

STRS Commencement Remarks

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I want to welcome all of our guests who have come to be with us today -- families and friends – to honor the 2009 graduates of the School of Theology and Religious Studies. Allow me to say that as you come here for personal reasons and attachments to our graduates, you also remind us that what we do here in this building and on this campus is always for the wider church. You represent why we do what we do and for whom we do it. In a sense there is no such thing as a special field called “public theology.” The study of all of theology is engaged in for the good of the church as the church seeks to give voice to its beliefs and practices before and in the wider world. All theology is public theology.

Catholic theologians in particular bear a sacred responsibility when they (we) engage in the craft of (what we call) “doing theology.” It is nothing less than a sacred trust. While I do not want to scare our graduates with this assertion, I judge it my privilege and responsibility to remind them (and us, their professors) that it is simply a sacred trust and a privilege beyond telling.

Catholic theologians also stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us in the over twenty centuries of Catholic belief and practice. And just as the pictures you treasure in your family album (or digital frames, otherwise known as “smart frames”) containing photos of loved ones especially from years gone by, so the church has her own “family album” of saints (and yes, sinners) who have gone before us and who have laid the spadework for the craft of theology in every age. We follow them. We all share in a broad, wide, deep and long Catholic tradition because of them and their work.

One outstanding part of the family album of Catholicism is a man whose 900th anniversary of death we observed on April 25th – St. Anselm of Canterbury.

I want to salute his work today because of its relating faith and reason. I want to salute his memory because of the historic and contemporary relationship between CUA and St. Anselm’s (Benedictine) Abbey here in Washington, D.C. through faculty positions held to this day and the numerous Benedictine students who over the years have graduated from CUA (as you yourselves do today) and through our shared search for God in study, research, writing and in prayer.

Many (all?) of today’s graduates may well remember that when you arrived at CUA the “tag line” for the university’s ads was “Do It All.” Three years ago it was decided we needed something new and the administration held a contest for a new one. Over five hundred entries were submitted. What was eventually selected was the one we now use “Reason. Faith. Service.” (It is worth noting that one of the entries was “do it all”...with an asterisk..”certain restrictions apply!”)

“Reason. Faith. Service.” Not nearly as catchy as “do it all.” But it does speak to the heart of what the academic life at CUA is (or at least should be) all about. It is certainly a tag line with which St. Anselm would be at home.

This Benedictine, monk, prior, abbot and archbishop wrote a number of significant works on the reasonableness of the faith in general as well as the reasonableness of why God became man -- for our sakes and our salvation. I became familiar with St. Anselm's work *Cur Deus Homo* when a colleague whose retirement we salute today, Rev. Dr. Joseph Komonchak, presented it to us in Christology classes when I was his seminary student and he invited us to read about Anselm in a classic Christology text by Alois Grillmeier, *Christ In Christian Tradition*. But as many of you graduates know secondary sources were not sufficient for Fr. Komonchak. We then read the original text and some of us even dipped our toes in the Latin original.

Among others, St. Anselm taught that there is a reasonableness to our faith. From as far back as Justin the Martyr's *First Apology* Christian theologians have set themselves the task of combining faith and reason. Sometimes it has been particular arguments about what Christians believe, such as the full humanity and divinity of Christ. At other times it has been to construct a system for Catholic theology in dialogue with the contemporary, prevailing philosophy or ways of thinking at the time. Clearly a particularly fruitful time for theological syntheses was the Scholastic era, made particularly famous by St. Bonaventure and St. Thomas Aquinas. But if you check the sources about St. Anselm you soon discover that he, not Aquinas, is regarded as the Father of Scholasticism!

The question I want to raise and the challenge I want to put before you is what does it mean to work to combine faith and reason, to come up with an appropriate apologetic for the faith and to offer to this and the next generation of believers an account of our theological stewardship that does not shrink from these challenges.

But we must not do this in a vacuum or in a ghetto or among like minded and similarly trained theological elites. We need to do it facing into our culture, a culture we should revere and love but which at the same time we may well need to critique and challenge.

For example, three weeks ago the Pew Forum on Religion issued findings about the beliefs and church affiliations of contemporary Americans. Among other things that poll indicated a high percentage of people changing belief systems from one church to another or to no church at all. In some subsequent commentary on the poll in the media it asserted that it was not uncommon to see believers not defecting *from* the faith but defecting *to* the faith of another tradition. One such article was entitled "Defecting to Faith" by Charles M. Brown in the May 2nd issue of *The New York Times*. It was a fair enough treatment of the Pew findings. But he made the remarkable claim that "science, logic and reason are on the side of the nonreligious."

Not so, I argue, from the depths of the Catholic tradition. We do not separate our faith from science, logic and reason. One of our perennial challenges is to incorporate and appropriate the best of contemporary science, logic and reason into the way we articulate what it is we hold as true, right and indeed credible.

That this is a contemporary challenge has ever been and always will be true. We need to learn from the giants who comprise the constellation of the family album of Catholic theologians and Catholic theology. But we need to learn from and yet go beyond them simply because it is an ever present challenge and task. For you graduates I pray it will be your stock in trade. I also pray that means you will always have a job!

We do the craft of theology no favor, however, if we simply repeat what our forebears said and did. We should learn from and appreciate how and what Aquinas said and did in the *Summa*. But that *summa* should spawn other *summas*, new ones for our day and age. In fact we do a disservice to Aquinas when we do not reach beyond him and cultivate a new way of doing what he did for a new day and age.

We do the Catholic tradition no favor if we say about God and the Incarnation all too glibly, readily or easily that “it’s a mystery” and thereby mean there is no need for faith to meet reason. Indeed God is the most precious mystery there is. But that does not mean that this mystery is impenetrable or off putting. In fact it is the opposite. This sacred mystery of God and God in the flesh is God’s perennial and continual invitation to us to be drawn into this utterly unfathomable yet always inviting mystery. Sometimes the refuge into “mystery” language is a subterfuge for not wanting to work. Academic study is hard work. But we engage in that hard work for the sake of making sure that our faith is reasonable and for the sake of others whose inquiring minds and hearts need to be addressed and answered. For St. Anselm, as it is for all Benedictine, it is both *ora et labora*.

We do the tradition of Catholic apologists no favor if we use their tried and true formulas for expressing the reasonableness of our faith and not seek to come up with new ways of accepting this same challenge because of the cultures (plural!) in which we live and in which the Christian God is incarnated and discovered. The recent revival of Chesterton and Belloc studies attests to a revived interest in apologetics. But we utilize them better as paradigms and examples, not as ideas simply to repeat. Such is not apologetics, which branch of Catholic life deserves revival and vitality. Mere repetition is lazy plagiarism.

We do this university no favor if we in this School of Theology and Religious Studies retreat from working with and through the relationship of faith and reason and leave it to the philosophers. *Fides et ratio* is as much our turf and responsibility as it is theirs. In fact this might be a common project for both of our faculties and student bodies.

Reason, Faith, Service is a motto St. Anselm could live with. It can be a motto we at CUA live by. It is my prayer that you graduates take this with you as you leave, and carry it with you as you go forward to move beyond what we have taught you here and to engage ever new publics in the ways of God. None of us can ever “do it all.” But doing what we can by “reason, faith and service” is the highest vocation imaginable. After all it is about and for God. It is a sacred trust. It is about faith seeking understanding. That was St. Anselm’s vocation. That it your life’s vocation. Thank you for starting that vocation with us at CUA.

