



“SICUT CERVUS AD FONTES”

REFLECTIONS ON THE ACADEMIC LIFE OF THE ITI

(1) ITI's Primary Aim: the formation of a certain kind of person

You are here for a Life. The ITI is more about a life, than a place. It is not primarily a place, but a community of people engaged in a certain activity. It is a life of a learner of a particular kind: a learner who is in pursuit of the common good of truth, particularly theological truth: God who is the First Truth.

ITI is an institute dedicated to theological study—your theological study. Thus, you are the ITI, in the most decisive sense of the term. You must take responsibility for this life—if you do, ITI's life will be vibrant and rich; if you do not, our life will be poor. Your activity is the essential part.

(2) ITI's Motto: Sicut cervus ad fontes

Psalm 42:1-2

Verse 1 “As a deer longs for sources [אֲפִיקַי, channel, stream, brook; LXX, πηγὰς, spring, fountain, well; Vul, *fontes*] of water, so my soul longs for you, O God.”

Verse 2 “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and see the face of God?”

Two main ideas are expressed in these verses: (a) *Thirst*; (b) what one turns to if one is really thirsty and wants a long drink: *a Source*

- a. *Thirst*: this thirst is the innermost energy of what the Old and the New Testament calls the “heart.” It is the very center of the human person, where his deepest longings abide. St. Augustine’s maxim is pertinent here: “You have made us toward yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” The human heart is an aspect of the love of which the *Shema Israel* commandment speaks, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deut 6:4-5).

God’s life is a source and spring of water that quenches the desires, the thirsts of the human heart:

John 4:14 “Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a source [πηγή; Vul, *fons*] of water gushing up to eternal life.”

- b. *A Source*: **John 7:37-39** describes the source of living water present in Christ:

“On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and proclaimed,

‘If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, “Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.”’

Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.”

Where does this water flow for us? How do we come to stand “under the spout where the glory comes out”? Through the body Christ left us, his own body—the Church and the Eucharist—by which he is present to us. Life of the Church as a whole, therefore, is of primary importance for us.

Sacred Scripture, the Fathers, the Doctors, and the Saints express the particular, ecclesial aspect of thought and knowledge which is the goal of theology—faith seeking understanding. These are sources of theology in the strict sense that theology would not exist without them. The depth of these texts comes from being touched by God’s Spirit. They are sources both in the sense of a richness of meaning and in the sense of giving rise to active thought. In this manner, encountering the original texts of the great masters promotes a breadth of vision, depth of reflection, and, perhaps most importantly, an eye for quality. Furthermore, because of a heavy reliance on the Saints of the Church, quality is complimented with holiness and the connatural insight into theological matters that accompanies a heart burning with love. Such an eye for quality and holiness are necessary for critically distinguishing between dead ends and promising paths among the theological works of any time period, but especially today.

(3) Theological Realities Themselves

As the innermost energy of a truly human life, the thirst for the living God is at the same time the innermost energy of theology. Here lies for ITI the *first* and perhaps also the *most important principle*. It is a principle that moves us as theologians primarily toward *things themselves*—especially the reality of the living God.

What we want to place at the center of our work are the great theological questions themselves, the great themes and realities themselves, and not primarily the question, “What has so and so said about this or that question?” This point cannot be emphasized enough. In a long awaited letter of his beloved, a lover wants to hear her herself through her words, he wants to be touched by her love, by her very person. She herself stands at the center. It is similar in theology. What is at issue in this evocation of longing and love is not “spirituality” in a sense distinct from serious scholarly theology. What is at issue is the inner energy and passion—the thirst—of theology itself. In a truly living theology, the *thing itself* must stand in the foreground. “What do we have before us?” “What is the object of our study?” The question, “What has been said about the object?” stands in the background.

An academic culture which orients itself by the innermost thirsting of the human heart for the fullness of life presupposes the growth and maturity of a person. This growth can only occur freely, in the unfolding of the powers that lie in the students themselves. Here lies our *first goal*, which is expressed in the first part of our motto, *sicut cervus*. “As the deer longs and thirsts. . .” We want to take our pedagogic steps in such a way that we offer room and nourishment for the growth of persons for whom theology springs from the innermost thirst of their heart. Of course, the defining goal of an academic institution is learning. The thirst of the heart cannot be checked in examinations or graded. But theological thought without thirst for the living God is like the answer to a question one has never asked. We can only offer the framework and perhaps remove obstacles. But we depend upon the gift of thirst and longing which our students and professors freely place at the disposal of all of us for the obtainment of and participation in the common good of truth.

