

Dean's Welcome to New STRS Students – August 31, 2009

It is my privilege to welcome you new graduate students to CUA's School of Theology and Religious Studies. It is also the first public occasion when I can acknowledge the work of our new Associate Dean for Graduate Studies, Dr. Charles Jones, who this summer replaced Dr. Barbieri and with whom many of you have been in contact.

I want to welcome some new faculty members: Dr. Christopher Ruddy (Ecclesiology) Dr. Joseph White (American Catholic Church History) Dr. Margaret Schreiber, O.P. (FYE) and Dr. Patricia Powers (Biomedical Ethics).

I also want to welcome two new staff members: Mr. Thomas Palanza and Ms. Abimbola Akintolayo, who is Assistant to both Fr. Mark Morozowich and Dr. Jones. Therefore she is a "need to know person" with whom graduates students will work very closely.

You have chosen to study at The Catholic University of America. Each of those terms can and should be parsed and discussed – *Catholic*, *University*, and *America*. But today I want to focus on the location of this university – in *Washington, D.C.* – the political capital of our country and a major capital among the capital cities of the world.

If this has not yet happened already let me assure you that you and I will continue to hear the pundits talk about life and politics "inside the Beltway." That is what this town is and does.

But there is another phrase that is less well known but that is often used about politics in Washington which can be used about the study of theology and religion. It is the phrase “who is framing the debate?” Obviously political parties try to frame Capitol Hill debates to suit their preconceptions and instincts. Think tanks and institutes dot this city with their approaches to “framing debates” on all sorts of issues and policies – yes, including the current national debate about access to health care.

As you study the evolution of church teaching or the currents from various religious traditions on any given issue one of the questions I’d like to ask you to raise is “who is framing the debate” or a slight variation “why are they saying what they are saying that way?” It seems to me that once you establish the context, framework and parameters of the approach to a given issue that you will be studying you have a precious tool that can help unlock the riches of the issue at hand. But may I urge that you work to do that without relying exclusively, or dare I say overmuch, on secondary sources? Sometimes commentators on religious and theological topics all too often, even if by inadvertence, seek to “frame the debate” sometimes with preconceived ideas or terms that came from other contexts which are not germane to the texts or ideas at hand.

A recent case in point concerning who frames the debate is the spurt of at least the initial commentary that surrounded the Holy Father’s early July encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*. Even before the ink was dry pundits had already decided what it said, most often indicating that the pope agreed with their already established opinions. Not surprisingly when it comes to a document about the economy, commentators of every stripe want to

cite what they agree with and ignore what they find challenging. Issues of the “common good,” concern for the environment, organizations of trade unions, and people’s fundamental rights to food and water are among the issues the pope raises which are not always welcomed in every quarter. But these are not new Catholic principles and teachings. My own sense is that this pope’s particular theological perspective is evident in this document which seeks to complement *Populorum Progressio* of forty years ago. Some have said the pope tried to do too much. Better too much than too little? Again, who frames the debate is one issue. Another is what to do about such essential and important aspects of life as seen through this Catholic lens? It is a rich and challenging document – one well worth the effort to engage on its own terms.

Closely allied with such a rigorous study of texts and documents in context is to study them in their original languages. Religious and theological texts deserve to be studied (and dare I say enjoyed) by studying them in their native languages. I defer to Associate Dean Chuck Jones about documents from world religions and about his own scholarly work on accurate translations of documents from Chinese Buddhism.

But let me offer two examples from the theological side of the house. This past spring I did some research on recent Roman documents on the Eucharist in preparation for the United Methodist – Roman Catholic dialogue. In reading a website translation of Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Mysterium Fidei* I was surprised to read that it asserted that the Eucharist is a re-enactment of the sacrifice of Calvary (n. 27 with a footnote to the Council of Trent). I say “surprised” because I thought that Trent taught that the Eucharist was the “re-presentation” of Christ’s sacrifice. I then checked the Latin text of the Vatican website Latin edition of the text which was, in fact, *representari*, which term

is very different and far richer than “reenactment.” *Representation* bespeaks memorial (*anamnesis*) in its breadth and depth. *Reenactment* bespeaks dramatization and watching. They are not the same thing.

Later on this summer I did some research on my presentation for the “Year of Priests” Symposium to be held in this very room on Oct. 6-7th. I wanted to trace the difference between calling the priest an *alter Christus* and the way the documents of Vatican II regularly assert that the priest acts *in persona Christi*. In an article from about a decade ago about baptism the author asserted that while *alter Christus* was often used in the Middle Ages to refer to the ordained priest in the patristic era it was used of the baptized. This was new to me so I checked the footnote. In fact the patristic text said that the baptized were called “Christ” and not “another Christ.” I relearned the wisdom of the Italian proverb – “every translator is a traitor!”

Be assured that the best minds and faculty guides are here to help you glean and sift through documents, texts and contexts. The path ahead will, I assure you, have its surprises simply because you will have worked hard to go beyond commentators, pundits and politics to mine the riches of theological and religious traditions of different stripes.

Welcome to graduate study “inside the Beltway.” And be careful about who does the translations and who is framing the debate!

