

# ‘Where is Catholic and Christian Thinking Going?’

by Gerald O’Collins, SJ, AC.

Let me begin by expressing my thanks for the privilege of delivering this fifth annual Walter Silvester memorial lecture,<sup>1</sup> and joining a distinguished line of previous speakers—not least, Professor Donna Orsuto who delivered the Walter Silvester memorial lecture in 2010.

In negotiation with the committee, I chose to address the questions: Where is Catholic thinking going? What is its future? Initially I planned to reflect this evening on Christian thinking and ask: what is the future of Christian thinking? But then I realized that limiting myself to reflect primarily on the future of Roman Catholic thinking would be a big enough challenge. In any case, some or even much of what I propose will, hopefully, also apply to Christian thinking in general.

What I want to argue is this. If Catholic thinking is to go anywhere in the twenty-first century, it needs not only to involve three areas or, if you like, three homes but also to foster close cooperation between those three homes.

## Catholic Thinking in Three Areas

Well what areas or homes does Catholic and Christian thinking cover? What does it involve and lead to? Our thinking can do three things for us: first, thinking brings us to understand better the truth and, in particular, the truth of our faith. Second, thinking can bring us to action, to act, for instance, against profound injustices in society and work for a better world. Third, thinking can enable us to deepen our life of prayer and improve our worship of God. In short, thinking directs our understanding, our acting, and our worship. If you like, thinking can enable us, first, to appreciate better the truth, second, to act for the common good, and, third, to worship the infinitely beautiful

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<sup>1</sup> This lecture was delivered on 25 October 2011 at Australian Catholic University (Melbourne).

God. Thinking can bring us further along the road to grasp the true, the good and the beautiful, or— better—to be grasped by truth, goodness and beauty.

Talking about ‘thinking’ can sound pretty abstract. It may be better to speak, concretely, of ‘thinkers’ and ask: where are Catholic thinkers going? What is their future? Here I am reminded of a man in the outback of Australia who heard a visitor from another country holding forth on some topic. After listening for a while, the man in the outback interrupted the visiting speaker and insisted: “If it’s not local, it’s not real.’ Well, what is the local picture? Where are Catholic and other Christian thinkers going in Australia? Here, of course, things become tricky. There is a huge risk in naming names and citing specific groups. That brings the obvious danger of omitting some important and even spectacular contributors. In any case, it’s impossible to name everyone and every active group in Australia, in general, and, in Melbourne, in particular. But let me take the risk, make my apologies in advance, and illustrate quite concretely what I mean by my three kinds of Catholic (and Christian) thinking.

As regards thinking which enables us to appreciate better and share better the truth of Catholic and Christian faith, we find that thinking being carried on here at the Australian Catholic University, across Victoria Parade at Catholic Theological College, by the Melbourne College of Divinity and its various recognized teaching institutions, and at other centres in Australia. This is the kind of thinking and research carried on by Brendan Byrne, Tony Campbell, Tony Coady, Mary Coloe, Jan Gray, Kevin Hart, Robyn Horner, Anne Hunt, Tony Kelly, Dorothy Lee, Andrew McGowan, Frank Moloney, Chris Mostert, Neil Ormerod, Catherine Playoust, Ormond Rush, Sean Winter, and many others. They probe the Scriptures and the treasures we have received from early Church councils and writers, from later writers like Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and Teresa of Avila, and from other outstanding men and women down through the centuries. This thinking can support those thousands of Catholics and other Christians engaged in teaching in primary and secondary schools. One blessing that has come to me since returning to live in Parkville two years ago has been the chance of serious

contact with hundreds of people working in Catholic education and communications in the dioceses of Broken Bay, Lismore, Melbourne, Parramatta, Sandhurst, and elsewhere. They are obviously dedicated to exploring and sharing with young people the truth of our faith, and want to be nourished by those at the university level who have committed themselves to biblical, theological, historical, philosophical and other areas of scholarship.

