

Inauguration Address – October 16, 2011

Archbishop Schnurr, Father Abbot, Members of the Board of Trustees, Honored guests, Monsignori and Fathers, graduates, family and friends. I would first like to congratulate our graduates, clergy and laity, on their tremendous achievement. I want to thank them for all the energy, enthusiasm, and creativity they have brought to this community of the Athenaeum and Mount St. Mary's Seminary. I also have a deep sense of gratitude to His Grace, the Archbishop of Cincinnati, for his confidence and trust in appointing me to the office of President and Rector. I ask all of you, my colleagues, family, friends, faculty, staff, seminarians and students to pray for me as I take up this new assignment.

We all know that the world is usually in crisis and today is not an exception. It is tempting to see this crisis in terms of wars, natural disasters, economic turmoil, and the phenomenon of political, social and cultural upheaval. However, I would suggest that there is a more fundamental and serious crisis in our world today. This crisis is part of a titanic struggle of ideas. At stake is the heart, the mind, the soul and the future of man and human society. We are entering into a monumental age, not an age of politics, or diplomacy, or wars, or empire building, but an age of ideas about the human person and human society. There are, it seems to me, two fundamental concepts: man as a secular being, self actualizing and the source and proponent of all moral norms, or man as a fundamentally transcendent being, created and drawn to an ultimate good outside himself but fundamental to his being and fulfillment. This then forms the meeting place for our modern debate: the place of faith and religion in the life of man and therefore in human society. A question that is surely of relevance in an institution like this and for people such as ourselves.

In reading Pope Benedict's address to the British Parliament in Westminster Hall, September 17, 2010, and the German Bundesrat in September of this year (2011), I was amazed at how succinctly he described this great modern crisis, the relationship of religion, politics, power and law. As a German, speaking to his countrymen, he could be, and was, clear and direct about the consequences of ignoring the deeper issues of our age.

He was one of the few who could reflect on the consequences of being unaware and unprepared for a diminishment of all that is truly human in the structures of any given society. His intensity and his analysis were dramatic as he reminded the parliament that, *“‘Without justice – what else is the State but a great band of robbers?’...We Germans know from our own experience that these words are no empty specter. We have seen how power became divorced from right, how power opposed right and crushed it, so the State became an instrument for destroying right- a highly organized band of robbers, capable of threatening the whole world and driving it to the edge of the abyss.”*

In Britain the Pope alluded to the relationship between religion, conscience, power, and the state when he recalled the courageous statesman and scholar Sir Thomas More. In Westminster Hall, a place where the state and the law conspired to convict an innocent and honest man of conscience, the Holy Father said: *“I recall the figure of Saint Thomas More, who is admired by believers and non-believers alike for the integrity with which he followed his conscience, even at the cost of displeasing the sovereign whose “good servant” he was, because he chose to serve God first. The dilemma which faced More in those difficult times, the perennial question of the relationship between what is owed to Caesar and what is owed to God, allows me the opportunity to reflect with you briefly on the proper place of religious belief within the political process.”*

Indeed, we must ask about the proper place of religion in society as a whole. Every society, Pope Benedict suggests, has to determine the authority by which that society is ordered and by which moral dilemmas are resolved. The Pope rightly proposes that to leave the identification, development, and maintenance of moral principles to nothing more solid than social consensus, we in fact, as was his experience in Germany, leave human society open to the ravishes wrought by human nature alone. This would be a very fragile basis for promoting moral principles. The Pope states the issue: *“The central question at issue, then, is this: where is the ethical foundation for political choices to be found?”* The underlying prejudice that the Holy Father is reacting to is that secularism alone, removed from the conscience of religion, is adequate for human progress and

fulfillment. The colossal failure of these propositions in the past has brought into focus the Holy Father's warning to the German people that we are once again on the precipice.

At the root of this question is the identity of the human person: It is the contrast between the vision of man and human society as purely secular; and a vision of man and society as transcendent and incarnational. These deeper issues have even now drawn concern and moved the American Bishops' Conference to establish a task force on religious freedom in our own country in our own day.

The struggle to determine the nature and character of the human person and form of human society is a struggle for the human soul itself. Can there be a greater issue at stake? We here, at the Athenaeum – Mount St. Mary's Seminary must turn our attention and resources towards this great debate, to the great struggle of ideas concerning the nature of man, and the nature of human and civil society. Because we are Catholics, which gives us a beautiful vision of man and society, and because we are intimately and essentially engaged in the world, we cannot escape or avoid this debate. In fact, we willingly engage in the conversation. We engage and do not retreat; we seek to transform not conform; and we deliberately evangelize in order to humanize. We refuse to withdraw from any aspect of human life and society.

The concern that somehow Christianity, and Catholicism in particular, may be forced from the town square, and that Catholics may begin to accept a social and civic contract that deprives that society of the essential voice, the very breath of the life of faith, has certainly played a role in the planning and reflection that I and the staff of the Seminary, Lay Ministry, and Special Studies programs have undertaken in grappling with the future direction of this place of education and leadership within the Archdiocese, the Province of Ohio and the Church in America.

We are not without allies in holding our position that the faith has a role in the public square. Fortunately, even within the secular philosophical system there are stirrings of some anxiety and dissent. The disorder, confusion and disintegration of social and

political structures moved one of the great modern philosophical architects of western secularism, Jürgen Habermas, to turn to the, then fellow European intellectual, Joseph Ratzinger, and ask what secularism could learn from the ancient faith about building a cohesive and just society. The realization that secularism alone, removed from the heart and beauty of religious faith, is empty, functional and pulls apart a society has begun to gnaw at the consciences of those open to an unbiased analysis of political and social problems.