(4) Common Problem or Objection: The “Real” World?

“You live in an ivory tower, not in the real world.” It is true that when you study eating, it is less than eating. Eating is the real thing. It is better to eat than to study eating.

However, it is different with theology: to study the word of God is to be in *contact* with the living God himself; you come in contact with that which is most important in life. You may do things that are more necessary, but you will do nothing better than this. This is why we pray at the beginning (and end) of class—we are approaching God himself in his word.

This contact with the living God takes place when doing theology with fear of the Lord rooted in faith. “*Fear of the Lord* is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 1:7). To fear the Lord is to recognize his greatness. Theology is not simply one of the many academic pursuits. The very first disposition required of a student is to *realize* the *greatness of the subject-matter*. It is a greatness that must be *pondered* in its many manifestations. “Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart” (Luke 2:19), “His mother treasured all these things in her heart” (Luke 2:51). This reflective, contemplative spirit can never be left behind. It must *express itself* in continuous questioning and in a continuous readiness to pursue these questions more deeply.

(5) Activities that Define ITI’s Life: Reading and Discussion for the sake of Participating in the Common Good of Truth

As stated, ITI’s *first goal* is to take our pedagogic steps in such a way that we offer room and nourishment for the growth of persons for whom theology springs from the innermost thirst of their heart. Which ‘pedagogic steps’ do we take? What are the activities that define ITI’s life?

a. *Reading.*

ITI’s curriculum has its point of departure in the primary sources (“*ad fontes*”) written by the great masters of the theological tradition, from Scripture and the Fathers of the Church to the present age. Texts have been carefully selected from the greatest authors and saints of both the East and West, seeking in this way to “breathe with both lungs of the Church.” The Greek Fathers and St. Thomas Aquinas are particularly important points of reference.

There is an old proverb: “You can lead a horse to the water, but you cannot make him drink.” We can set the living water of the writings of the great masters within your reach, but you are the one who will have to drink from these sources. Unless you drink, nothing will happen. A cow could eat grass all day, but if it did not ruminate, if it did not re-chew what it has taken in, it would starve. It is similar with reading the great masters. You have to re-read them; you have to, as it were, ruminate in a *spirit of contemplation*. If you read with genuine thirst and genuine hunger, you will read in this way.

Texts are teachers. Seek a ‘conversion’: consider reading as the most precious activity, the most important pedagogical event. Here you are taught by the philosophical and theological Masters themselves. You receive a teaching better than any we would be able to provide for you. ITI has the conviction that there is a better way of teaching and studying theology, namely, a discipleship to the great masters acquired by the careful reading under the guidance of the professor. (In their professors, students have a living model of what such discipleship consists in. The often difficult texts are opened up by ITI faculty so that students by and by become better readers of them.)

However, to be taught by texts we first need to learn how to read them successfully. Learned readers ask questions of each text they read. We too, as readers learning how to read, must ask “why is the author writing this text?” “What is the content of his text?” and “How is he communicating this content?” One reads a text with accuracy and depth when she analyzes how the parts of a text fit together to form one whole. A good reader is attentive to the structure of the text and the author’s ordering of his ideas and arguments.

b. *Discussion.*

It is essential that you bring your own questions to class. There is nothing quite as pointless as the answer to a question one has not asked. If I say, “four,” you will wonder what I mean. If I say, “What is two and two?” and then I say, “four,” it makes sense to you. This is why it is so important for you to bring your questions with you to class and to raise them in class. Aristotle argues in favor of questions becoming truly questions for those who learn.

“For those who wish to get clear of difficulties it is advantageous to state the difficulties well; for the subsequent free play of thought implies the solution of the previous difficulties, and it is not possible to untie a knot which one does not know. But the difficulty of our thinking points to a knot in the object; for in so far as our thought is in difficulties, it is in like case with those who are tied up; for in either case it is impossible to go forward. Therefore one should have surveyed all the difficulties beforehand, both for the reasons we

have stated and because people who inquire without first stating the difficulties are like those who do not know where they have to go; besides, a man does not otherwise know even whether he has found what he is looking for or not; for the end is not clear to such a man, while to him who has first discussed the difficulties it is clear. Further, he who has heard all the contending arguments, as if they were the parties to a case, must be in a better position for judging.” (*Metaphysics* 3.1.)

