

Peter Lombard and the Greatness of the Catholic University. Last updated 17 April, 2017.

Today I would like to speak to you about four things, No, not to worry -- not The Four Last Things. The four things I want to talk about are: medieval Paris, The Catholic University of America, Peter Lombard's lectures on the Bible, long thought to be lost, which I was privileged to discover in Great Britain last summer, and -- satsumas.

The first Paris I invite you to visit with me is that of the mid-twelfth-century, specifically the cathedral school at the Old Cathedral of St Mary, the predecessor to the Cathedral of Notre Dame which still, of course, stands today. There, the great Scholastic theologian Peter Lombard taught for decades before becoming Bishop of Paris in 1160. And there the seeds of the University of Paris, the first Catholic university, and, by extension, of The Catholic University of America, were sown.

The second Paris is only a few steps forward on the timeline, the University of Paris in the mid-thirteenth century. These are heady times. The works of the ancient Greeks, Aristotle in particular, and the great Islamic thinkers such as Avicenna and Averroes have been introduced and are being debated, and while the faculty is made up primarily of laymen, it also includes the likes of St. Thomas Aquinas and St Bonaventure. This is both the site of tremendous intellectual leaps and advancements and of the Condemnations of 1270 and 1277, in which the Bishop of Paris, Stephen Tempier, condemned many propositions, among which were those of St. Thomas.

But before we get to The Catholic University of America, let's take a side trip to California to taste some satsumas. You see, my family and I lived in Southern California in the first years of the third millennium, in Ojai, where they filmed the movie "Shangri-la". The sky seemed bluer, the ocean was a never-ending wonder, and, in the enthusiasm of a newcomer, I tore out our lawn, bought a few truckloads of organic loom from a farmer friend, and planted

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over three hundred rose bushes and fruit trees. There, as I watched my children joyfully traipse out the door, pluck fresh satsumas off the trees, and pop them into their mouths, I started to consider myself an expert gardener. I might have stayed happily deluded in this conceit, had I not then brought my gardening enthusiasm with me to Virginia where the state's red clay, fickle weather, two-spotted spider mites and brazen deer showed me otherwise. What had turned our little California plot into a techni-color paradise of roses, lemons, oranges, and, satsumas, was hidden in plain sight. It was not my skill, but the combination of sun, climate, healthy plants, and, most importantly, soil that had been cultivated and tended by two generations of farmers.

This is where we return to The Catholic University of America. I hope to persuade you all on this day devoted to research that using the Catholic methods of teaching and learning like those that grew and flourished in the Scholastic lecture halls of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries – just like that organic soil that turned out to be absolutely essential to our gardens -- is essential to the greatness of any truly Catholic university.

Oh no, you might say, this guy wants to send us back to the Middle Ages, a time before Gutenberg, Newton's Laws, and iPhones. Not at all. The intellectual model of the medieval university gives us a glimpse of the powerhouse of intellectual advancement we can and should be. Imagine adding to that powerhouse what we have right in front of us: a faculty and student body that includes women, that is made up of students and scholars from all kinds of diverse backgrounds, and the tremendous advantage of scientific tools and methods that allow us to appreciate God's creation at levels never before imagined.

Like that California soil, Peter Lombard's lectures on the Bible were also hidden in plain sight. Here's the story - for more than two decades I worked on manuscripts attributed to Peter

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Lombard's students, Peter Comestor and Stephen Langton. Like everybody else, I knew from his Last Will and Testament that Peter Lombard had lectured on most of the Bible, but also like everybody else I assumed that they were lost for good. Great scholars had hunted for those books in libraries and manuscript collections for centuries, without success. Little did I know that the clues to finding those lectures were right in front of me.

To do so, however, meant rejecting long-held scholarly assumptions. The High Middle Ages, after all, was supposed to be a book culture. And I would likely still be looking for a book had it not been for God's grace and the combined efforts of Dr. Susan Wessel and my Dean, Fr. Mark Morozowich. Thanks to them, I was given the chance to come to CUA to teach and to write. Shortly after coming here, in a conversation with Professor Tim Noone of the Department of Philosophy, I learned that we had both experienced the same frustrations trying to make "modern scientific editorial theory", invented by Lachmann in the 1830s and standard among all scholars since then, work in editing texts from the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries. It wasn't long before we were working together, along with our distinguished friend and colleague, Joshua Benson, trying to find a new theory, one that would actually work for most Scholastic texts from the High Middle Ages.

