



Faith and Reason - The Catholic Intellectual Tradition
Interfaith Event

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This quote, which comes from Psalm 8, is an expression of the ancient wisdom of the Jewish people, whose traditions we as Christians have inherited and upon whose faith we, in a certain sense stand, as on holy ground.

In speaking to you today I want, in a sense, to invite you to reflect with me on this psalm. Before we do so however I also want to indicate that the topic I have been asked to address – *Faith and Reason: the Catholic Intellectual Tradition* – is both a very important one and an impossibly complex one to do justice to in a short address. The very framing of the topic points to its importance. When people hear talk of the Catholic Church, or the Catholic tradition, they often tend to think immediately of Catholicism as a religious institution, or more generally as a religion which is founded on a large number of relatively independent, disconnected, and to many people fanciful and irrational, beliefs or doctrines to which Catholics are required to give their intellectual assent.

While there is some limited truth to this, it represents a very meagre and therefore distorted understanding of Catholicism and, I would suggest, also a very unappealing one, especially to today's world. Furthermore such a view is largely responsible for the tendency, very common today, to relegate religion, in this case Catholic Christianity, exclusively to the private world of individual belief and as such to disqualify it from any place in what is usually called the public square. Catholics, like other exotic individuals and groups who hold religious beliefs, are welcome to do so but these beliefs, and the people who hold to them, must not be allowed to have any influence on the public life of our society. *"You are free to believe whatever you want to,"* such religious people are told, *"but you have no right to force your views on others and certainly no right to expect that your doctrines can have a say in the determining of public policy"*.

The topic of today's address challenges this view. It invites us to consider first of all that faith and human reason have, or at least might have, a positive relationship to each other, and secondly that contemporary Catholicism, rather than being a set of disconnected and intellectually groundless doctrines, is the inheritor and bearer of a long, rigorous and cohesive intellectual tradition which, at least partly because it has been so influential in the development of the Western culture and civilization which we inhabit, merits our attention, our consideration and our respect.

If all of this is true generally, then it is also true in the particular case of Notre Dame and the even more particular case of the School of Medicine. Integral to the Catholic intellectual tradition is a particular view of what it means to be a human person, especially in terms of how individual human beings should be treated, but also in terms of the rights and responsibilities human beings have to others, both as individuals and as communities of persons. Another way of speaking of



the Catholic intellectual tradition, in view of this emphasis on what it means to be human, is to speak of a Catholic “world view” – a way, in other words, of holding together in a meaningful, a cohesive and, in the true sense of the word, a “rational” fashion, the perplexing mystery of human life as we experience it.

Today then I simply want to invite you to take some initial steps with me as we seek to understand the basis of the Catholic world view. It is, after all, a world view which informs, or should inform, everything that Notre Dame stands for. And because Notre Dame is an institute of higher learning, and exists within the milieu of a complex, multi-cultural, multi-faith, and increasingly secular culture, we must be willing to engage with this world view and to seek to discover, presuming that it exists, the integrity, the coherence and what I might call the satisfying attractiveness of this world view even if, in the end, we still have more questions than answers about it.

So let me return now to the words of psalm 8. They are up on the screen for your convenience.

They are, of course, an ancient expression of faith, composed in a pre-scientific age. As people looked up into the night skies their instinct was, and indeed still is for many people, to ask the most fundamental questions. Where did all this come from? Why is there anything at all? Where do I fit into this great sweep of creation? What am I supposed to do, if anything, with this life which I experience as a gift I owe to someone else, precisely because I did not give it to myself? Is the very fact of my existence a call to do and be something? And if so where, or perhaps, who, does this call, this invitation or even this imperative I sense within me, come from? Or is it all pure chance, with no ultimate explanation, and therefore no ultimate meaning?

The psalms are traditionally attributed to King David, who is generally understood to have lived around three thousand years ago. We presume, probably rightly, that the people of his time had a very limited grasp of the extent of the universe. Certainly they did not have the depth of knowledge we now possess about the mind-boggling nature of the cosmos: perhaps as many as 400 billion stars in our own galaxy, which is one of between one hundred and two hundred billion galaxies presumed to exist in the universe. The figures in reality are beyond our grasp. The sense of wonder and awe in the face of this overwhelming reality of which we see only the minutest part when we look up into the night sky, is as real today as it was three thousand years ago. Even if we were for a moment to take out the specifically religious aspects of the quote from Psalm 8 would we not still say, *"When I see the heavens, the moon and the stars, who am I and who are we in the face so such immensity?"*

It seems to me that the mystery, or if you prefer the perplexing reality, of our existence is not clarified so much as it is deepened by our even-increasing knowledge of how big and complex our universe is and how extensive its reach. The more we know the more we discover we do not know. The more we think we understand the greater our perplexity becomes. As a result our appetite for more and more information and for an answer to our deepest questions continues to grow. The current popularity of shows like Professor Brian Cox's “Stargazing Live” shows that the mystery of the universe, and especially of its origins, continues to exercise a great fascination for us.

