



INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL INSTITUTE

ITI's Point of Reference: The longing for the fullness of life, the thirst for the living God

“Sicut cervus ad fontes,”

“As a deer longs for sources of water, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and see the face of God?” (Psalm 42:2-3)

Purpose of Studies at the ITI and the Inner Unity of Theology

The purpose of study at the ITI is no different from the purpose of theology itself: to enter ever more deeply into the reality of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as this mystery is revealed to us through the Incarnate Word. Receiving this divine truth humbly, we seek to make it the center of our life and thought, through disciplined study of the word of God and its classic exponents, in a context of vigorous discussion and, above all, prayer.

As a pursuit of God Himself, the study of theology is not a means to some further end; it is a foretaste, limited but precious, of the beatific vision, the ultimate end and fulfillment of man. For this reason, courses in the main degree programs are not designed in response to current fashions or particular careers, but rather according to perennial truths, in a sequence determined by their inner relationships. To speak of *perennial* truths is to speak of truths which out of their very profundity are alive and brimming with relevance at all times, in all places including our own time. While certain degree programs focus on particular questions or problems of contemporary society, the basic orientation to the divine truth loved and known for its own sake remains as the guiding principle of our life and efforts.

Thus, the ITI studies Catholic theology as a unified whole. Within that whole, particular additional attention is devoted to the theme of marriage and the family. We are convinced that there is a deep unity in the whole theological tradition from the beginning to the present, and we have this confidence because the Holy Spirit remains with the Church. Such a viewpoint, however, is not the prevailing perspective, as our Grand Chancellor, Christoph Cardinal Schönborn, states: “The teaching of theology has largely become a kind of encyclopedia of approaches, of models, of authors, which lacks coherence and an organic structure. At the end of theology, students have bits and pieces of their faith, without a coherent, global view... The real situation of theology today is that of poverty, a lack of greatness, a lack of great inspiration.” Foregoing premature specialization, therefore, the ITI seeks to unfold theology out of its inner unity, in conformity with its essence as a scientific reflection of the faith of the Church. The courses are ordered around the central mysteries of the faith—the Trinity, the Incarnation, grace, justification, the Church, etc.—and all particular questions are addressed in the light of these central mysteries.

Because of this the ITI is able to provide a much needed solid theological formation for Catholic leaders, lay and clergy, to achieve critical judgment in our culture and the capacity to contribute to the new evangelization, which is especially needed in the area of marriage and the family. Hence, our purpose, as expressed in the first part of our motto, *sicut cervus*, “As the deer longs and thirsts. . .”, 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 for the fullness of life. This is the academic culture which we hope to cultivate: our aim is the growth of a person who has matured in a certain manner, namely, a person in whose heart the great sources of theology are present and can flow in a living manner toward the living God. In short, the most important thing for us is a heart formed in a certain way.

The Pedagogical Principles of the ITI

“Ad Fontes” – The Study of Primary Sources

The curricula of our various programs have their point of departure in the primary sources (“*ad fontes*”) written by the great masters of the theological tradition, from 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.

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 is necessary for critically distinguishing between dead ends and

promising paths among the theological works of any time period, but especially today: the plurality of opinions that currently abounds can lead to wasted time and, worse still, misled minds if one is not in possession of a critical eye, steeped in the truth contemplated and lived by the masters of the theological tradition. As our Grand Chancellor, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, states: a person “who has gotten the taste of a great master will be able to discern what is good food, and what is fast food. Much of what is on the theological market is fast food, even junk food.”

The texts of the masters are neither fast nor are they junk. They contain untold treasures but offer them only to those who have the love and patience to remain with them beyond a first glance. Just as water continues to flow from a source, so also does the intellectual wealth in the great sources of theology continue to unfold itself; and this wealth becomes the source of active thought that raises questions freely and widely—they build themselves a presence in memory and this presence continues to operate in one’s heart in a living fashion. Their texts call for clarifying questions and drive the flow of thought deeper and deeper. The sources are truly sources, namely, origin and stimulus for active thought.

