Opening Words

Professor Paul D. Murray, Dean-Director of the Centre for Catholic Studies

A View on the CCS: Life and Work, Retrospect and Prospect

Thanks Anna. Bishop Séamus, Lord and Lady Brennan, sisters, brothers, fathers, mothers, colleagues, and friends, it really is a joy to be able to share these celebrations with you. There are a number of different groups represented here: from conference speakers and staff and students of the CCS and other Durham colleagues, through various CCS friends, partners, and donors, to other interested parties from far and near. Whatever your subjective sense of why you are here – whether that be a sense of obligation, or conscription, or interested response to invitation, or entirely free self-volition – objectively speaking, you are here because we in the CCS very much wanted you to be here and you, in turn, have had the generosity and capacity to respond positively and so make these days of celebration possible. So on behalf of the staff and students of the CCS, I start by extending a heartfelt word of welcome and grateful thanks to each and every one of you, speakers, donors, and interested parties, for making the time and effort – very considerable in some cases – to be with us for these days. With some confidence, I hope you will find them to be enjoyable, inspiring, and expanding in equal measure.

I also extend a word of thanks to all who have worked so hard to organise these days, so ably led by Theresa Phillips, and to the Dean and Chapter of Durham Cathedral for the generous hospitality we will enjoy tomorrow evening for the Mass of Thanksgiving. Stretching well over ten years now, deep gratitude is really the keynote of all else I want to say in these words of orientation: for the sense of a vision having been lent, breathed-in, shared-in, in-spirated and co-spirated into being.

In some entirely uncharacteristic moment of pompous prolixity, I originally billed these words as ‘A View on the CCS: Life and Work, Retrospect and Prospect’. Thankfully,
we then subsequently hit upon the far better idea of distributing my paper on ‘Theology in Dialogue’ in advance, in order to share something of this view on and from the CCS before our coming together. When taken jointly with the glossy propaganda materials to be found in the conference packs, particularly the CCS Prospectus and the 10th Anniversary Development Brochure, this really gives you the key information, story, and vision. So, if you should find your attention drifting at any point over the next few days, you could do far worse than spend a few minutes perusing these documents, which we obviously hope will have an irresistible appeal for you. Let me just play upon a few of the relevant points and themes for a few minutes.

A little short of 10 years ago, in early May 2008, in this very room, we marked the October 2007 formal establishment of the CCS with a conference on the theme of ‘Catholic Theology in the Public Academy’, which reflected our strap-line. As a research, teaching, and outreach unit focussed on Catholic theology and Catholic studies, with a permanent faculty, with formal teaching and research reaching from undergraduate through postgraduate and postdoctoral, and situated not on Catholic institutional soil but in the pluralist, secular academy, there was a sense of the CCS being something of a world-first when it was established. Sure, there were already numerous other centres for Catholic Studies around the world, particularly in the States, but these are typically based in Catholic institutions. And, again, whilst there were individual posts in Catholic studies in various non-Catholic institutions (such as at Duke), these tend not to be collective endeavours. The one main exception was the Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies (IACS) in the University of Southern California but that is without the permanent teaching faculty and teaching programme that the CCS has. Interestingly, however, since its foundation, the CCS has inspired similar initiatives at: Roehampton University; Trinity College, Dublin; Dublin City University; the Chinese University of Hong Kong; and Otago University, Dunedin, NZ (in process). So people seem to find the model attractive.

From the University’s perspective, the establishment of the CCS presented the opportunity to engage more deeply and more intentionally with the world’s largest faith tradition, and so to expand further the expertise and standing of its internationally regarded Department of Theology and Religion. Whilst, viewed in one way, this was in the University’s enlightened self-interest, it nevertheless took a certain generosity and expansion of imagination to appreciate that this was so and so enable it to happen. So, I here want to extend a formal word of thanks to colleagues in T&R for their hospitality to this initiative, as similarly to successive Heads of Department, successive PVC’s A&H, and successive Vice-Chancellor’s for their respective sustained support.
In turn, from the Catholic ecclesial perspective, the establishment of the CCS presented an opportunity to give new institutional form and expression to UK Catholic theology into the future, allied with the reputation and stability of a leading research university during a time of very considerable cultural change and Catholic institutional demise. Three months prior to the establishment of the CCS, the Missionary Institute London had closed its doors for the last time. Since that point, four other venerable UK Catholic theological institutions have closed or are about to close: Scotus College, Glasgow in 2009; Ushaw College ceased to operate as a seminary in 2011; the Franciscan Study Centre, Canterbury in 2017; and the jewel in the crown, Heythrop College, this coming summer.