Then there are those Catholics and other Christians whose thinking brings them to act against social injustices and work for a better world. Thinking energizes and directs their actions for the common good. Here I should mention both those who speak out and act on social issues like Frank Brennan, Bruce Duncan, Julie Edwards, Archbishop Philip Freier, and Andrew Hamilton, and those like Nicholas Tonti-Filippini and Bill Uren whose research and reflection take place in the area of bio-ethics. When we ask, 'where are Catholic thinkers moving in the area of social action?', we must also recall those whose thinking directs the hands-on work of such organizations as the St Vincent de Paul Society and the Order of Malta. Finally, in the area of social action, their thinking has led numerous Christians in Australia to combat racism and anti-Semitism, to dedicate themselves to the indigenous peoples, and in other ways to work for a fairer and more harmonious Australia.

Thirdly, Catholic (and Christian) thinking can take the form of deepening, enlivening, and promoting our life of prayer and worship. Work in spirituality, music, the liturgy, the visual arts, architecture, and poetry cultivates ways of thinking and imagining that help people to lift up their hearts in prayer and song to the infinitely beautiful God. I remember here with great gratitude all that has been done by Michael Casey, Rosemary Crumlin, Richard Divall, Margaret Manion, Les Murray, Peter Steele, Chris Willcock, and many others. Furthermore, we should not forget how around the nation we are blessed by all those men and women who lead and train choirs, direct orchestras, serve on liturgy commissions and committees, and run galleries. Let's remember also those whose calling has led them to create and support institutes of spirituality, and those who encourage prayer through such organizations as the World Community for Christian Meditation.

Catholic thinking can specialize in promoting what is beautiful and in allowing people through contemplation to anticipate even now the communion with the utterly beautiful God that will be our everlasting happiness.

That's the way I would sum up Catholic thinking in this country and elsewhere. Catholic (and Christian) thinkers are in the business of furthering the understanding of the truth, the promotion of justice, and the enriching of our worship of our beautiful God. This triple scheme enlarges the familiar twosome, faith and justice and makes it a threesome: faith, justice, and worship. Catholic and other Christian thinkers help us to understand faith, to promote justice, and to worship the infinitely beautiful God. Possessed by a concern for truth, goodness and beauty, they lead us to deepen our grasp of truth, to act for the common good, and to worship the One whom St Augustine called 'the Beauty of all things beautiful'.

My admiration for such Catholic thinking becomes even deeper when I recall some of the central challenges that shape the world of the twenty-first century, that world in which we pursue truth, justice and beauty. Let me turn next to the global context in which Christian and Catholic thinkers currently live and move and have their being.

## **The World in the Twenty-First Century**

There is a character in one of Saul Bellow's novels who declared that history was a nightmare during which he was trying to get some sleep. Here Saul Bellow parodied what James Joyce wrote in Ulysses: 'history is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.' Even if we distance ourselves from such radical pessimism and acknowledge the many positive features of the contemporary scene, the big picture remains challenging and even threatening as we move further into the twenty-first century. Let me mention here only three major features of our global situation: endemic violence; the impact of modern economic conditions; and the electronic revolution.

## Violence

Over and over again our world continues to suffer from violence, the violence of the strong against the weak. Too many supposedly democratic governments continue to exemplify the sad truth of W. H. Auden's words about the "conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder".<sup>2</sup> Shaken by terrorist attacks, some governments lose their moral bearings and practise torture, execute people without a trial, and practise a wholesale perversion of information about, for instance, 'Weapons of Mass Destruction'. What does such a poisoned political climate do to those engaged in Christian thinking? Only a few years ago it led Professor George Hunsinger of Princeton Theological Seminary to found the National Religious Campaign Against Torture, a coalition of Christians, Jews, Muslims, and others. Some of you may have heard Hunsinger speak about his campaign against torture at the Fifth Parliament of the World's Religions held in Melbourne in December 2009.

