JOHANNES QUASTEN AWARD 2014

Cardinal Walter Kasper

Presentation by Msgr Paul McPartlan,
Acting Dean of the School of Theology and Religious Studies, CUA

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Your Eminences, Provost Morozowich, dear colleagues, students and friends:

It is no exaggeration to say that Johannes Quasten became a legend during his 30 years as a professor here at the Catholic University of America, from 1938 until his retirement in 1970. For his 70th birthday that year, he was presented with a festschrift edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and our dear departed colleague, Fr Patrick Granfield, who died just this year.¹ May he rest in peace. The festschrift contained no fewer than 81 contributions from distinguished scholars, such as Yves Congar, Jean Daniélou, Kurt Aland, Josef Jungmann, John Meyendorff, Joseph Ratzinger, and many others. Quasten’s field was patrology, and he is credited with establishing here in the States a new intellectual school of patristic study, based on the fundamental principle that ‘early Christianity cannot be intelligently understood without a thorough knowledge of classical culture’.²

One of his students, Walter Burghardt, said that prior to Quasten’s arrival in the USA, patristics had only been taught ‘on the side’, as an adjunct to something like dogma or Church history. Quasten gave it a whole new status, maintaining that contemporary Christian doctrine needs to be in vital contact with early Christian teaching, and that that in turn can only be understood in its cultural context. What he communicated, says Burghardt, ‘was a sense of history, an awareness


② Ibid., p.915.
of cultural contexts, a realisation that Christianity is inescapably involved in the ebb and flow of
time, that affirmations and doctrines and words and syllables cannot be interpreted in isolation from
their original milieu’. ³ Well, Bernard Lonergan once said that ‘the meaning of Vatican II was the
acknowledgement of history’. The documents of the council are replete with patristic references, and
the council’s final text was its great constitution, Gaudium et Spes, on the Church in the Modern
World. Yes, Quasten must surely be counted among those who prepared the way for Vatican II.

One of his core principles was: ‘You will achieve as much as you are willing to sacrifice
for’, ⁴ and he knew what that meant. He came to the USA, via Rome, having had his permission to
teach withdrawn in 1937 by the Nazi government in Germany. He made his name here in the USA,
but he was actually born in Germany, he gained his doctorate and his habilitation at the university
of Münster, where he then began to teach, and he spent a considerable portion of his early working
life in Rome, which gives three significant points of contact with our distinguished recipient of the
Quasten Award this year, Cardinal Walter Kasper, likewise born in Germany, likewise a teacher in
Münster, though not a student there, and likewise someone for whom Rome has been a major place
of work, though rather later in his career than it was for the young Quasten.

Cardinal Kasper was born in 1933 in Heidenheim, Germany. He studied Catholic theology
and philosophy at Tübingen and Munich, and was ordained priest in 1957. From 1957-58, he was
a parochial vicar in Stuttgart, and then he returned to Tübingen to study for his doctorate, which he
gained in 1961, followed by his own post-doctoral teaching degree or habilitation in 1964. In the
same year, he took up a professorship in Dogmatics at the University of Münster, becoming dean of

³ Ibid., p.916.

⁴ Ibid, p.915.
theological faculty there in 1969, and in 1970 he transferred to the University of Tübingen. During the 1980s, he served two five-year terms as a member of the International Theological Commission, coinciding exactly with the two terms served by our own Professor Carl Peter. In the Fall of 1983, he was a Visiting Professor here at CUA, and he returned to CUA in 1990 to deliver the Cardinal Dearden Lecture. The same year, he received an honorary doctorate from CUA, the first of a grand total of no less than 20 honorary doctorates at the last count.

In 1989, he was elected as Bishop of the Diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart, Germany’s fourth largest Catholic diocese, and he took as his motto “Veritatem in caritate”. In 1994, he was appointed as the co-chair of the international Lutheran-Catholic ecumenical dialogue. In 2001, he was created Cardinal Deacon of Ognissanti in Via Appia Nuova by Pope John Paul II, and very soon afterwards Pope John Paul nominated Cardinal Kasper as President of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity. He served in that office until his retirement in 2010, also being a member of various other Vatican dicasteries. In 2013, he was the oldest cardinal eligible to take part in the conclave that elected Pope Francis, having reached his 80th birthday just a few days after Pope Benedict announced his resignation.


Clearly, Cardinal Kasper’s field is dogmatic or systematic theology rather than patristics, but it seems to me that the same passion to understand the Church and the living of the Christian life
amid the realities of history and culture, ‘in the ebb and flow of time’, both in the early centuries and still today, drives Walter Kasper as it drove Johannes Quasten. It is precisely such an understanding, cultivated through long years of careful scholarship and matured through many years of episcopal ministry, caring for the people of God with a heartfelt concern for their welfare, that has enabled the dynamic and highly successful leadership that Cardinal Kasper has given to the Catholic Church’s ecumenical effort, particularly to Catholic-Lutheran, Catholic-Anglican, and Catholic-Orthodox relations, not to mention the Catholic Church’s relationship with the Jews. In 2004, he received an award at the Latin American Rabbinical Seminary in Buenos Aires for his lifetime dedication to the cause of reconciliation and understanding between Catholics and Jews.

There are so many rich strands to Cardinal Kasper’s work and writings over the years, but I dare to suggest that perhaps the subject dearest to his heart is indeed ecumenism. Over the years, he has devoted so much energy, intelligence and imagination to that cause, with the charity and boundless patience that it requires. Patience, he likes to say, is the little sister of hope. But ecumenism demands a holy impatience with our divisions, too, and he has certainly shown that. ‘In my opinion’, he said in 2009 to a gathering of Catholics and Lutherans, ‘the Churches are too wrapped up in their own concerns, their structures and their structural reforms. God knows these things are necessary. But they are not what makes the Church engaging or credible.’ On the same occasion, he explained what he holds most dear in ecumenism, namely ‘spiritual ecumenism’. It’s the ‘heart of ecumenism’, he said. It’s the ecumenism of ‘prayer and conversion’. ‘Without prayer and conversion there is no ecumenism. But with prayer and conversion, according to the word of Jesus, a great deal - indeed everything - is possible’. Cardinal Kasper once said that in the 20th century, horribly marked by war and innocent suffering, the ecumenical movement was ‘a light
shining in the darkness, and a powerful peace movement'. Among many other things, we salute him this afternoon for all that he has done to keep that light shining, for the good both of the Church and of the world at large.

Your Eminence, Catholic University and especially our School of Theology and Religious Studies is delighted and honored to welcome you back today, not only as an outstanding bishop-theologian, but also as a friend, and it is my very great pleasure, as acting dean of the school, to present you with this year’s Quasten Award for excellence in scholarship and leadership in religious studies. Congratulations!