Presidential Address: The Apostolate of Study

It is hard to believe that we are already at the start of another semester. To all our new students: Welcome to the DSPT—I pray that it will be a wonderful first semester of study for you! To all our returning students: Welcome back—I pray that you will continue to achieve the very best, relentlessly reaching for your academic goals, and enjoying the highest activity possible for human beings—the contemplation of the truth!

I am deeply edified and admire you all immensely for pursuing the study of philosophy and theology in our current circumstances—not only in a job market where there are not an abundance of jobs for philosophers and theologians, and where the jobs that do exist aren't the most financially rewarding. (I hope I haven't dashed anyone's dreams of being a rich philosopher--even in Plato's day philosopher-kings were only an idea, not a reality). But I also admire your choice of study in a world so filled with uncertainty, change, tremendous evils, and extraordinary problems. You have not chosen to pursue the most lucrative or the securest course, but are taking a risk—a risk, I believe, that will be more than worth it, but a risk nevertheless.

We live in uncertain times. Our nation, it seems, is being rent from the inside—from ideologies that run counter to the true dignity of the human person and fundamental moral truths; from an incredibly low level of public discourse, where clear reasoning and charitable dialogue on the most important issues seldom, if ever, rises above the level of disparagement, name-calling, and the threat of violence; where our mainstream media engages in deceptive practices and can no longer be trusted; where the tragedy of wars abroad are compounded by an ever-increasing level of violence and criminality at home. We are all too familiar with the current problems and woes of our world—and one would think that only a single-minded turn to political activism, economic problem-solving, and a planning process focused on collective safety, security and material prosperity could be the proper response to our current situation.

But I propose a different solution, indeed the solution that you have already chosen: We need to study. We need to contemplate the truth. We need to engage in the most useless and impractical of all activities—only then shall we be able to respond adequately to the challenges of our day. This sounds, of course, like pure foolishness. Maybe a very pragmatic kind of study—scientific research in the interest of technological breakthrough and discovery—might be a possible way of addressing today's evils since, after all, worldly wisdom would have us put some hope that better medicine, more efficient systems of communication and

control, artificial intelligence, or the physical and mental enhancement of our faculties could make our world better.

A closer look, however, tells us a different story. The first automatic, portable machine gun was invented by Hiram Maxim in 1884. The invention was immediately recognized for the danger it was—European powers vowed only to use it in cases of absolute necessity and only against non-Europeans. And, to be sure, this was true at first: the first time the machine gun was used was in Zimbabwe, and not until 1893. But slowly lines were blurred, and the machine gun became a staple of conventional warfare from the Boer War to the Spanish-American War, culminating in World War I, perhaps its most sustained, destructive, and horrific use. Though I've chosen a particularly dark example, there is a general lesson to be learned: Technologies do not necessarily make us better people. And even if we arbitrarily decide that certain inventions are inherently evil—so we insist that the machine gun, the guillotine, and the atomic bomb are outliers—our hope that technology can of itself save us is shattered when we realize that even inventions as seemingly benign as the ultrasound—a wonderful breakthrough in women's healthcare and prenatal medicine—can be turned against life. Technologies, in many ways, have made our lives better, and I don't want to suggest otherwise, but they also have liabilities, and can be

misused to devastating effect. In many ways, technology simply intensifies or magnifies the existing strengths and weaknesses of human character.

Technology does not, too, help us deal with the most fundamental problems of human existence—though medicine may improve our health and quality of life, it cannot prevent sickness and death altogether, nor does it solve the riddle of the meaning of human existence, the fundamental "existential question" of being human—that is, why do we exist, for what purpose? Nor do they address the many maladies of the human spirit—anxiety, loneliness, alienation, and abandonment; indeed, such aspects of our human existence and our ultimate goal of happiness are not touched by technology. Technological progress might make us faster, stronger, smarter, and longer-living, but it does not make us wiser or happier.

So what does? Our own tradition—Christian, Roman Catholic, and Dominican—has constantly held that it is in the *contemplation of spiritual realities*—the entering into the ultimate mysteries of existence through loving meditation on God and his works—that is personally transformative. Drawing from the deep treasures of Sacred Scripture, Tradition, and the teaching of Christ's Church, in conjunction with the best that human rational reflection has to offer, such contemplation reveals answers to the questions about the meaning of our lives and assures us

that there is a meaning to our life; that there are meaningful answers to our deepest questions; and that there is not only truth, but the Truth—the truth that is God Himself come among us, the *summa veritatum* that all truths, all things, point to as there source. This is why study naturally becomes prayer, and why in the greatest thinkers—St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Albert the Great, St. Anselm, and St. Bonaventure, to name but a few of whom we study at the DSPT—there is a natural oscillation between study and prayer in the very same text.