Violence and institutionalized injustice against women remain almost all-pervasive. Rape is used as a weapon of war, and baby girls can be systematically killed to avoid paying dowries for their marriages. Among international criminal activities, human trafficking—and, in particular, sex trafficking—remains very profitable, coming third after the business of selling drugs and arms. One million children are sold into slavery each year, and very many of them are little girls.

Suffering inflicted on women also includes (1) the denial of education, a denial deeply rooted in various cultures, and (2) can take the form in so-called democratic countries of all kinds of subtle discrimination. A worldwide and often violent failure to honour the equality and dignity of women conditions and challenges the work of Catholic and other thinkers around the globe.

One should also mention the persecution, often violent persecution, practised in various countries against Catholics, other Christians, and followers of other religions. In our global village,

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<sup>2</sup> W. H. Auden, The Collected Poems of W. H. Auden (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 184.

how does and how should that persecution affect those believers who take leadership roles for thinking about and acting in the cause of truth, justice and beauty?

## **The Economic and Social Context**

The economic situation obviously affects the life and future prospects of Catholic thinking. The unprecedented affluence enjoyed by many people has gone hand in hand with an enhanced, even extreme, individualism in the Western world and beyond. In recent years we have witnessed a greedy individualism bringing financial disaster, and even prompting global economic crises. Such cold-blooded self-sufficiency ravages the environment and contributes to climate change. It can feed social disintegration through the breakdown of family life. The curse of hard drugs and gambling, the criminality they encourage, and unemployment plague post-industrial societies. In such a context what are the chances and hopes for Catholic and other Christian thinkers when they aim to teach and inspire personal faith, social action, and communal worship?

Economics affects the life and future of university campuses. Higher education has been widely commercialized, and those in control have often reduced the chances of studying classics, fine arts, history, literature, philosophy, theology and other subjects that constitute the 'humanities'. The current 'age of money' prioritizes the financial benefits of education and asks with scepticism: how could the study of the humanities and, in particular, of theology and religion possibly translate into cash? How much money will graduates in fine arts, music, philosophy and theology earn for themselves and their families? One university in Australia advertises itself by guaranteeing 'career-focused outcomes'. Another Australian university pushes postgraduate programmes with the slogan, 'Achieve a faster rise to the top anywhere in the world'. Disciplines that promise immediate financial returns win out over less marketable subjects, like the humanities in general and theology (and religious studies) in particular. Departments in humanities find government funding removed or drastically reduced. Some new universities specialize in science, technology, and business, and make little or no room for the humanities.

How can Catholic and Christian theological and philosophical work be saved in an age of money? Who will supply the minimum funds that can support philosophical and theological thinkers in providing leadership through their search for truth, justice, and beauty?

## The Electronic Revolution

The exponential growth of science and technology is a third factor that should be recalled when reflecting on hopes for Catholic and Christian thinking in the twenty-first century. The pace of change in the technological world seems to be increasing rather than slowing down. Through the internet and the world-wide-web, for example, new technologies offer extraordinarily enhanced means for communication.

At the close of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), Karl Rahner and other theologians hailed the coming of the global Church. They reflected on what had been happening in the Church around the world. But nearly fifty years ago they could not foresee how the internet would affect global communications: for instance, within the Catholic Church. On the one hand, it has blessed Catholic thinkers, leaders and others with undreamt of possibilities of being instantly linked with each other around the world. But, on the other hand, e-mails, skype, the i-pad, and e-conferences have supported a centralization of authority and decision-making that sheer distance and slow communications made impossible in the past. Catholic thinkers do their work now in a highly globalized and centralized Church.

Websites have made available, of course, new possibilities for biblical, philosophical, and theological learning and updating. But that prompts the question: are direct human relations fundamental for thinking and learning in theology and the other disciplines that constitute the humanities? For thinking, teaching and learning to take place effectively, do we need to bring people into personal, face-to-face contact? Or can modern technology adequately substitute for the

immediate human contact provided by traditional lectures, seminars, conferences, discussions, and one-to-one tutorials?