At a Munich colloquium in 2004 Habermas lamented the fact that secularism was, in fact, fracturing the human bonds necessary to sustain any kind of common life. Cardinal Ratzinger responded that the ancient faith discovered and knows that there must be a common focus beyond the present existential experience that draws humanity together toward something beyond itself. Even though Habermas kept a safe distance from Christianity, he has become a proponent of giving Christianity a significant place within the new Europe. Many of his colleagues were angry with him but none have found any other solution to the problems addressed by the Cardinal. Meanwhile the prejudice against religion and faith as necessary elements of a stable and just society continues to unravel the fabric of western society and has moved both the Holy Father and the American Bishops to become even more outspoken and more active in the cause of human dignity and human freedom.

Cardinal Ratzinger's response articulated clearly a most complex insight. What/Who is the focus beyond ourselves that makes a common life possible and gives a deeper meaning to life, to our existence, than merely the Self? The search for a resolution of today's secular problem moves us away from an existential analysis into a deeper truth that God is that focus that is beyond. This truth of the need for something beyond ourselves leads us to affirm the existence of a God whom we know to be a vast and transcendent presence that encompasses the entire cosmos.¹

¹ We know that modern physics is raising many of the deeper questions of modern man and opening up many of the questions that pertain to the survival and meaning of life itself. As this new age of science peels back the layers of observable and theoretical phenomena of our natural home in time and space, it becomes clear that the faith life and wisdom of the Catholic Church has approached these very same

Education and leadership are critical elements of the mission of the Seminary and Athenaeum and it is my intention to work to strengthen and expand this mission. However, we cannot be content in seeing our program of education as merely functional, practical, and mechanical in preparing people to do the tasks of priesthood and ministry well. Certainly these are components of an administrative task but, alone, they do not serve the needs of the modern Church. In fact, to approach all the issues of human society as administrative and organizational problems is the foundation of the modern secular society whose philosophical presumption is that the “self-creating” human person is fully competent to create a civil order on the basis of ideologies instead of values or virtues - a process that often leads to political systems that denigrate human freedom and dignity. Our task is to form, prepare, and provide the intellectual and creative tools allowing our students to engaging in the work of evangelization, transformation, and bringing about the reign of God.

When we speak of education and leadership, we mean a movement toward these deep realities of human existence as meaningful and life giving. Our institution must be willing to have a big vision; we must be willing to embrace the great tasks; we must be willing to pull up anchor and set off on the great adventure of faith and wisdom into the heart of God as he is in his universe and in his Church. Without the adventures of heart and mind, there is no evangelization and there is no deep and abiding turning away from the nihilism of modern society, no turning toward the mystery of origin and destiny, a mystery that alone can give life an enduring and compelling meaning. Our mission is to have our students enter into the mystery of life, which is the mystery of faith, and this, ultimately, is the mystery of God.

It is our intention to muster the resources necessary to enable this institution to be, not only a player but also a leader in the voyage of mind and heart into that which is our true identity and our true mission. We need both wise and holy priests and holy, energetic,

insights and observations for centuries, in fact since the transcendent God loved us enough to unite the heavens and the earth in the incarnation of His Son.

committed, lay people. The idea that without a renewed sense of commitment and enthusiasm from the laity, we will renew the response to the priesthood is delusional. It is our intention to create an environment and a program that encourages both clergy and laity, the men preparing for priesthood, and the laity preparing for ministry, to become more fully engaged in the evangelical mission of the Church. Praying together and learning together are building blocks of this very necessary work for Christ and the Church. It is my intention to build upon our strong foundation and deepen and expand our service to all the People of God. As part of this mission, and through the generosity of some of our benefactors, we are in the process of establishing a new program in catechesis and evangelization that will reach every parish, every school, every home in our diocese. We will put out into the deep; we will cast our nets; we will make a difference; we will be successful and we do expect a miraculous catch.

Our program will strive to make sure that those who leave this institution will certainly be able to understand the deeper issues of our times and interpret them for others within our society in a way consistent with the mind of the Church and the wisdom of our lived experience of faith. Our vision, our hope, is to engage society, not abandon the stage. Christianity is fundamentally a message, a proclamation, concerning the most essential and greatest things of life, and our generation now takes up the commission to go into the whole world and proclaim the good news.

Priesthood is an invitation to fall in love, to fall in love with everything that God has created and through the “everything”, to fall in love with God. Fear of a shallow empty life is without foundation in the great love story of God and His people. This love story envelopes the whole Church and, in a very special way, invites the laity into a deeper sense of the opportunities they have to reach beyond the daily and the ordinary and embrace the needs of their fellow travelers in a communal and ongoing search for meaning and purpose.

We are setting out here as of this day, in Mount St. Mary’s Seminary of the West and the Athenaeum of Ohio on a great adventure of our time, the adventure of the soul to reclaim

its rightful place in the modern human drama. The people of the Church - clergy, consecrated religious and laity - are invited to join the great procession moving out of darkness and nihilism into the light of all things good and lasting. With your help and your support, I will take my place now as rector/president to lead our small part of the great procession of the faithful, and here, in this place, we will make our contribution to God and to His people by working in faith and with diligence to lead people home to the seat of all charity and all wisdom.

Thank you and May God Bless all of you.