My point is that I could never have found those lectures, nor understood the impact of their discovery by myself. It took being part of an amazing faculty. It took colleagues who shared my love for research and for the Christian intellectual tradition. One day, we finally figured out why Lachmannian editorial theory didn't work: the High Middle Ages were not, as everybody supposed, a book culture; the surviving manuscripts, at least those that preserved scholastic teaching, were rather vestiges of a thoroughly oral culture, closer to that of Homer and classical antiquity than to that of the Renaissance.

You see -- every medievalist knew that classroom teaching was oral, but not one suspected that the manuscripts preserving those classroom lectures could not be studied, interpreted, or edited as books. Once we had this insight, we started to see that the same manuscripts we'd pored over for decades had actually preserved in almost every case manifold layers of orality side-by-side with copying errors susceptible to Lachmannian technique. Knowing this, I was able to locate Peter Lombard's long-lost lectures on the Bible in the lectures of his students, who used his lectures, copies of which were circulating around Paris, as the foundation for their own. I found some under their names and others chunked in to their lectures. Obviously, no one was worrying about plagiarism.

So, -- orality led us to Lombard's lectures on the Bible. That was pretty cool, but an even bigger surprise was coming. We found in those lectures the first-known appearance of the single greatest advance in logical theory during the Middle Ages: the logical theory of supposition. So what, you say. Well, you are right to ask: what's the big deal? Few people other than specialists know how far and how high the art and science of logic advanced during the High Middle Ages, but it is sufficient for my purposes to note simply that modern mathematical logic, invented in the mid to late 19th century by Boole, De Morgan, Frege and other intellectual giants, and which has ascended to great heights ever since, has still not caught up to our medieval logicians. Moreover, as Tim Noone is fond of saying, the medieval logic that made possible unprecedented advances in all known fields but especially in medieval philosophy and theology also made possible the capacity of the Latin-speaking Christians teaching at Paris to make such extraordinary use of the great works not only of the ancient Greeks, Aristotle in particular, but also of the great Islamic thinkers, Avicenna, Averroes, and many others. In short, finding the

Peter Lombard and the Greatness of the Catholic University. Last updated 17 April, 2017.

single greatest advance in medieval logical theory in twelfth-century biblical lectures was a shock, to say the least.

To understand how it got there, we need to go back to an earlier Peter – Peter Abelard, a charismatic genius who, depending on whom you ask, is everything from the hero to the bad boy of the Middle Ages. Abelard tells us his life story in his *Historia calamitatum*, the account of his misfortunes, and few modern tales can match its drama: his cocky challenge to the greatest scholars and teachers of his day, his love affair with his student Heloise, his castration by her uncle, a Norman knight, his subsequent trials – to himself and others -- as a monk, and **above all**, the condemnation of his thought by his theological opponents, including the towering figure of St. Bernard, at two Church Councils, Soissons in 1121 and Sens in 1140.

To understand Abelard, we have to understand some theology, and not just any theology but some of the most difficult Christian theology imaginable: Trinitarian theology. Famously, Abelard had bragged that he could explain the Trinity by reason alone, without regard to anything we know from Divine Revelation. Reason can in fact ascend to profound understanding of God, as we know from the last line of the eighth book of Aristotle's *Physics*, where the Stagyrte arrives at a notion of God as First Cause of all that is. But arriving by reason alone at a Triune God, a Godhead with three Divine Persons, is another matter altogether. It will give you some idea of the heights of Abelard's audacious self-confidence that he believed, quite sincerely, that the Trinity was intelligible to human reason alone.

What gave Abelard such confidence in human reason, unaided by Divine Revelation? The answer is logic, and Abelard is on the short list of the greatest logicians in all of human history. Here we should let him tell the beginning of the story, a story of theology and logic, and

Peter Lombard and the Greatness of the Catholic University. Last updated 17 April, 2017.

one that forms the backdrop for Peter Lombard and the formation of that thoroughly-Catholic University of Paris. In *The Story of my Misfortunes*, Abelard recounts a confrontation between himself and Alberic of Reims, one of his principal accusers at the Council of Soissons, where Abelard's *Theologia 'summi boni'* (Theology of the Highest Good) was being examined for heresy. Alberic, himself an expert logician, challenged Abelard's denial of a position that he, Alberic, had been teaching for years, namely that God had begotten Himself. Alberic's reasoning was simple: since there was only one God and since God begot God, God must have begotten Himself.