But aren't we naïve to think that there is truth—haven't the panoply of cultures, the arguments of postmodern philosophers, the finding of psychology, history, and sociology (not to mention physics and biology)—revealed the concept of "truth" as the childish fantasy it is? Haven't a vast parade of brilliant nineteenth and twentieth century atheist philosophers shown us that "God is dead" that, indeed, "God" was never more than a legitimating myth or psychological projection? Haven't we heard that metaphysics is dead, that religion is private, that morality is a matter of personal opinion, and that each of us only has to speak "our truth"?

We might well misquote Mark Twain to say that "news of God's death (and the death of metaphysics, morality, and truth) are greatly exaggerated." The general thesis behind atheism has been not only that God does not exist, but that God has

been a perpetual burden imposed by mankind on itself. Freed of such a burden, mankind would naturally achieve its potential, realize what is greatest in itself, and establish a paradise on earth—of a Marxist, fascist, or liberal democratic capitalist variety, who can say?—but a paradise nonetheless. But if we look to the 20th century (and indeed, already the 21st), we find that released from the supposed burden of God, humanity has not fared as promised. If anything, the 20th century stands as an abiding testament to our continued inability to save ourselves. Rather than take up the gentle yoke of Christ, we are now free to embrace the gulag, the gas chamber, and the concentration camp.

But God, they say, is irreconcilable with the existence of evil. Such is the classic problem of evil, where an all-powerful, all-loving, providential God is said to conflict with the existence of human suffering, malice, and the many evils of human existence. But if we abolish God, have we untied that knot? Has the problem of evil really been solved? While the apparent paradox, the task of reconciling an all-powerful and all-beneficent God with the reality of evil, has been eliminated, an even deeper existential problem remains: as human beings, we must still endure and make sense of a world filled with evils; we must still find meaning in suffering. Only this time, we have no one beyond ourselves to lament to or to appeal to (our psalms of lamentation have no one to hear them). And what is perhaps worse, we not only remain without ultimate explanation for what

is wrong with the world, what is bad, but we now have no explanation for the good, either.

It is no coincidence that in the wake of 19th century atheism, European pessimism—so well epitomized in Schopenhauer and extending from the 1860's to the First World War—became a dominant cultural and intellectual trend. Evil was no less hated because there was no God to blame, and so without God, existence, being itself, became the villain. And despite heroic attempts to find meaning and happiness without God—we might recall Nietzsche's desperate, almost frantic search for a joyful science (*eine frohliche Wissenschaft*) after the death of Christianity—there have been no success stories in that particular enterprise.

There is an implicit sense that the modern, Enlightenment enterprise of human reason, politics, and salvation apart from God has failed, but not yet a realization of how radical a return to our Christian tradition there must be in order to overcome the current crisis of our contemporary society. Postmodernism, though praiseworthy for its sustained critique of the Enlightenment project, provides us no foundation for retrieving the meaningfulness of human existence—indeed, postmodernism, and undermines itself even as it pecks away at Enlightenment ideals. Contemporary ideologies continue to look for the source of truth and meaning in our own choices—and in an even more radical way than in centuries

past. If only we live by our own lights and choices, these ideologies claim—choosing not only our own vocations, but our values, our morality, our bodies, and shaping reality on our terms so that nothing is not a reflection of our desires and feelings—only this will make us happy.

But has it? We see loneliness, anxiety, addiction, and suicide at rates previously unheard of—an astonishing fact for an enlightened society for which happiness should be more attainable than ever before. But in a world evacuated of inherent meaning, of nothing truly transcendent to ourselves; with no other, no divine lover, what prevents us from being swallowed by the "nothing" (*nihil*) of it all? When God ceases to make a difference, being relegated to the dustbin of history or the obscurity of private preference; when the divine has no power to guide our world or transform our lives; when our prayers have no real addressee, and thus become a form of self-talk or self-hypnosis—what remains for us?