There are some human experiences in which we participate only by being physically present with others: notably, sexual relations, birth, and also—as many would rightly argue—worship. None of these activities can be performed by proxy or at a distance. People have to be present face-to-face and within touch of each other. Is this also true for teaching, learning and thinking together in the humanities and, specifically, for Catholic and Christian theology?

In an age when more and more students and professors go online for learning and teaching, we must face the issue: in an age of e-books and e-journals, what will happen to the printed books and articles through which Catholic and Christian thinkers have traditionally shared their insights, advice and conclusions? Computers and all manner of electronic devices are obviously facilitating research and communication in such areas as history, literature, philosophy, spirituality, and theology. Online teaching and publishing have changed the face of contemporary theology. But it all leaves us with the question: what will online thinking do in the long run or even in the short run to Christian thinkers engaged with our understanding of truth, our pursuit of goodness, and our worship of the divine beauty?

### **Three ‘Homes’ for Catholic Thinking**

I have sketched ways in which violence of various kinds, economic conditions, and new technology are affecting Catholic and Christian thinkers. One could fill out the contemporary context by examining such further features of the twenty-first century as persistent racism, interfaith hostility, and other negative and positive elements that condition Christian thinking around the globe. But after evoking something of the contemporary context, let me return to the threefold classification of thinkers, who inhabit distinct (but not separate) ‘homes’ or social locations. What challenges do these thinkers face? What are their future prospects?

## A Home for Understanding

These are tough times for philosophers, theologians and other thinkers who occupy an academic home. We have seen how within their departments and faculties they may be suffering economically. Looking out from their academic home, Christian thinkers in Australia face a Western society that largely lacks any reference to God. In his book A Secular Age, Charles Taylor has famously presented Western 'culture' as a world largely devoid of reference to 'the beyond'.<sup>3</sup> Such secular indifference to the God who is beyond seems even more striking on the public face of much Australian society.

Sport, one might easily think, has replaced religion. The passion for Australian Rules has, for instance, taken over the lives of many. Where religion passed on traditions, values, and models for imitation in the lives of heroic men and women, Australian Rules now does this for thousands, even millions. Sport fills their existence with purpose and direction. Through its liturgy and liturgical seasons, religion once provided meaning and sacramental revitalization. Australian Rules now does the same, and makes the grand final the climax of its liturgical year. Formerly, most Catholics and other Christians turned to sacramental celebrations at least at times of birth, marriage and death. Nowadays, as the poet Bruce Dawe reflected, sport can supply the axis around which an entire life-cycle can revolve.

Years ago, before the Swans moved to Sydney and the Brisbane Lions came into existence, in a prophetic poem, 'Life-cycle', Bruce Dawe showed how sport could replace the rituals of religion: from birth to death.

In secularized Australian society of today, what questions promise to be effective and fruitful when Catholic thinkers ponder and present their faith? What questions will allow the central Christian and Catholic story to emerge and exercise its power? Or, to put matters more concretely,

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<sup>3</sup> Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2007.

how can we enquire about God and portray Christ and his Church in ways that make sense today? At a time and in a country where the religious imagination seems dimmed, how might Catholic thinkers approach the questions: where is God? And who is Jesus Christ? How might such thinkers help people discover or rediscover the deepest meaning and truth that touches their own experience? We face a widespread absence of faith and a spiritual void that lacks persuasive answers to such basic questions as: how should we live? Why are we alive anyway?

Such then is the challenge for Catholic thinkers who occupy an academic home. They need to retell the old story in a new context. They need to fashion a language and find symbols that celebrate wonder at God and evoke the sacred, mysterious past when the Word became flesh to live, die on a cross, and rise from the dead for our eternal welfare. If they are to fulfill their vocation in the twenty-first century, Catholic and other Christian thinkers need to speak a fresh language that can attract an indifferent and individualistic generation and show them how, in a world that is only apparently godless and meaningless, we are all ultimately redeemable.