The great masters lead faculty and students most directly to the realities discussed in theology, above all God himself. They enable us to place at the center of our work the great questions themselves, the great themes themselves, and not primarily the question, “What has so and so said about this or that question?” There is much at stake here, indeed the inner energy and passion of theology itself. In a truly living theology, the thing itself—especially the living God—must stand in the foreground. Again, Cardinal Schönborn illustrates well this principle of the ITI: “The first interest in theology has to be a common look at the object. It is not of primary interest what this or that theologian has said about Christ: rather, the passion in theology has to be to know Christ Himself, to approach His mystery, to approach Christ. Theology is a means to approach reality itself.” In these manifold ways, the great masters of theology bring the flowing source of life into sight and into the heart for those willing to converse with them, to walk with them, to pray with them.

Looking to the voices of the past finds its completion in bringing these voices into the present conversation. The voices of the masters are not dead voices, the sources have not run dry. They continue to be life giving and by turning to them we find ourselves caught up in their transforming power: if a thirst for God truly shapes our heart, we will discover welling up within us a passionate love for our contemporary problematic, a love that impels us to take our place in the present day renewal of the Church and the world. A new springtime is at hand within Christendom and the new life blossoming into renewal is one drawn from the sources. This is the testimony of Second Vatican Council, the promise of St. John Paul II: “The words of the Council are clear: the [conciliar] Fathers saw that it is fundamental for the adequate formation of the clergy and of Christian youth that it preserve a close link with the cultural heritage of the past, and in particular with the thought of St. Thomas; and that this, in the long run, is a necessary condition for the longed-for renewal of the Church.”

Active Questioning and Discussion

Our students should work through these sources in a discussion that flows as freely and openly as possible. Discussion is of paramount importance since it deeply effects the formation of a certain kind of person—it fosters a permanent disposition to act well, that is, it fosters virtue. Virtue is gained only through activity and with respect to the virtues of the intellectual life this involves the activity of asking, examining, attempting to argue from principles, etc. We want our students to have the occasion for growing in the virtues of careful, searching, responsible reading and thinking, which raises questions and pursues them to the end. In the much used system of lectures and exams that test memorization of the lectures what is it that is acquired as a virtue? Capacity for actual thought and for critical reflection is what stands in the foreground for us. These virtues are not simply a natural endowment of intelligent people, but they must slowly grow through activity. It is of utmost importance that the students become the protagonists of their own education. It is vital that they truly 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 free and responsible play of thought, of raising questions and pursuing inquiries—while being faithful to the faith and the pastoral office of the Catholic Church—is what we hold of great value here at the ITI. The experience of a serious discussion which pursues truth, not power, a discussion in which all become aware of truth as a common good, is of the greatest importance. This experience requires a discussion in which students call each other to responsible thought, to transforming opinions into knowledge. Many are used to considering classes, whether lectures or seminars, the privileged place of learning. At the ITI, by contrast, the reading of the sources is to become more and more this privileged place. Classes are to assume more and more the role of helping this privileged place.

Specific Questions on the ITI

ITI and the Truth of the Matter – The ITI is primarily concerned with the question: “What is the truth of the matter?” Only secondarily are we interested in what a particular author thought about a specific subject. More than simply recalling what is said by a given author, we are primarily concerned with judging whether what is said is true or not. Hence, the ITI is interested in forming students to think and make judgments in regards to what is the truth of the matter. For this reason, the ITI offers a vigorous philosophical formation which culminates in a robust theological formation.

ITI and Sacred Scripture – The Second Vatican Council boldly proclaimed that the inspired Word of God is “the very soul of sacred theology” (*Dei Verbum*, 24). It is precisely from the source of Scripture that the living water flows which both stills and inflames thirst for the living God. Thus, Scripture as the Church receives it stands at the center of the curriculum. All other courses are ordered to unfolding its meaning. Because ITI is committed to the Word of God as the foundation and soul of all theology, Scripture is reverently studied in every semester of our program. In order to fully interpret the meaning of Scripture, historical-critical investigations play a helpful and necessary role. Such

investigations, however, find their inner completion only in the properly theological question, “What is the truth of the matter?” Precisely this question always holds the primacy of place at the ITI.

ITI and the Saints of the Church – At the ITI we believe in the profound unity between theology and sanctity. The ITI holds that the Saints are the true theologians. No person understands God and His revelation better than the Saints. To come into contact with a Saint—for instance through his or her writings—is to come in contact with someone who has entered into the depth of the mysteries of revelation not only by way of intellectual learning, but also through experience—a lived faith in the living God. They have a first-hand, almost experiential knowledge of the things of God, that is, the revealed realities that scientific theology tries to understand.