Abelard responded simply and calmly by asking Alberic to examine the very book that he had in his hands. There Alberic found in the opening chapter of Augustine's great work, *On the Trinity*, words that exonerated Abelard's teaching and smashed Alberic's: "He who thinks God to be of such power that He begot His very self goes astray even more, since not only is it true that God does not exist in this way but neither do spiritual or bodily creatures, for nothing exists whatsoever that begets itself."

Abelard, however, would go on to spend decades trying to one-up Augustine by showing that using reason alone he could assign attributes that were proper to each Divine Person – power to the Father, wisdom to the Son, and kindness to the Holy Spirit. There is no doubt from his own rhetoric that he thought that he had succeeded. But the fact of the matter is that he failed, albeit brilliantly, because he could never get past 1) how intrinsically our understanding of the Trinity is tied to revelation and 2) the fundamental logical limitation of definition or essence.

Let me explain. First, while logic can shed light on the nature of the Trinity, the knowledge that God is triune comes from Revelation alone. Second, to be able to distinguish

Peter Lombard and the Greatness of the Catholic University. Last updated 17 April, 2017.

between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit in the way that he wished, Abelard needed something more than the logic of signification, which no matter how brilliantly stretched, could not in the end get him to where he needed to go, because God's essence and any definition based thereon must necessarily apply with equal force to all three Divine Persons.

What Abelard needed but lacked was a logic based on reference rather than signification, a logic that would allow the same word to refer in one context to one Divine Person and in another to another Divine Person. Abelard died in 1141, just a few short years after Peter Lombard had begun teaching in the schools of Paris. In a dramatic postscript to Abelard's life and death, the very students who had frequented the three schools of logic that he founded during his career, who had opposed him in the intellectual give-and-take of classroom discussions, quoting the Creed to him -- *but what about Light from Light, True God from True God* -- committed themselves to developing a logic that would meet the challenge posed by the theological difficulties of the Trinity.

And they succeeded. They came up with the single greatest logical advance of the Middle Ages: the logical theory of supposition, which as you can now guess from my story, was based not on essence and signification but rather on reference and context. Their logic revolutionized the schools and above all, philosophy and theology. And -- like Poe's purloined letter, we find that revolutionary logic in, of all places, -- you guessed it -- Peter Lombard's biblical lectures. That too was hidden in plain sight, and without Abelard's ambitious failure, and the challenges it produced, it may never have been developed.

We can see here in the mid-twelfth-century lecture halls of Abelard and Peter Lombard the seeds and the soil for the greatness of the Catholic university to come. Most historians have

Peter Lombard and the Greatness of the Catholic University. Last updated 17 April, 2017.

focused on Abelard's condemnations at the hands of the great Saint Bernard of Clairvaux. In the modern telling Abelard is the hero and Bernard the villain, since the former is seen as a champion of academic freedom, the latter its opponent. But while colorful, this narrative ends at half-time. Bernard and Abelard's other accusers knew that Abelard was wrong but didn't know why. Yet Abelard's students, Alberic and others, didn't let the whole matter stop there. Instead, they developed a new and much more supple logical theory, one that could solve problems in Trinitarian theology that were a millenium old. Peter Lombard and his students took advantage of that new logical theory in striving to understand Trinitarian theology.

In this telling of the story, there aren't any real bad guys but only good guys. Abelard's brilliant attempts to stretch existing logical theory to solve those Trinitarian difficulties failed, but that failure resulted in tremendous intellectual advances. Bernard and the other Churchmen who accused and condemned Abelard were right to do so, because his Trinitarian theology was in fact suspect, but it is one thing to know that something or somebody is wrong and quite another to know why. The real hero of this story is the Scholastic method of asking questions and seeking answers using the best intellectual tools available. In those Scholastic lecture halls Abelard's students developed supposition theory and theologians like Peter Lombard, who opposed Abelard, used it to explain where and why Abelard's Trinitarian theology had fallen short.