In finding a fresh language, Catholic thinkers can be helped by contemporary literature, art, and the cinema. A book by Maryanne Confoy, [Morris West: A Writer and a Spirituality](#) showed the kind of help a modern novelist might offer to Christian thinking. In this context I would add something about the world of advertising. The shallow values and empty goals of much advertising open up, inadvertently and often hilariously, splendid possibilities for probing questions. When following on TV the Australian tennis championships earlier this year, over and over again I found myself confronted with a goofy-looking young man who returns home and discovers to his delight that his parents have installed a new bathroom. The ad ended with the message: 'your bathroom, your life'. But is that what life should be ultimately about, making enough money so that you can enjoy a modern bathroom? Another ad for a large hardware chain continues to assure prospective customers that 'the lowest prices are just the beginning'. One might well ask: the beginning of what? A happy home life? A truly meaningful existence?

## A Home for Justice

Where the academic home for Catholic thinking characteristically fosters a faith that seeks to understand the truth and to communicate it effectively, a second home for such thinking fosters a search for justice. This second home may take the shape of a centre for social services located in a poor suburb. Whatever their physical surroundings, the thinkers who choose this 'home' aim at unmasking, challenging, and remedying the social evils of their world.

Such Catholic thinkers support conflict prevention and, even better, a conflict resolution that can help reduce the awful violence of war and the threats of new armed conflicts. They will denounce government policies that endorse the practice of torture and substitute the law of force for the force of law. They are called to resist those who may identify themselves as enlightened 'liberals' but repeatedly exemplify what, as we have seen above, W. H. Auden described as 'the conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder'.

These thinkers are in the business of combating racism, anti-Semitism, and the unfinished business of reconciliation with indigenous peoples. In too many parts of the world, political leaders and those they represent have hardly initiated such reconciliation. Instead, they may press ahead with projects inspired by a 'progress' that wrecks the land and the livelihood of the indigenous.

Thinkers who 'seek justice' must make their voices heard in a world where short-sighted greed too often destroys ecosystems, enlarges deserts, and threatens global water supplies. Faith in the risen Christ must also bring action over such ecological issues, as well as over social and political issues.

In a society that has largely lost its moral centre, Catholic thinkers can be tempted to lapse into playing the blame game. If they don't point the finger at the failures of the institutional churches and their leaders, they may cite the impact of modern science and technology. Have the sciences

endorsed 'progress' (however that is to be understood), spread an ethical and religious neutrality, and left many people feeling that they are at the mercy of impersonal forces?

Advances in life sciences and technology need to be evaluated ethically and religiously. Otherwise, they can threaten the dignity, environment, and even survival of the human race. With various governments ready to legalise experiments with human embryos, full and honest dialogue between ethics and faith, on the one hand, and scientific reason, on the other, is more urgent than ever. In one of his novels, H. G. Wells expressed this need by having a scientist (Dr Moreau) declare: 'I went on with this research just the way it led me...I have never troubled [myself] about the ethics of this matter' (The Island of Dr Moreau). Wells, for all his liberal ideas, recognized the danger of modern science refusing to be guided by moral norms.

A few ago when I was doing research at St Mary's University College, Twickenham, I enjoyed hearing from a colleague named Trevor Stammers, a Christian medical doctor who was frequently engaged in public discussions: for instance, about taking and using human organs. At a time when the availability of organs was less than 50% of the need, some people were in debate with Trevor and arguing that corpses have no rights. 'Yes, we should not do harm, but you can't do harm to the dead. We can take and use their organs, whether or not they consented to this before they died.' Trevor startled them with his question: 'Would you accept necrophilia? Is necrophilia wrong?' His blunt objection reminded them that they had concerned only with not doing harm but ignoring the question of not doing wrong.