As our Grand Chancellor Christoph Cardinal Schönborn states, “The saints are the true theologians. If we consider what theology truly is, we must consider what St. Thomas Aquinas says about connaturality to the object . . . [We must] grow in a certain connaturality with the object. That means he learns not only by intellect, but by experience. St. Thomas speaks, with Dionysius the Areopagite, about the *patri divina*—not just to approach the things of God, the reality of God, but to *suffer* it, to be transformed by the object. This is the meaning of connaturality with what we study: familiarity with it. The best formation comes when we become familiar with Christ, when the Holy Spirit leads our thoughts and our heart, and grace transforms our habits. Then we judge theologically, not only by reason, but by the heart. We make a judgment not only through intellectual knowledge, but through a spiritual intuition about what is right and what is wrong. It is vital during theological studies, then, to read the saints. Isn’t it true that only great intellectual capacity joined with true sanctity makes the true theologian?”

Thus, the vision of those who know about the divine from their own experience is certainly one of the great sources of inspiration for theology. This is why we pay special attention to the reading of the saints, even if they were not theologians in the academic sense.

ITI and the Church Fathers from East and West – The curricula of ITI’s degree programs have their point of departure the primary sources written by the great masters and saints of the theological tradition. This especially concerns an encounter with the original texts of the Church Fathers. It draws on the theological tradition of the East as well as of the West, seeking in this way to “breathe with both lungs of the Church.” (St. John Paul II) The Fathers of the Church have a great importance since “by reason of the office assigned to them by God in the Church, they are distinguished by a certain subtle insight into heavenly things and by a marvelous keenness of intellect, which enables them to penetrate to the very innermost meaning of the divine word and bring to light all that can help to elucidate the teaching of Christ and promote holiness of life.” (Pope Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 28)

ITI and St. Thomas Aquinas –The Saints are those *par excellence* who assist us understanding God and His self-Revelation in Scripture. With this in mind, ITI grants a unique dedication to St. Thomas Aquinas the “principal Doctor of the Church” (Pope Paul VI), whose chief labor was to reverently understand the inspired Word of God and to humbly open up its inexhaustible wealth of truth contained therein. Regarding this labor—in which he drew upon a wealth of resources—he is highly regarded among the most brilliant of Saints. He is our “guide and model for theological studies” (St. John Paul II). With Pope Paul VI we are in full agreement that the teaching of St. Thomas “is a most efficacious instrument not only for safeguarding the foundations of the faith, but also in gaining the fruits of healthy progress with profit and security.”

The Grand Chancellor of the ITI, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, has remarked in his sermon for the inauguration of the ITI that “Thomas Aquinas is a holy theologian. He is not holy despite his theology, but was pronounced holy *as* a theologian . . . Among these saints there are also holy thinkers and theologians. Thomas Aquinas is considered the greatest of them . . . The Church has seen a reflection of the image of Christ in the work of Thomas Aquinas. Holy theology! Holy Thought! The Church confesses that this is possible, and she points to Thomas to show how this is possible . . . His theology itself is holy, and this means that the mystery of the cross shines in it. . . . Thomas was a holy theologian, because he did theology, not to please others, not to become famous, not to be interesting, not to develop “his own original point of view” and then defend it obstinately, but because his theology flowed from an unconditional surrender to the truth, which is Christ . . . Selfless surrender to truth—in this selflessness of Thomas’s theology one can see the light of the wisdom of the cross. He selflessly communicates the light of truth. He selflessly allows himself to be penetrated by the light of truth.”

The major presence of St. Thomas at the ITI is exemplary for a Catholic program of theology. We are accomplishing exactly what the Church has so strongly recommended from Leo XIII to Vatican II and John Paul II. We are, furthermore, fulfilling our own specific mission of breathing with both lungs of the Church, for St. Thomas brings together the writings of great saints and thinkers from both the East and West.

ITI and Magisterial Texts – The ITI studies theology within the very heart of the Catholic Church. We are faithful in all respects to the teaching of the Magisterium. The majority of the most important papal encyclicals and many conciliar documents, especially of Vatican II, are appointed to be read in different courses. This is absolutely essential, given the role of authority in theology and the intended function of these magisterial documents—which is precisely to pass on the truth without distortion, and to settle disputed questions. Thus, studying key magisterial documents is second in importance only to the study of Scripture itself. Of particular interest, are the writings of St. John Paul II.