One of the interesting questions posed by people like Brian Cox concerns the possibility that the universe might be both infinite and eternal. While this is usually couched in terms of the idea that it will never come to an end, it is also couched in terms of the possibility that it also never had a



beginning. Sometimes what appears to be, at least to me, a rather glib reply is given: *well, why not? Why couldn't the universe be infinite?* Some people say this as if it is the most logical and uncomplicated thing in the world to imagine the possibility that something might have no beginning and no end. And yet, not only does this fly in the face of our experience of absolutely everything we encounter during the course of our lives, but it also transfers a concept which in classical philosophy has only been ascribed to God to what is, by definition, not God. In fact, many of those who propose the idea of an infinite universe explicitly reject the idea of the existence of God.

Many of us would be aware of the famous proofs for the existence of God, one of which is that God is the uncaused cause of everything that exists, precisely because everything that exists is caused by something else, as a very condition of its existing at all. And yet the very notion of the need for a cause means that, in the end, or should I say at the beginning, there must be a cause which was itself not caused by any other thing - and that uncaused cause we call God.

I do not intend in this presentation to expand on this so-called proof of God's existence, beyond pointing out that there is a logic and a coherence about this approach provided that certain presuppositions, which to many people would appear absolutely unassailable, are accepted. In this case the presupposition, which is based on human experience and observation, is that everything that exists must have a cause. I might also add, as something of an aside though a vitally important one, that in this approach God is not another thing, or another entity, or another being. Rather God is pure being from which every existing thing takes its own being. This is of course language about God which is deeply philosophical. Christian theology will want to expand this much further, but we will come to that in a moment. First we must return to our topic: faith and reason.

There are many ways into the consideration of the relationship between faith and reason. I have elected to begin in the way I have in order to suggest that the "reasonableness" of our Christian and Catholic faith is a reasonableness which can be demonstrated within the framework of certain basic presuppositions, the most foundational of which is the existence of God. Belief in God is clearly an expression of a faith to which many human beings give assent. While for many believers this assent is initially given on the basis of their upbringing, it is maintained because it is judged to be a reasonable and convincing, though not scientifically provable, way to begin to answer the fundamental questions to which I have already alluded.

Human beings of course, of which each one of us is an example, are frail and fallible. It is possible to get the matter of God very wrong, both in terms of the foundational question of the existence of God, and in terms of what human beings can properly and confidently say about the nature of God. Today I am speaking to you in the context of a Catholic University.

In terms of its foundational ethos, Notre Dame University accepts, even though individual staff or students who are part of the university may not accept, that God exists. In beginning this presentation with an invitation to look up to the stars and to allow their splendour to prompt in us a sense of wonder and a deep and persistent curiosity about their origins, I am wanting to propose, and even insist, that first of all it is eminently reasonable to ask about the possibility of a creator, about God, and secondly that it is also eminently reasonable to form the view, on the basis of logical thought and philosophical reasoning, that there is indeed a creator, to whom we do in fact give the name "God". Not everyone will come to this conclusion, and indeed it seems that in our



own time more and more people are coming to the opposite conclusion. In view of this I think it important to acknowledge that we are living in a rather peculiar period in history in which, unlike the whole of recorded human history up until now, the existence of God is not almost universally accepted. Some would say of course that this growing agnosticism, or atheism, is an inevitable result of the increasing sophistication of humanity.

As we look around the world in which we live today, however, with its grinding poverty in so many places, its proliferation of ever more destructive weapons of war, its obscene concentration of human wealth and resources in such a tiny percentage of the world's population, the shocking prevalence of suicide in so-called developed and affluent societies, and so much more, I think we can quite genuinely ask whether or not, in the areas which really count for human beings, we truly are caught up in an evolutionary process of greater and greater sophistication as human beings. Could it be instead that we are best marking time or even perhaps going backwards? Knowing more and more about the "what" of things does not necessarily mean that we know more and more about the "why" of things. And yet it is the "why" questions which are the most fundamental.

This capacity of human beings to observe the world in which we live and begin to ask questions about it, coupled with the very real possibility of coming to wrong conclusions which can have devastating consequences for individuals and communities, points to what the Catholic tradition would see as the fundamental relationship between faith and reason. The Catholic tradition has always been very positive about the gift of intelligence with which God has endowed human beings, the gift that we call "reason" or "reasoning". Human beings know things, and what is more we know that we know things and we are able to ask questions about what we know so that we might know more widely or more deeply.

Human beings are, in this sense always on a quest for more. In religious language we would talk about transcendence – the ability to go beyond our limits to the limitless, at least in our thinking. At the same time of course, the whole of human history, while it testifies to the remarkable reality of human intellectual capacity, or to put it in another way the capacity for reflexive self-consciousness, also testifies to the appalling capacity for human beings, individually and collectively, to go wrong. If we accept the presupposition that God exists, and the further presupposition which is fundamental to Christianity that God is made known to us in the life, death and rising to new life of Jesus of Nazareth, then the position which is adopted by Catholic Christianity, namely that faith, when properly understood, comes to the defense of human reasoning and protects it from going astray, begins to make sense. Let me expand on this a little more.

