

Our Common Word for Uncommon Times

The 2001 Campbell Scholars*

Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

Bound by Faith and Bound by Pain

We had planned to gather at Columbia Theological Seminary, in Decatur, Georgia, to spend eight weeks exploring what to us was an important issue in church life, namely, how the church can be one while at the same time fully incarnate in its various contexts. We had hoped to study this subject with scholarly leisure, to share our perspectives, and, at the end of our common experience, to have a word of encouragement to the church and the academy.

On September 11, as we were about to start our work, our leisurely plans were shattered. Before our very eyes, some of us in our living rooms in Georgia, Germany, or South Africa, and some of us as we traveled to Decatur, saw the two tallest buildings in New York City collapsing, and with them our illusions of a world at peace. Thousands of lives were lost. And lost also was the dream that many in the world still cherished, that somehow, somewhere, some could be safe from the pain and vulnerability of others. It was thought that economic and political globalization would lead to unity and prosperity for the world. Instead, we were witnessing the globalization of pain and terror.

We have come together with a profound sense of the ties that bind: ties of pain and ties of hope. We find ourselves gathered as Christians from a variety of places and contexts, compelled by circumstances to explore what the Gospel that is our common bond has to say to such a world. We have gathered under the shadow of the events of September 11—events that to us have come to symbolize the widespread experience of senseless suffering, of genocide, of life in constant terror.

We come from churches in different parts of the world. We come from Asia, where churches struggle with religious diversity as it relates to issues of Gospel and culture. We come from Europe, where churches long engaged in missionary work are now seeking to rediscover and redefine their mission. We come from Africa, a continent full of promise and tragedy, where new nations are being born even as millions of people are daily facing death. We come from the Caribbean, from island nations that have become playgrounds for wealthy tourists, and also victims of economic and political marginalization. We come from the United States, a country blessed by a unique ethnic and religious diversity, where many people are still learning that they are bound in a common destiny with all the rest of the world.

We come from different ministries in which we seek to serve the same Lord—some of us as local pastors, others as theologians, teachers, and writers. In our various settings we have witnessed and shared in struggles against racial segregation, economic exploitation, cultural oppression, gender inequality, political repression,

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poverty, and diseases such as HIV-AIDS.

Coming as we do from a variety of settings, cultures, and traditions, we have been struck both by our common bonds and by the differences among us. The ties that bind us include a common faith, but they include also the common experience of all human pain. As a group, we have been able to experience both our very concrete contextualities and our equally concrete unity. We are bound by our unity, but also by the very fact that each one of us is grounded in a very particular context.

A Call to Prayer

Out of those contexts and experiences, as well as of the context and experiences we have shared as Campbell Scholars, and above all the experience of shared human tragedy, we feel the need to call first of all for prayer—prayer in which so much of the world joined on September 11, and which the world so much needs after October 7, when bombs began to fall in Afghanistan.

We pray, and call others to pray, out of the anguish of our hearts. We confess with the Psalmist that “too long have I had my dwelling among those who hate peace” (Ps. 120:6), and that we have been tempted to be carried away by shouts and slogans of hatred and vengeance. We confess that too often we have been oblivious to human tragedy that does not strike close to home, or that does not intrude into our homes via the mass media. We pray for world peace and for world justice. We pray for each other. We pray, as our Lord still prays for us, that we may be one, so that the world may believe (John 17:21). We pray for those who do not believe as we do, and for those who do not believe at all. We pray for those who do not have the consolation of prayer. We pray for those who pray against us. We pray for all. In short, we pray that our prayer may be as catholic as it is contextual, that it be prayer, not only in the presence of God, but also in the presence of God’s entire creation.

A Call to Conversation

We call for this conversation with God to lead to conversation with all humankind. Such conversation is not a mere dialogue that we have and then go home. Nor is it a negotiation in which we seek a compromise, a middle point between our beliefs and “theirs.” It is rather a common life in which, while deeply grounded in our own contexts and our own faith, we live out our catholic vocation. We need a conversation that overcomes old suspicions, that does not seek to classify, or even to convince, but to meet, to create bonds of love, to grow into “all truth” (John 16:13). We need to turn our daily lives into a conversation with other Christians who do not believe as we do, and with those of other faiths who share our concern for the future of the world. We need the conversation of daily living together, not out of economic or social necessity, but out of obedience to the eternal purpose of God “to unite all things” (Eph. 1:10).

A Call to Contextual Catholicity

The question is no longer, what is the unity of the church? The question is rather, what hope is there for a world so divided? What hope is there for a world so entwined that all humankind and even the entire Earth share a common destiny of life or death? What hope is there for a world so divided that events such as genocide in Rwanda and ethnic cleansing can take place, and have been taking place for quite some time, without the world being moved to compassionate action? For the world, these are

indeed questions of life or death.

They are also questions of life or death for the church. If in this hour the Christian church cannot somehow witness to a unity and reconciliation that goes beyond partisanship, nationality, or theological stance, we shall be like salt that has lost its taste, and should not be surprised if the Lord of history casts us out to be trampled by all (Matt. 5:13).

The time has come for all Christians to proclaim with renewed energy the mystery of God's will, made known to us, "as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:10). Yet we are painfully aware that even within our faith community we do not live out of that hope of unity and reconciliation. And we are equally aware that too often we have used proclamation to impose ourselves and our perspective on the rest of humankind.

A Call to Faith

As Christians, we see creation groaning in travail. We groan as we "wait for adoption," for the full "redemption of our bodies," for "the revealing of the children of God." We groan because, even in these times when the world so urgently needs a witness to reconciliation, there is strife within our churches; there are tendencies to further divide the church; there is an unwillingness to set aside our past and present grievances for the sake of God's future. Yet, like Abraham, the common ancestor of Jews, Muslims, and Christians, we also hope against hope (Rom. 4:18), trusting that the present sufferings are the labor pains that will give birth to God's new creation (Rom. 8:22-23).

