

“Intellectus, Christus, et Crux: The Life of the Mind in Light of Christ and the Cross”
Augustine School Fall Convocation Address

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As we enter into a new year, we give thanks for God’s many blessings to us as a school. We have grown in enrollment (almost doubling since last year). We have acquired new physical space (30,000 square feet instead of 2,800 square feet!), and we continue to build a great faculty. We indeed have much to be thankful for as we begin this year.

But at the end of the day, we must always pay attention to “first things,” and recall what we affirm as a school, and what makes Augustine School unique. For this year’s Convocation Address—our first in hopefully a long tradition of such events—we ask a simple question: how does the Christian faith provide the necessary substructure, not just for a *Christian* intellectual life, but for *any* intellectual whatsoever.

In the Western world there is a rich tradition of the life of the mind. Much of the emphasis on the life of the mind in the West flows from our Christian inheritance, as seen in the biblical documents, and in key thinkers of the West (e.g., Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Calvin, among others). As the modern world has jettisoned its Christian intellectual inheritance, there has been a corresponding confusion about the value of the mind, and indeed, even of the possibility of knowledge at all, whether of God or of the created order.

This essay suggests that a return to the most promising life of the mind is ultimately a return to a life grounded in Christ and the cross, and in the theological vision that both undergirds such realities, and flows from them. The essay retrieves central themes of the West’s Christian inheritance, and suggests that such themes form the matrix of any promising and sustainable intellectual life. In particular, the essay probes the following themes: (1) the centrality of a *telos*, or goal; (2) the centrality of creation and history; (3) the centrality of the cross; (4) the centrality of the Logos; (5) the centrality of the ethical nature of true knowledge.

The Centrality of a “Telos,” or Goal to All Things

First, whereas much of modern thought appears to be adrift with no direction or purpose, pre-modern Christian thinkers almost always engaged in the intellectual endeavor against the backdrop of an overarching *telos* or goal. With Augustine and the medieval tradition that follows him, the *telos* of the vision of God was the goal that animated and informed his intellectual deliberations. Whereas much of the time scholarship and intellectual endeavors seem to be aimlessly adrift, and seem to have no ultimate purpose or direction, Christian thought (particularly in its pre-modern form) was often animated by a grander and more beautiful vision of life and of the world. Although articulated somewhat differently by different persons, Christians almost always engaged in the intellectual life against the backdrop of the beatific vision (seeing God face to face one day), or against the goal of serving the glory of God.

Interestingly, this larger *telos* both exalted the importance of the life of the mind (by seeing it as part of a larger and grander picture of the world), and humbled the life of the mind (by recognizing that the intellectual life was not simply its own end, but served a larger goal—the glory and vision of God).

The Centrality of Creation and History

Second, whereas modern thinkers often are skeptical about the importance of knowledge, and are skeptical about a real order of things, Christian thinkers have affirmed that the created order is truly that, a created order and that hence the intellectual life is, in Aquinas' words, coming into contact with "the truth of things." The affirmation of a doctrine of creation also allowed pre-modern thinkers to affirm that education, or the life of the mind, is not primarily about constructing knowledge or imposing order, but about receiving knowledge, about discovering what is already there. A corollary to a doctrine of creation, Christians have always affirmed the centrality and importance of history. Because the Christian gospel is a *past* tense event that continues to shape history in the *present*, and is the means by which evil and sin are defeated in the *future*, Christians have always had a theological reason to pay attention to what has come before—i.e., to history. Malcolm Muggeridge, reflecting on the twentieth century—whether his experience in trying to understand the apologists for Stalin in Russia, or in trying to understand the love of abortion in the West, could comment that modern man seems to have a type of "suicidal impulse"—a type of self-hatred. Likewise, Richard Weaver, commenting on the "attack upon memory" manifest in modern culture, could suggest that modern man was intentionally trying to "kill" himself by obliterating all connections to the past—i.e., to history—by modern man's attack upon memory and reflection.