This asking of questions, this testing of possible answers, this weighing of evidence, this forming of conclusions and even yes, at times, the arriving at certainty, are part of our experience of what it is to be human. We are, to use a phrase often used in this context, rational animals.

In this respect it is important to see that hidden behind this idea is the even more fundamental idea of truth. Human beings are able to see and grasp the truth of things and recognize that there is an objectivity about truth which does not allow for contradiction. It is true that I am physically here in this lecture room at this moment talking to you, and therefore am not in my office in Adelaide Terrace in the City. But of course this particular truth points to a universal truth: you cannot physically be in two completely different places at one and the same time. It is true that I was born in a hospital in East Melbourne in 1954 and that therefore I cannot have been born in



the Mount Lawley hospital here in Perth in 1958. These are obvious and trivial examples but they point to a very important conclusion: there is such a thing as objective truth. This may seem perfectly obvious but it is the case that in our present time in history the very idea of truth is seen by many to be relative. We often hear people speak of “your truth” and “my truth”. What is often meant by this is that there are different points of view and any one perspective is as good as, and as true as, another. But is this approach itself always objectively, or only relatively, true?

I might, for example, say with absolute conviction that Richmond is the best team in the AFL and someone else might say that, no, it is not Richmond but rather the Fremantle Dockers which is the best team.

This of course points to a further dimension of this idea of truth: that there must be a way of verifying it. If Richmond is consistently the Premiership winner and Fremantle is consistently on the bottom of the ladder each year over a number of years, we can confidently say that, at least at this point in time, Richmond is a better team than Fremantle. In such a scenario, this would be objectively true though not universally so for it might happen that in years to come the situation might be reversed.

However, it is also possible that a one-eyed Fremantle supporter might well, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, continue to insist that Fremantle is the better team and is simply dogged by bad luck – a horrendous run of injuries, too many interstate games, biased umpiring, and so on. Human beings can let their emotions, or their prejudices, get in the way of rational thinking. They can begin to think and act as if what they want to be true really is objectively true – when in fact it isn't.

As I have already hinted, in the Catholic tradition this is where the relationship between faith and reason comes into play: as human beings we are gifted with an amazing capacity for intelligent, rational, logical thought - but we are also subject to the play of our emotions, to the fallibility and limits of our reasoning, to our capacity for rushed judgments and irrational decisions. We are smart, yes, but we are not God!

While rushed judgments and limited perspectives on the matter of football teams is relatively unimportant, this cannot be said for all areas of life, including the kinds of issues, questions and sometimes life-and-death decisions you will have to make in your chosen profession. There you will need to bring all your objectivity, all your powers of reasoning and logical thought, all your knowledge and judgement to bear as you deal intimately with the lives of other people. And therefore, precisely because this is true, you will need to be acutely aware of your limitations, of the dangers of rushed judgments, of the possibility of unrecognised and unacknowledged prejudices and emotions, all leading you to decisions which potentially can have profoundly destructive consequences for individual persons, for families, and for society as a whole. Neither individual persons, nor families, nor our society, should be treated as objects on which we can experiment, or try out new theories, or play at social engineering, or quite simply have a go and hope for the best: human beings, both individually and collectively, have an objective and personal dignity which should absolutely preclude any such approach – and yet sadly in our society today this is so often not the case.

In the Catholic intellectual tradition, including our moral tradition, it is the presuppositions of faith which enable us to guard against these very real dangers. Those presuppositions of faith, which



centre around the trinity of God, Christ and Church, together constitute what I have referred to in this presentation as the Catholic world view: that particular, characteristic and internally coherent way of putting together what it means to be a human person, what human relationships are meant to look like, what a society where everyone can flourish and reach their full potential needs in order to succeed, what human solidarity implies, what the right relationship between God and human beings demands of us, and so on.

In the Catholic tradition we base ourselves on the fundamental presupposition that God exists – an eminently reasonable and defensible presupposition as I have indicated earlier; we further base ourselves on the presupposition that God is as Jesus Christ has revealed God to be: a creating and life-giving God of compassion, forgiveness, and love who is intimately caught up in the creation and in particular in the lives and destiny of every human being. And we further base ourselves on the presupposition that God, in and through Jesus Christ, continues to engage with the world in love especially through his Church which, in spite of its many failings, is animated and protected by the presence of God's Spirit, and which is empowered by God lead human beings to the fullness of Truth.

In the Catholic world view the faith, as the Church proposes it to us, especially when it does so in a definitive way, acts as a light which guides us as we travel the road of the human search for intelligibility, reason and truth, knowing that that search always has as its ultimate goal the well-being, full flourishing and true dignity of people, both as individuals and as members of communities, cultures and societies which exist precisely for the same reason: to protect, defend and advance the true human worth and inviolable dignity of every human person.