One of the faith-rooted convictions which has guided the development of the CCS is that whilst times of challenge are a constant in Christian life, requiring sensitive and responsible handling, so also is the newness of the Spirit a constant, bringing new beginnings, perhaps seemingly modest at their outset, but which need discerning and imaginatively supporting. To take two relevant historic examples: in the wake of the Elizabethan settlement and the outlawing of Catholicism, Cardinal Allen and his colleagues founded Catholic Oxford in exile in Douai in 1568, which did its work for over 200 years. In turn, in the wake of the French revolution, the Douai community returned, tolerated if still illicit, and amongst other institutional manifestations, founded Ushaw, which grew to be the most significant English Catholic tertiary institution in the 19th century and which also did its work for over 200 years.

So also, in the teeth of our own times of challenge, something of the institutional newness and possibility of the CCS has begun to be borne into being over the past ten years; starting with the permanently endowed establishment of the Bede Chair of Catholic Theology in May 2008 in partnership with the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle, the Oaklea Sisters of Mercy, and the Sisters of La Retraite. Since that point, a considerable number of other organisations, institutions, religious orders, and individuals of vision – many of them represented here – have partnered with us to help realise other key aspects of the vision and potential of the CCS, with further posts, student scholarships, research projects, public events and outreach work. A heart-felt thanks to each of you. It is in this same spirit of partnership that we, in turn, hope to continue working together to ensure that our current celebration of ten years of vital beginnings can become, for future generations, a celebration of ten decades and more of flourishing in Catholic theological mission in the stable, common mainstream of the UK public academy.

A particular word of thanks is owing to you, Bishop Séamus, our President for these celebrations. Your years as Administrator and then Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle have
coincided almost exactly with the ten years of formal existence of the CCS. You have been a true and constant friend throughout this period and we thank you for that.

We’re also particularly grateful to the Executive of the Conference of Religious for England and Wales – represented by Br James Bonor – for the specific support received for these Anniversary celebrations; as also Fairfield University, CT, The Tablet, and the Newman Association.

Whilst the May 2008 launch conference was simply entitled, ‘Catholic Theology in the Public Academy’, focusing on the institutional distinctiveness of the CCS, this time we are wanting to focus on what’s inside the tin: on the kind of work that we seek to pursue and to model. Hence the sub-title, ‘Searching the Questions, Sounding the Depths’, is significant. It’s intended to suggest that the constructive theological work of the CCS is variously marked both by the aggiornamento concern to engage the key issues of our day, for church and society, and by the ressourcement concern to pursue these issues through close and creative conversation with the depth and breadth of the tradition, seeking to give it appropriately refreshed articulation and performance. In the circulated paper, I refer to this as a process of ‘Critical-constructive analysis of the issues which arise in relation to the understanding and practice of faith, with a view to enhancing the quality of such understanding and practice.’

As this suggests, despite the fact that the CCS rightly has strong reach across the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, with programmes in the History of Catholicism and Catholicism, Literature, and the Arts, it will nevertheless rightly remain that the heartland of our work will be in seeking to shape the practice and conversations of Catholicism. In various different forms, there is, if you like, a common commitment to theological change-agency at work here. Moreover, as situated in the pluralist, public-secular university system – and in contrast to some other contexts – here there is no question which cannot in principle be asked, nor any line of analysis which cannot in principle be pursued. Equally, however, we seek to do this not as critical by-standers but as engaged participants; not as adolescents but as adults sharing in the responsibilities of living Catholic communion more fully, freely, and fluently for the good of church and society. Now, we’ve not tried to do everything in this conference. The panel topics we’ve chosen represent certain aspects of our work and interests. Nor have we sought to represent all possible perspectives. The plenary speakers have been invited because we believe they each variously represent the kind of commitments and orientation which we are here seeking to model.

By way of summary and conclusion, let me return to matter of the significance of these 10th Anniversary celebrations: their true significance, I would say, is in the manner of a foundation stone. As for Cardinal William Allen and the fathers of Douai in 1568, and as for
the fathers of Ushaw in the early years of the nineteenth century, so too our conviction within
the CCS is that we are being called, in the Holy Spirit, to plant a decisive new phase of
Catholic tertiary mission in the UK; one that is both sufficiently agile and appropriately stable
as to be able to serve Catholic theological work and witness today, tomorrow, and way into
the future. Our hope and prayer is that this same Holy Spirit will continue to evoke resonance
with this project in the hearts and minds of others who are able to help us to realise its
potential and so ensure its growth to maturity and stable flourishing. We thank each of you
for your own interest in this project. In your packs you will find the CCS prayer card. We ask
that you join with us regularly in that prayer and allow it to shape you.

Thank you. I now invite Bishop Séamus to say a few words.