Discussing in class not only includes raising questions, but also examining what is being said by others, attempting to argue from principles to conclusions, and making judgments about conclusions in the light of first principles. Plato describes the pedagogical event as follows:

“It is only when all these things, names and definitions, visual and other sensations, are rubbed together and subjected to tests in which questions and answers are exchanged in good faith and without malice that finally, when human capacity is stretched to its limit, a spark of understanding and intelligence flashes out and illuminates the subject at issue.” (*Letter* 7, 344).

Class Discussion as a Public-Political Event linked to the Common Good of Knowledge of Truth

What is a common good? A common good is a good in which many persons can share at the same time without in any way decreasing or dividing it. It has four marks: eminent communicability, superabundance, incommensurability, and the part-whole relation. On the nature of the common good St. Augustine wrote: “the possession of goodness is by no means diminished by being shared with a partner either permanent or temporarily assumed; on the contrary, the possession of goodness is increased in proportion to the concord and charity of each of those who share it.” (*De Civitate Dei*, 15.5)

Examples. Is a wedding cake a common good? It would appear to be so, since it is a good which can be shared by all the people at the wedding. However, it is quickly realized that the bride’s piece of cake is not the bridegroom’s piece and vice-versa. Moreover, a common good is a good which does not decrease nor can be divided when many partake in it, yet our wedding cake is diminished and divided with each consumed piece. Therefore, it is not fully a common good.

Is peace in the family or in the State a common good? Let us think through peace in the family. Wife, husband, and children all contribute to building up peace in their family. Does the wife’s participation in the peace of the family decrease or divide the husband’s participation? No, it does not. On the contrary, as St. Augustine stated, the possession of the common good of peace is increased in proportion to each

of those who share it. Peace in a family is a common good—many can partake in it and it does not decrease.

Jesus and the Common Good. “Whoever seeks to keep his life as a possession will lose it; whoever loses it will give life to it.” (Luke 17:33) This apparent paradox can be solved by seeing that Jesus is contrasting two kinds of goods, namely, a private good and a common good. At a basic level, Jesus’ maxim is concerned with the “I” – “Thou” or “me” – “we” relationship. Let us put this concern in a form of a question: “How do I as an individual person (“me”) relate to my community (“we) and my God (“Thou”)? Or put differently, “how does my own individual good relate to the common good of my community or to God who is the greatest common good?” In his maxim, Jesus answers these questions for us: “choose to seek the common good of the community by sacrificing your own individual goods”; or, “sacrifice your own private goods for the sake of participating in the common good.” Clement of Rome, commenting on the importance of the virtue of humility for a Christian, recapitulates Jesus’ teaching: “The more he seems to be superior to others, the more humble-minded ought he to be, and to seek the common good for all, and not his own.”¹

Primacy or Priority of the Common Good. However, we must ask ourselves, why? For what benefit or advantage? Do I have to give up all my own goods to my community? Do I have to sacrifice everything for someone else’s gain? Do I have to be a quasi-martyr to my community and my God? Jesus would answer in the negative to each of these questions. Why would his answer be a resounding “no”? First, because the genuine common good of the “we”—for instance, of the community—is a *greater good* than your own individual goods. Secondly, since you are part of the community, you, too, participate in the good of the community. In this manner, this common good is also *your own good*. In other words, by sacrificing something of lesser significance (i.e., your own individual, private good), you are gaining something much greater (i.e., participation in a common good). The payoff is remarkable! This prompted the first century rhetorician and historian Valerius Maximus to say of the Romans, “they preferred to be poor in a rich empire than to be rich in a poor empire.”² St. Paul teaches the same: “We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything” (2 Corinthians 6:8-10). St. John Chrysostom underscores this key point: act “in everything for the common good, and not seeking our own . . . one [truly] seeks one’s own good when one looks to that of one’s neighbor, for what is their good is ours.”³ Thus, a common good is *not* an alien good that is opposed to the good of the person, but rather as John Paul II explains, “the common good, by its very nature, both unites individual persons and ensures the true good of each . . . the more

¹ Clement of Rome, *1 Clement* 48:6.

² Quoted in De Koninck, “Primacy of the Common Good Against the Personalists,” edited and translated by Ralph McInerny (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 83.