Shall we decide, instead, to have faith in humanity, faith in ourselves? But if there is one thing we ought to not have faith in, it is ourselves—as G.K. Chesterton reminds us, "original sin is the only doctrine that has been validated by 2000 years of human history . . . Whether or no man could be washed in miraculous waters, there was no doubt at any rate that he wanted washing. But [we] . . . have begun in our day not to deny the highly disputable water, but to deny the

indisputable dirt." This denial of sin has doubtless only been possible accompanied by the distorting effects of modern ideologies and their grand narratives, complemented by strategies of obfuscation—most especially a culture of distraction, amusement, and frenetic activity. Our contemporary world seems determined to try an endless series of "new" (that is, warmed-over and repackaged) alternatives to the truths it abandoned. But whatever the alternative—new designer drugs, artificial intelligence, a perfect world government, crystals, transcendental meditation, or the latest in designer religion, self-help therapy, or technological innovation—there lingers an unexpressed but ever increasing sense of disillusionment and despair.

Viewed in this light, then, what our contemporary world needs most desperately is to rediscover in its own neglected, repressed, and nearly forgotten tradition the truth of the Gospel and the memory of a salvation history and centuries of human intellectual and spiritual striving, the tradition of humanity's slowly being drawn to the fullness of truth made available in Christ. Our contemporary world needs a *metanoia*, a conversion, an "attitude adjustment," a spiritual revolution in the most literal sense of a return.

In centuries when the faith was more robustly enculturated in institutions, customs, and daily lives, someone who had wandered from the truth of the faith might return in a more passive manner—by relying on liturgy, community, institutions, and the expression of the faith at work in everyday things. But in our current secularized, de-Christianized world, our path to renewal must take a more active form; indeed, while community, liturgy, art, music, and the material embodiment of our faith must never be neglected, in many ways these also call out for enrichment and renewal. A more active, reflective, and intentional renewal of our contemporary world can only take place through the sublime discipline, the joyful asceticism, the rigorous contemplation of study. The only really adequate response to the evils of the world lies in the process of renewal that, presupposing God's grace, begins with the activity of study and contemplation.

It is only with this contemplation that we can, in turn, be effective preachers, which is not only the *raison d'etre* of the Dominicans, the Order of Preachers, but of the Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology. It is with study that you are prepared to preach—only out of contemplation can we proclaim the Gospel, *contemplata aliis tradere*, and only in the fullness of our Catholic tradition understood through study are we able to see the fullness of the faith and then

communicate it to others. And when we are truly engaged in contemplative, prayerful study and we invite others into that study, into this community of scholars that the DSPT is, we are, it turns out, already preaching the Gospel; we are inviting others to share in the adventure of discovering and understanding the truth, and in so doing, to be transformed by it.

Entering into study is the only way we can be sure that the faith is becoming a part of us, entering into our bones, as it were, becoming second-nature to us. If we do not immerse ourselves in the truth, we risk allowing what surrounds us on a daily basis—including half-truths and flawed habits—to inform us rather than the very best that revelation and natural reason have to offer. It is all too easy for us to allow popular movies, bad song lyrics, poorly written fiction, and other secular narratives to become more formative for our imaginations than the Gospels. It is only with a habit of study that the most fundamental truths can become habitual in us—an intellectual habit in Aristotle's sense—*sophia*. Study, overflowing into and returning from prayer, is the only way to keep ourselves rooted in the truth, close to Christ, and prepared to meet the new moral challenges of our contemporary world; it is, as St. Thomas Aquinas tells us, an ascetic practice that keeps us ever attuned to spiritual things, prepared to be

transformed by God's mercy and truth, and ready to work for the good of the world and the salvation of souls.

So as you go through this semester—and, in particular, when you are struggling to grasp a concept, understand a difficult passage of a text, or just plain tired and stressed, remember that you are not just pursuing an academic degree here at the DSPT. You could do that anywhere! God is calling you to study as a spiritual practice, to the *apostolate of study*, to use a phrase from Christopher Dawson—which is not only, as Aristotle reminds us, the highest human activity—contemplation—but the inseparable partner to prayer and the wellspring from which transformation—of ourselves, our neighbor, and our world—flows. As you encounter the challenges and labors of your study, may you be filled with a sense of the sublimity, the beauty, and the joys and delights of this contemplation. I pray that each and every one of you have a beautiful, blessed semester!