The Centrality of the Cross

Third, while modern thinkers have often construed the life of the mind as a morally neutral reality, severed from the heart and will, the best of Christian thought has always recognized that the life of the mind is a gracious gift, is a part of the whole life of the person, and must always serve larger purposes than simply the acquisition of facts. Indeed, on a Christian understanding, it is the cross of Christ that has freed the mind to truly think God's thoughts after Him, and to submit our thoughts to the universal lordship of Christ. This is perhaps best seen in Jesus' command to love God with our minds (Mt. 22:37ff.), Paul's teaching that Christians are to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5), and Augustine's and Anselm's teaching of "faith seeking understanding," which holds that true understanding is always rooted in a previous faith commitment to the Mind behind all knowledge. Perhaps one of the clearest historical examples is to be found in Augustine's *De Trinitate*. In attacking the neoplatonic notion that one could arrive at "God" (or the "One") via human effort, Augustine argues passionately that the only way one can get to the knowledge of God is through the cross of Christ—God must come down to us if we are going to rise to Him. We might summarize this Augustinian (and biblical) principle with the Latin phrase, *nullus intellectus sine cruce*—"there is no understanding without the cross." Teased out and applied more generally to the intellectual life, we might argue that true understanding—ultimate understanding—only takes place with a mind that has truly been transformed by the gospel.

The Centrality of the Logos

Fourth, whereas the modern world has witnessed a bewildering confusion about the nature of language, and possibility of meaning in communication, the Christian tradition (especially in the Gospel of John and the writings of Augustine) affirms a rich theology of language and communication, where words and signs are meaningful because they exist against the backdrop of a created order, because man as image bearer is a communicating and relational being, and because words and signs exist in relation to the Word (i.e., Christ), who serves as the ground and goal of all language. At least one benefit of reading modern writers like Jacques Derrida is that Derrida is honest enough to admit that without some sort of real and transcendent *logos*, meaningful communication is an impossibility. If anything, Christians can rejoice that they serve a communicating and *speaking* God, who has made us as image-bearers capable of communicating, and that Christ—the Logos—is (in Augustine’s words) “the Teacher” who illumines the human mind to know God, the world, and other persons.

The Centrality of the Ethical Nature of True Knowledge

Fifth, whereas knowledge in the modern world is often severed from any inherent relationship to practice, a Christian understanding of the intellectual life has virtually always affirmed the necessary and inseparable connection between knowledge and practice. One thinks here of the opening section of John Calvin’s *Institutes*. The knowledge of God forms a central motif of the *Institutes*, and in a striking passage, Calvin writes that to know God *is* to honor Him. Calvin does *not* say that one can have knowledge, and that one must *then* act on it. Rather, according to Calvin, to know God *is* to honor Him—that is, if one does *not* honor God, one is giving proof that one indeed does *not* truly know God. This is a far cry from modern notions of knowledge, and Christians should recover this insight from Calvin. Knowledge is not simply the downloading of data—like two pocket pcs, beaming information back and forth during a boring meeting. Knowledge, on a Christian understanding—at least the knowledge of God—is knowledge, that if it has been truly received, inherently and organically leads one to *honor* the God one claims to know. Indeed, the *honoring* is a necessary part of the *knowledge* itself.

Conclusion

In sum, for persons living at the edge of a new millennium, the way forward entails attention to the past. Rather than playing with game rules set by the Enlightenment, or by other modern notions hostile to orthodox Christianity, Christians should *explore* and *retrieve* the Christian theological moorings of a truly sustainable and meaningful intellectual life. G.K. Chesterton, in *Orthodoxy*, could lament the “suicide of thought”—the possibility that man might indeed come to deny that “our thoughts have any relation to reality at all.”¹ Chesterton’s fear has largely become reality in the modern West, and Christians should indeed affirm that the Christian gospel provides the necessary substructure—or, we might say, the necessary precondition—for the life of the mind. Indeed, the recovery of a genuine and meaningful life of the mind is ultimately a recovery of Christ and the gospel, since in such a recovery of the essentials of Christianity we find the true and enduring foundation for the intellectual life.

¹ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 38. But see the whole chapter, “The Suicide of Thought.”