Before leaving my second 'home' for Catholic thinkers, I want to add that a 'home for justice' can also be found in centres for prayer and spiritual development, like St Beuno's in North Wales, Trosly and Taizé in France, the Benedictine abbey in New Norcia, or the Campion Centre of Ignatian Spirituality in Kew (to name only five out of many such centres). Those people who through spiritual experience and prayer find meaning in life or deepen their sense of life's meaning become—from what I have repeatedly seen—less materialistic and more concerned for a just society. They lose

racial prejudices and commit themselves in various ways to encourage racial cohesion and discourage autonomous individualism. Healthy spirituality has a huge potential to change society. The practice of prayer supports generous, even heroic commitment, as the social activist Dorothy Day (1897–1980) showed by her shining example.

The film Of Gods and Men illustrated dramatically how regular prayer in common supported the thinking and social commitment of a group of Cistercian monks living in the mountains of Algeria. Their heroic love for people in the local Muslim village led to their being killed, apparently by fundamentalists. An earlier film also based on real life, Dead Men Walking, pictured the courageous solidarity of Sister Helen Prejean towards those sentenced to death (and the families of the victims) and her tenacious opposition to capital punishment—a witness underpinned by her religious life and community.<sup>4</sup> These two examples put the question: what shape can thinking about justice take when this thinking is located on death-row or in an isolated monastery during a civil war in North Africa?

## **A Home for Prayer**

With my last examples I have moved towards my third home for Catholic and Christian thinking: places of regular spiritual and liturgical practice. Many Catholic thinkers find the heart of the matter in celebrating the Eucharist and praying the divine office. Such worship prompts reflection on the beauty of God, and is oriented towards the future goal of glorious life with God for all eternity. In the past such Catholic thinking was practised mainly by monks, hermits, and male and female ‘religious’. Nowadays the ‘home for prayer’ has made room for further groups of prayerful and reflective believers. This home can become a great tent that spreads out from the liturgy.

Firstly, some find particular inspiration in popular religiosity: for instance, the worship of God expressed through pilgrimages and devotion to saints. We learn much when we ask: what form did

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<sup>4</sup> Where her 1993 non-fiction book presented two different offenders, the 1995 film ‘consolidated’ them, as well as merging into one their crimes and the families of their victims.

your Christian thinking take on the 'camino' to Santiago de Compostela and at the last World Youth Day?

Secondly, others cultivate their prayerful thinking in the light of Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and indigenous spirituality, and their diverse experiences and expressions. What influence, for example, can Hindu spirituality have on those who draw from the prayer-life and religious symbols of India when reflecting on the central truths of Christian faith?

Thirdly, when thinking about the Trinity and other key doctrines of Christianity, some turn to the writings of outstanding saints and mystics. Thus in Trinity: Insights from the Mystics<sup>5</sup> Anne Hunt has shown how the experience and worship of the tripersonal God form the central location for Christian thinking. She has done this by appropriating for contemporary thinking the Trinitarian consciousness of eight mystical writers: from William of St Thierry to Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity.

## Summing Up

We can distinguish then three classes of Catholic and Christian thinkers, by picturing their different 'homes': a home for understanding, a home for justice, and a home for prayer. It is through understanding, action, and worship, respectively, that these thinkers relate to God and their fellow human beings, and seek to bless and enrich their world.

Catholic thinking and Christian thinking need three homes. Those who occupy these homes concern themselves, respectively, with the truth of God to be explored and understood, with the justice of God to be practised, and with the infinite beauty of God to be worshipped alone and in community.

Some thinkers, of course, occupy not only one home but also two or even three homes. Whatever home or homes we assign to different thinkers, Catholic and Christian thinking remains the

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<sup>5</sup> Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2010.

poorer when it lacks those who occupy one or other home. We need thinkers concerned with all three central realities of Christianity: faith, justice, and worship. Together, the pursuit of faith, the pursuit of justice, and the pursuit of worship complement each other and should continue to enrich Catholic and Christian life as we move further into the twenty-first century. If Christian thinking is to go anywhere, it needs to occupy three homes that engage themselves together with the study of truth, the realization of justice, and the celebration of beauty.