We can now move a century forward to the University of Paris of Saints Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas, where we see precisely the same soil and the same greatness. I mentioned above the famous Condemnations of 1270 and 1277, in which the Bishop of Paris, Stephen Tempier, attempted to put an end to threats posed to Christian theology by Aristotelian philosophy. In the standard telling of the story Saint Thomas Aquinas is the hero, since he

Peter Lombard and the Greatness of the Catholic University. Last updated 17 April, 2017.

reconciled Aristotelian philosophy with Christian theology, which is more or less true as far as it goes. But here again that telling only gets us to halftime. The full story, as so often happens, is much more complex, but for our purposes here it is worth telling, since it is in essence the same story that we have just heard: new knowledge that poses a challenge, condemnations, and then rapid advances in theoretical knowledge that get to the heart of those challenges.

In this fuller version, Saint Thomas Aquinas plays the role of Abelard. Now, I know that this may seem to some of you strange and even untoward, but please hear me out. Like Abelard, Thomas Aquinas was a transcendent genius. Like Abelard, he transformed the scholastic landscape, only in this case to a much greater extent, since he transformed huge swaths of medieval metaphysics, epistemology, and theology. But, just like Abelard, his logic wasn't advanced enough to support the changes in philosophy and theology that he sought to make. This wasn't his fault. Unlike Saint Bonaventure, who followed the full arts course at Paris, Saint Thomas learned logic in Naples.

And so, just like Abelard, the thought of Saint Thomas was subsequently subjected to searching, relentless, and in truth telling criticisms in the lecture halls of the University of Paris during the closing decades of the thirteenth century and well into the fourteenth as well. What was the basis for such criticisms? Yes, by now, you all can guess: logic! Medieval logic continued to develop at an extraordinary pace and to ascend to extraordinary heights. The result was the same: the Scholastic method of questions and solutions, of disputations on any topic whatsoever, led again to intellectual greatness. Same soil, same result. Anyone who knows Catholic thought at Paris from 1250 to 1350 knows that Saint Thomas was not the end but rather the beginning of the rapid and steady ascent of the University of Paris, as thoroughly-Catholic a university as there ever was and arguably the greatest of all time.

You'll notice that the scholastic soil that produced greatness both in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Paris was no respecter of persons. Individuals, no matter how brilliant, were surpassed by their successors: this was the natural result of the fertile scholastic soil. The whole Scholastic method presupposed open and ongoing intellectual debate, and while everyone's lectures were listened to carefully, even those which were good enough, like those of Peter Lombard, to serve as the basis for the lectures of the following generation were nevertheless continually subjected to critical scrutiny. The only thing that mattered was truth. Error and failure were inevitable but not to be feared in the slightest, since they were in fact the ground for intellectual advances. Where did such unflinching confidence in the truth come from?

Here we at The Catholic University of America can learn a great deal from Peter Lombard's lectures on the Bible, in which we find serene confidence in the unity of truth, in which we find cutting-edge search for the truth side-by-side with open and unapologetic desire for God. Most Catholics today would contrast the Patristic Era, which was supposedly pastoral and biblical and accessible, in short everything we need in the present age, with the High Middle Ages, which are thought to have been logical and speculative and coldly academic, apart from the salient exception of the mystics. Indeed, most Christians, Catholics and Protestants alike, believe that the medieval Catholic Church paid little heed to the Bible. But the truth is quite the contrary.

It turns out that the Bible was central to the great speculative advances of the High Middle Ages. And, truth be told, why should this surprise us? Why should it surprise us that the profound mysteries of Trinitarian, Incarnational, and Marian theology should drive the greatest intellectual advances of the Middle Ages? It shouldn't surprise us at all, for just as theoretical Physics drives intellectual advancement today, so did medieval theology in the Middle Ages.

Peter Lombard and the Greatness of the Catholic University. Last updated 17 April, 2017.

Nor should it surprise us that the very same folios which preserve the Lombard's Trinitarian theology should record his public and fervent love for Christ, for Mary the Mother of God, and for the Church!

The Lombard's lectures on Genesis make clear that medieval academic theology was not in the least a coldly-academic enterprise. There was nothing cold about the classrooms of Peter Lombard or of Bonaventure and Aquinas for that matter except perhaps the temperature, and neither the Bible nor Christ were ever far from their minds and hearts. Their classrooms routinely witnessed the most-advanced theoretical inquiries together with the deepest and most sincere love for God and the Church. Theology and mysticism were not separate things but were rather one discipline, one way of living that combined ardent love for God with rigorous search for truth.

What else can we at The Catholic University of America learn from Peter Lombard's lectures on the Bible? I'll name three things.