³ St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on John*, 15:3 (59.101).

common the good, the more properly one's own it will also be: mine, yours, ours.”⁴ This is the logic of Jesus' maxim. By seeking the common good of your family or community, or by seeking God himself who is the greatest common good, above and beyond your own individual goods, you are seeking a greater good for yourself which leads to your own fulfillment and satisfaction as a person. This logic is probably what moved St. John Chrysostom to write, “It is not possible for a person to be saved who has not looked to the common good.”⁵ Likewise with St. Augustine: “Charity, about which it is written that it does not seek its own (1 Corinthians 13:6), is understood in this way: it places the common before the private, not the private before the common.”⁶ We can summarize the meaning of Jesus' maxim in the following manner: in relation to an authentic common good, one receives by giving.⁷ This helps us make better sense of another maxim of Jesus': “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). Put simply, in relation to an authentic common good, let the “me” (or my own private good) become the servant of the “we” (or the common good of a community) for the sake of the fulfillment of “us” (both “me” and “we”). This is the power of the “we” united by a genuine common good.

The Practicality of Jesus' Maxim: Choosing the Common Good. If we desire to live according to Jesus' maxim, if we desire give life to our life, if we desire to love, then we need to choose the common good over and above our private goods. How can this be accomplished? Let us look at an example.

Students at a University—for instance, students at the ITI—consciously seek together the common good of knowledge of the truth (*action #1, seek an authentic common good consciously together with others*). Each individual student chooses to forsake a manifold number of private goods such as money, time, sleep, development of personal talents and interests, and private opinions, for the sake of this common good (*action #2, subordinate yourself to that good for the sake of others*). The students respectively subordinate themselves one to the other, and to their professors, to enable all of the student body to share knowledge of the truth (*action #3, subordinate yourself to others for the sake of that good*). The result: (a) the common good of knowledge of the truth is a greater good than the private goods which were given up by each student. (b) Although each student gave up some of their private goods, each and every one of them *personally* possessed the common good of knowledge in which each is a part as their own personal good. Thus, each student is more pleased and satisfied as a result.

⁴ John Paul II, *Letter to Families*, §10.

⁵ St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew*, 77.6 (58.710). He writes elsewhere: “Since they showed zeal and did all things for the common good, they reached heaven. For nothing is as pleasing to God as living for the common good.” *Homilies on Matthew*, 78.2 (58.714). See also his *Homilies on John*, 15:3 (59.101).

⁶ St. Augustine, *Epistola* 211.

⁷ See Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50*, translated by Christine M. Thomas (Hermeneia Series, ed. H. Koester; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 367.

The nature of the common good becomes evident by observing what happens when a truly common good is loved as a private good. When the end one pursues in connection with a common good is a private good, that private good tends by an inevitable logic to displace the common good. One stops loving the common good. This displacement is expressed by St. Augustine:

. . . [T]hey love their [view]—not because it is true but because it is theirs. Otherwise they could equally love another true view, as I love what they say when what they say is true—not because it is theirs but because it is true, and therefore not theirs but true. And if they love a view because it is true, it is already both theirs and mine, since it belongs in common to all lovers of the truth. . . . And therefore, O Lord, your judgments should be feared, because your truth is neither mine nor his nor anyone else's, but it belongs to all of us whom you publicly call to its communion, warning us terribly not to have it in private, so as not to be deprived of it. For anyone who claims as proper to himself what you have given to all to enjoy, and wants to be his own what belongs to all, is driven away from what is common to his own—that is, from truth to the lie. For the one who speaks the lie speaks out of his own. (St. Augustine, *Confessiones*, 12.25.34; emphasis added; for another example see St. Thomas, *De Virtutibus*, 2.2 c)

(*Discussion and the Common Good of Truth, continued.*) The question of the common good is linked to our activity of discussion. Our class discussion is a public and political event that concerns a great common good—the common good of truth, of God's truth as pursued by theology. Because class discussion is linked with a common good there is, on the one hand a *great seriousness* about this event—that is why we call each other by our last names rather than by our first names (e.g., Ms. Harrison, Mr. Mijhad). On the other hand, there is a *great joy and festivity* to our discussion because it helps us participate in the truth to a greater degree and this results in joy. Clothing is telling here—we ought to dress for a public/political event that has a certain seriousness and festivity about it.

The Common Good and Love

A common good has a unique power to *unify*. It is able to lift us out of the narrow circle of our private life in which we tend to live and widens our heart for the great whole in which we live, ultimately the Body of Christ. The nobility of a great common good, Jesus Christ himself in his person, can motivate persons to make the necessary sacrifices. This is the effect of a true common good: from the human heart, from the freedom of the person, the common good releases energies of love, of devotion, of courage, of sacrifice, that go far beyond what individual people can do by themselves.

