

## Dean's Remarks – Commencement – May 12, 2007

It seems to me that one way of characterizing what we offer to the students in this School is to say that it is a comprehensive and classical education in Theology and Religious Studies. By “comprehensive” and “classical” I mean to say that we offer the full range of courses that would qualify as a standard theological education in the Catholic tradition. But it also seems to me that the lens we place on the range of topics from systematic and historical theology, to church history, scripture, liturgy, moral theology and Christian ethics, catechesis and religious education, world religions and contextual theology, spirituality and the variety of disciplines that comprise pastoral studies is that of culture. This is to say that what the church has done in all of its lifetime theologically is to seek to interpret and to integrate what the Catholic tradition has always believed, professed and tried to live in light of the pressing and burning questions of a given time and place. One of the words to describe that is culture

For example, from my own discipline of liturgy and sacraments I have come to believe that there is no such thing as “the” compendium of sacramental theology. In fact all of the great authors and magisterial documents of our tradition were crafted at specific times and places and responded to particular needs. In the end one needs to glean the insights from all periods and eras in the church's life in order to reflect what Catholic sacramental theology is all about. Similarly despite the emphasis on the phrase “liturgical inculturation” today it seems to me that any serious study of the historical evolution of the liturgy is a study of ongoing inculturation in terms of liturgical language, the structure of liturgical rites, music and architecture, to name some of its pluriform aspects

With regard to the theological enterprise itself what I want to argue is that a classical and comprehensive theological education should equip us to be very contemporary, modern and – dare I say it? -- relevant. Alternatively, it also seems to me that if we strive for being contemporary, modern (or even post modern) and relevant here and now in terms of the theology we espouse, then we can easily wind up having nothing to say to the next generation. A classical and comprehensive theological education should equip us with a toolbox to use as we continue to work on crafting theology that is reflective of a 2,000 year tradition and yet which is applicable and used to illuminate the burning issues of our time for this generation and for generations to come.

I judge that this is what we do best here in STRS. And that among our faculty we have a cadre of colleagues whose particular areas of expertise help to challenge us to engage the church in the post modern world with the breadth of our Catholic tradition. In effect our work here is always culturally conditioned in that it is influenced by the culture we live in and in turn should influence the way we embrace or critique that same culture.

What are some of the things which I think we need to continue to reflect upon with the resources of this faculty and student body/

Some are arguing that the next presidential election will be a “green election” with environment a major factor in people’s decision making (Thomas Friedman, “Turning the Election Green” *New York Times*, April 25, 2007, A31). Environmental Studies at CUA has a religion component and environmental consciousness is a new facet of our STRS curriculum. That is why it is called “environmental Studies” and not “Environmental Science.” From my own field of liturgical studies I am more and more convinced that the church’s doctrine of sacramentality has been eclipsed in post Vatican

It approaches to liturgy and to appreciating it as a chief characteristic of Catholicism. Part of that doctrine involves the use of the gifts of creation in our worship of God and to accept the challenge inherent in their use. For example, we who use water in baptism to signify new life should then be challenged to look at our moral response to pollution and water rights. (See the document of the Holy See, specifically the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, "Water, An Essential Element for Life," prepared for the Third World Water Forum, Kyoto, March 16-23, 2003.)

From the very beginning of his pontificate Pope Benedict XVI has asserted an ecumenical priority and has demonstrated that, for example, in his trip to Istanbul. That priority is reflected here with several professors engaged in national and international ecumenical dialogues, including those with the Orthodox. The breadth of our course offerings includes the major world religions and in some cases contextual theology is an important means of engaging other religions in true dialogue. Such a study reveres other religions, it is not simply an examination of them. In these very days the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York is featuring "Venice and the Islamic World" with a magnificent and timely demonstration of religious differences and yet, according to one New York art critic, offers something of a reconciliation between Christianity and Islam accomplished through art.

None of us needs to be reminded of the fact that we are at war in Iraq. The Catholic church has traditionally used the "just war" theory to measure a country's efforts in such an engagement and their moral worth. At the same time today there is an important debate going on about just what a "just war" is and how that criterion can be applied to today's armed conflicts. (Peter Steinfels, "A Catholic Debate on 'Just War'

Mounts, *New York Times* "Beliefs" April 14, 2007, B 6) This same debate occurs on our campus not only in Peace Studies seminars but in classes of all grades and levels. One characteristic of those debates reflects the combination of a classical principle and a cotemporary application, here it is specifically how do we apply such a mainstay of Catholic moral life to a contemporary war?

It seems that not a day goes by that stem cell research is not mentioned in the press, and we in the nation's capital are made aware of plans to fund it on both sides of the political aisle. Even as the rhetoric about this gets inflated when promises of the benefits of such research is immediately applied to chronic and death dealing diseases, we need the relative calm of theological debate and insight to make appropriate distinctions about where these cells come from, who "owns" them and what responsibility we all share for them and for human life. Gratefully among our faculty are renowned experts in the field of moral theology who can help us and the wider society come to reasoned and reasonable positions about this contentious, and regrettably sometimes very politicized issue.

These remarks are nothing new to you, our graduates of 2007. You know this only too well because you have learned a great deal from professors who have passed on to you a comprehensive and classical theological education. And if you hear in these remarks more than a hint of pride in what the faculty does, know that that is what I intend. In fact I am very proud of the work and collegueship of this faculty of the School of Theology and Religious Studies. It is my hope that you graduates take from them all that you have learned and apply it in ever new situations in the years ahead in your academic careers and church ministries. You will do us very proud if you build on

what we have been able to teach you. And if you go beyond repeating what we have said in classes and in directing your dissertations to offering the next generations of students and church members your own insights from a storehouse of what is classical and comprehensive, you will do us proud, very proud indeed. Congratulations on what you have accomplished here at CUA. But allow that to be the base from which you continue to grow and mature theologically – for your sakes, for the church’s sake and for the sake of the culture in which we live