The first is the central importance of Sacred Scripture, the Word of God, the foundation not just of Christian theology but of all human wisdom. Spinoza taught modernity that the Bible is just another book, but a Catholic university simply cannot accept such a premise. Kant stipulated that study of the Bible and theology were two different things, but here again one can and should ask how it is possible that such a theoretical claim was ever accepted and ratified by Catholic scholars and theologians. Peter Lombard and the saint-scholars who followed him a century later at Paris would certainly have rejected any such claim outright. Saint Bonaventure, responding to the challenge of an Arts faculty for which philosophy alone was sufficient for attaining beatitude, spent his entire career making the case that only theology, based as it is on

Peter Lombard and the Greatness of the Catholic University. Last updated 17 April, 2017.

revelation, with the Bible at its foundation and core, can lead us to beatitude. Has that changed? Could it ever change for a truly Catholic university? I think not. To the extent that we are Catholic, to that extent we believe in a living God who loves us and cares for us in a personal way. Christian wisdom, *sapientia Christiana*, must ever remain the same in that sense: Christ, risen from the dead, the Word of God and the second person of the Holy Trinity, remains our Savior, and the Trinity itself our ultimate end. For us today, as for Peter Lombard and Bonaventure during the Middle Ages, the Bible itself, the Word of the living God, must remain our indispensable guide, to be interpreted, as Augustine taught our entire Catholic tradition, in the light of truth.

The second, which flows from the first, is a radical confidence in the unity of truth, the *sine qua non* of the greatness of any Catholic University. Like Peter Lombard, we should make use of the best intellectual tools available to humankind. Peter Lombard made use of the logical theory of supposition developed by Abelard's students to untie the theological knots in Trinitarian theology that were to that point in Christian intellectual history insoluble. We should imitate his classroom methods to the fullest extent possible. And here I'm not suggesting that we return to the curriculum of the medieval University of Paris, although it is well known among my students and those of Professor Noone that, if we had our way, every student at CUA would take four years of logic and four years of Latin. What I **AM** suggesting is that, like Peter Lombard and his medieval successors, we take full advantage of the latest and greatest intellectual advances, be they mathematical, scientific, literary, historical, or of any kind whatsoever. Like Saint Augustine during the Patristic era and like Saints Albert, Bonaventure, and Thomas Aquinas during the era of the Schoolmen, we at The Catholic University of America

have nothing to fear from but rather everything to gain from intellectual advances of whatever kind in whatever field. Could truth be other than one?

If there are those who deny this unity, it is only because Catholic scholars have retreated into a shell, which leads to the third salient trait of the medieval schools, which is, I would argue, the soil most indispensable to any Catholic university: the most open and transparent intellectual debate and discourse imaginable. The high points of the medieval University of Paris are well known: magisterial disputations and quodlibetal lectures and debates. Masters would hold disputations in the presence of the entire university community. They would face off with each other over the most difficult and intractable theoretical problems then known, in philosophy, in theology, in logic, and make no mistake: there were winners and losers. Other masters, formidable and learned, were in the audience listening, and there was no room to hide. The Masters of Theology at the medieval University of Paris had to be at the top of their intellectual game. This was true even in the twelfth century, when the students of Peter Abelard and Peter Lombard challenged and surpassed them both, raising the theory of supposition and Trinitarian theology to new heights.

One gets the distinct impression today that Catholic scholars and intellectuals feel the need to agree with each other and to paper over differences. But in the medieval schools it was far otherwise. Ferocious disagreements were routine, oftentimes between and among members of the same religious order, much less between secular priests and religious, Franciscans and Dominicans, and so on. We don't have to give up true civility and collegiality to do this. But we've lost a great deal, if this is in our past and not our present and our future.

There was as much disagreement or more in the medieval University of Paris, where there was ample room for Saints Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas to disagree with other, than there could possibly be in our own age and in our own university. We have nothing to fear from transparent and rigorous intellectual discourse and debate.

And therein lies a medieval blueprint for the present-day Catholic University of America: intellectually fearless; interdisciplinary; inventive and imaginative; and utterly faithful to Christ and his Church. My research has taught me to ponder the greatness of the twelfth-century cathedral schools of Paris, and to ponder that of the medieval University of Paris that followed. I am asking you today to ponder especially the principles on which those medieval schools were founded and run, to gaze upon the intellectual and spiritual soil that was the foundation for their greatness and could be so for ours.

I thank you for your time and attention.