When you feel down in your studies, when their immediate profit for you is not clear to you, then stop and remember the common good of truth that you are pursuing—let the greatness of this good sink into your heart and move you to sacrificial love. You can also remind others when you see that others are in difficulty. For awakening love, there is nothing more effective than looking at the good, than touching the good with one's heart, in particular the common good. This is *our hope* at the ITI.

A Note on Lecturing. As professors, we are truly professors who must teach with a certain authority in the name of the Church what belongs, and what does not belong, to the faith of the Church. Whatever pedagogical means we choose, this magisterial function must be preserved. We should pass on (*traditio*) this faith to our students.

According to the pre-given nature of the ITI, we have always held and continue to hold the conviction that there is a better way of teaching and studying theology, namely, a discipleship to the great masters acquired by careful reading and active discussion under the guidance of a professor. Active involvement of the students in a give and take of questions and answers is an essential part of this approach, but it does not exclude elements of the lecture.

As companions with all of you in the search for truth, each professor must be skilled in various pedagogies with the ability to adapt them to the circumstances of teaching, that is, the type of material being taught, the nature of the course (a seminar, an instruction course, or skills class), to your various states as students, and to the unique qualities of each professor's temperament and background.

We are on a journey and can improve our pedagogy in light of the common good of ITI. The pre-given nature of ITI from its founding can be seen as an invitation to understand this pedagogy of active reading and discussion better and to experiment with it so as to make more and more effective use of it for teaching the truths of the Catholic faith.

The Purpose of our Pedagogy. The purpose of ITI's pedagogy—which includes primarily active reading and discussion, as well as elements of lecturing—is to further the growth of a person for whom theology springs from the desire for happiness, the desire for the universal or infinite good (*sicut cervus*), a person in whom the sources of the great masters of theology, and the *truths of faith* revealed by the Word incarnate which have been handed down (*traditio*) to us through his body, the Church, are present in a living manner as sources (*ad fontes*).

(6) Theology as highest intellectual virtue requires activity

Why are reading and discussion so important?

Reading and discussion play an important role in the study of theology qua theology. If the ultimate goal is that we understand the truths of the faith more deeply, then our own act of understanding must be awakened. Reading and discussion awaken our act of understanding. In other words, these two activities are great aids in the formation of a certain kind of person who possesses the intellectual virtue of theology or wisdom.

Because it is the highest science, theology or wisdom is also the highest intellectual virtue (see St. Thomas *Summa Theologiae*, II-IIae, q. 45, a. 2). Wisdom is gained through contemplative and active theological study when one can pronounce right judgment about Divine things. The intellectual virtue of theology—which aims at the knowledge of Divine things—is acquired only through the *activity* of reading and discussion (both include reflection/contemplation, questioning, examining, and attempting to pass through the way to the conclusion, through the argument from self-evident principles or articles of faith).

Therefore, we want our students to have the occasion for growing in the virtues of careful, critical reading and thinking, which raises questions and responsibly pursues them to the end. It is vital that they fully prepare the texts for each class and that sufficient room is given to student discussion to further the virtues of active and responsible reading and thinking. The experience of a serious discussion which pursues truth, not power, requires a discussion in which students call each other to responsible thought, to transforming opinions into knowledge of the truth.

(7) Background: Life of Charity Together

Not only is wisdom obtained through the intellectual virtue of theology, but it is also obtained through a certain *connaturality* with Divine things (see St. Thomas *Summa Theologiae*, II-IIae, q. 45, a. 2). Such a connaturality to judge aright about Divine things, i.e., wisdom, is generated by the gift of the Holy Spirit. Dionysius the Areopagite in *The Divine Names*, 2 says that the theologian must not only develop the intellectual virtue of theology, but he must also “suffer (*pati*) the divine.” This suffering with or connaturality with the divine is a *fruit of love* because it unites us with God. This divine love is ecstatic (see Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 4.19) and therefore does not allow those touched by it to belong to themselves but only to those they love: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives within me” (Gal 2:20).

Psalm 85:10 “Steadfast love and truth will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss.”

ITI is more about a life, than a place. It is a life of a learner of a particular kind: a learner who is in pursuit of the common good of truth, particularly theological truth: God who is the First Truth. Therefore, at the ITI theology and sanctity, study and charity, virtue and gift all rise together to embrace our covenant God. As our 7th *Principle* states, “Theology stands under the rule of the new commandment and exists for the sake of union with the One whose love for us we come more deeply to understand.”