contemplate He who is the center and heart of the Truth, present in our midst.

Our world is now known to be more vast than it was in the 13th century due to the explosion of modern scientific learning, the knowledge we have of a greater swath of intellectual history and alternative cultural visions of reality. There are tremendous new intellectual challenges. And yet basic questions remain the same: what is a human being and what makes our life most noble? Can we truly know something about God, and is his revelation intelligible? And how do we negotiate different disciplines of learning, in their distinction and unity? In the modern setting of the university, where there is a marked new absence of theology, the common intellectual pursuits of human beings often falter when it comes to the sacred and even to ultimate questions of explanation. Often, we fall back into what Charles Taylor calls the “immanent frame,” a world of theoretical and practical reason bound by the immanent world of human society and the physical cosmos, without reference to transcendent being, unity, goodness, or truth, that is to say, to those features of reality that conduct the mind toward God.⁴ We live today so often in a culture of mere immanence, a horizon of ascetic imprisonment closed off from the mystery of God in his

⁴ See the larger argument of Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2007), and relatedly, Cornelio Fabro, *God in Exile: Modern Atheism* (New York: Newman Press, 1968).

transcendence, and the mercy of God in its effects. This affects the modern university, as specialization and positivistic study of historical figures is cultivated, without integration into a larger wisdom. Political activism often predominates instead of speculative and theoretical learning: what John Henry Newman called servile arts versus the liberal arts, truths studied for their own sake. There is nothing wrong with servile arts or with a healthy dose of political activity, but one must first know what one serves or whom one serves and in view of what theoretical ends one is working, and in this measure, the Christian university must know the Trinity and serve and love the Trinity, to cultivate a genuine communion of persons, in justice and in mercy. To do this, the university must be animated by a collective desire to know all of being, its causes, and all that is true, good, and beautiful, including the truth, goodness, and beauty of God and his revelation.

Theology for a Missionary Church

Pope Francis calls us today to a universal stance of missionary dynamism. The Church needs to avoid the temptation to turn in on itself and instead go to the peripheries. However, we also need to go to the centers of our own person and others. We ourselves are in need of conversion to God, especially if we are called to turn toward others and help them convert to God.

As we all know, in the 2nd century already, Justin Martyr spoke and wrote in Rome of the “seeds of the Logos,” those preparations of grace sown by God in pre-Christian cultures, which the Gospel might address and bring to fulfillment. In the heart of the empire, Justin was envisaging a center turned toward the peripheries in order to be itself.⁵

⁵ On Justin’s theology of Christ as Logos, see Eric Osborn, *Justin Martyr* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1973); Brian Daley, *God Visible: Patristic Christology Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 55–

When the Church seeks to speak of the *Logos ensarkos*, the Word made flesh, to all who are able to seek Logos, universal rationality, then the Church is most herself. Rémi Brague has spoken in a related way of occidental culture in Europe as “eccentric culture,” a culture always open to and in search of new truths, and ever seeking to explain and test convictions.⁶ In fact, we can only have this kind of confidence in universal reason if we are also first grounded in universally valid principles of nature and grace, in the learning of perennial philosophy and sound doctrinal understanding of the Church’s magisterial teaching.

This is one reason the 16th- and 17th-century missionaries from the Franciscan, Jesuit, and Dominican orders were so effective. They were trained in scholastic traditions of philosophy and theology, so that they acquired a true kind of universalism. When they confronted new cultures, they were able to discern what was essentially common to all human culture and what was accidental, as well as modes of expression of the essential proper to each culture. Inculturation requires understanding of the universally essential and respect for cultures simultaneously.

When Dominican missionaries wrote back to their teachers in Salamanca in the 16th century to inquire about how to confront the injustices of slavery in the Americas, they were inquiring into the questions simultaneously of universal human nature and universal human rights with consequences for political justice and Christian charity. The preaching of universal human rights in the west emerged in large part as an expression of the

62. An important analysis of this aspect of ancient thought is provided by Joseph Ratzinger in his essay “Truth of Christianity?,” in *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*, trans. by H. Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 138–209.

⁶ Rémi Brague, *Eccentric Culture: A Theory of Western Civilization* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine, 2009).

scholastic principles of nature and grace developed in Catholic universities and exported to new cultures.

Today we encounter new theological questions and challenges, from science and technology, from new ideologies and philosophies, from communication with non-Christian religious traditions, but also new practical challenges of justice, including but not limited to the protection of vulnerable persons in the Church, the problems of education inequality, the challenge of an inclusive and moral system of economic exchanges, conflicts around the meaning of the human body and civic marriage, and the defense of human life from conception to natural death. The Church cannot embrace a merely defensive stance nor one of mere compliance to secular ideologies or non-Christian religious conceptions. The Church must engage intelligently with the complexities of modern culture while preaching and remaining radically faithful to the mystery of Christ, his incarnation, death and resurrection, and to the mystery of God revealed in the prophetic and apostolic teaching. This is the stance of a missionary to the nations, whether those nations are formerly Christian or not Christian, or partially converted, who today need to hear the Gospel proclaimed with fidelity, intelligence, zeal, and love. This is our Trinitarian mission to the world, a universal mission beginning from the Cross of the Son of God, and from the empty tomb and continuing out everywhere, and forever, until the end of time. This is the theological mission of a Trinitarian university. Thank you.