In times of pain and uncertainty, it is quite easy to fall into idolatry—worshiping gods that have no power to save. There is the idolatry of nation and national purpose, when our will and actions should be guided instead by God's purposes. Throughout human history, we have seen what a high price is paid for national idolatry. There is the idolatry of religion, in which we absolutize our beliefs to the point of placing our trust in them, when in truth our trust should be in no other save in God. In recent days, we have seen how high a price can be paid for this more subtle form of idolatry. There is the idolatry of power and of wealth. For decades, God has challenged this idolatry through the voices of the poor and the powerless, and we have refused to hear.

A Call to Action

These are times that will require of Christians great generosity: generosity in responding to the need and the pain of the victims of terror, hatred, poverty, disease, hunger, and every form of injustice; generosity toward other Christians whose exact beliefs we do not share; generosity toward people of other faiths, or of no faith at all.

These are times when reconciliation and unity among Christians have ceased being merely a dream, and have become an urgent task, as the whole creation waits with eager longing for the manifestation of the children of God.

These are times when Christians must reject every idolatry—even the idolatry of their own views—and risk marching out into the unknown following the guidance of the God who goes ahead of us into freedom, and unity, and justice, and life. We must remember that the Good News, the Evangel, includes the good news of God's plan to unite all things.

This is the time when we must risk being open to God's future. Of this future the

church must be a sign. To this future the church must be an invitation. Out of this future the church must live its life.

The church witnesses to the love of God incarnate through its presence and incarnation in every human context—particularly in contexts of pain and despair. It is through its unity in this diversity—through its catholicity—that the church witnesses to the victory of God incarnate, who “when he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive” (Eph. 4:8).

This will require that we be ready to address the contexts in which we are placed, to be full participants in the struggles for reconciliation and justice in those contexts, and yet, to be open to what God is doing in every other context. In brief, it will require that the church be truly catholic, and therefore fully contextual.

To this the church must be committed at every level and in every one of its manifestations. While catholicity is a gift of God, it is also our task and our vocation. It must be intentionally sought, practiced, and shown. Therefore, our call to action has implications for every level of church life.

A Word to Theological Education

To Columbia Theological Seminary, to its trustees, students, staff, and faculty, we express gratitude. We thank you for your concern for worldwide catholicity, which brought us here. We thank you for your hospitality, which made our sojourn among you pleasant and productive. We thank you for your generosity in bringing us together around a table that became for us a constant reminder of the table of our Lord, for providing a time that became for us a foretaste of the final time for which we all long.

We commend you for your efforts at practicing catholicity by internationalizing theological education. We note and appreciate your programs that seek to expose students, faculty, and the entire community of Columbia to various contexts in the rest of the world. These are examples worth following. Without such exposure catholicity can easily remain an abstract concept.

In order to prepare students for contextually catholic ministry, seminaries must be intentional in their teaching and practice of catholicity. Therefore, we humbly call Columbia Theological Seminary, as well as the entire enterprise of theological education, to be very intentional in its quest to experience and proclaim catholicity. Catholicity requires that theological education include exposure to the church in various contexts. Catholicity requires that theological work reflecting contexts different from our own be taken seriously. Catholicity also requires that theological education be firmly grounded in its own context, with all its complexity and variety. Catholicity must be lived locally. This implies that seminaries will make themselves vulnerable to the challenges of social, cultural, and racial diversity within their own communities. They will become places where all learn to relate positively and productively to religious diversity. If in the past seminaries have modeled themselves mainly after the patterns of the monastery and the university, it is time they begin modeling themselves also after the pattern of the church on the village or town square. While clearly announcing their ecclesial nature and commitment, their life will be such that their door faces the crossroads of the community, and can only be reached through the square.

In times such as these, seminaries and other centers of theological education must ask questions such as:

-- How does our community reflect the composition and the concerns of the immediate community in which we are placed?

-- What mechanisms have we developed to listen to the variety of voices, both in our immediate communities and in other parts of the world?

-- What concrete tools are we providing our graduates, so that in their service to church and community they will understand the theological need, feel compelled, and be prepared, to foster genuine conversation among the various religious, cultural, and social sectors?

-- How does our curriculum demonstrate our commitment, not only to denominational identity, but also to catholic identity? Do we live, teach, and worship in the presence of that church catholic? Or is catholicity something we remember only at certain convenient and designated times?

A Word to the Churches

To the churches also, we begin with a word of gratitude. It is in the church that we have been nourished, and by the church that we have been brought to this time and place. We speak not only *to* the church, but also *from* the church. The words we address to the church we therefore address also to ourselves.

In times such as these, when catholicity and contextuality have become issues of life or death, our calling requires that congregations ask questions such as:

How does this particular local congregation or parish experience and reflect the church catholic? When one worships, how is one brought into the presence of the church catholic? How does the unity of this particular congregation point to the unity of the church, and to God's purpose of unity for all creation? How do we express and experience our unity with other local congregations of other denominations in our own community? Is this a daily experience, one that defines our very being as Christians, or is it something we do occasionally, on those special dates when it seems appropriate to put on the garment of catholicity? Are people encouraged to define themselves primarily as Presbyterians, Methodists, Roman Catholics, Baptists, Pentecostals, or as catholic Christians? Are our ecumenical commitments and contacts only "vertical," along denominational and confessional lines, or are they also "horizontal," along local lines? How are our catholic commitments expressed in our budgets, our curriculum materials, our preaching?

As congregations answer these questions in their own life, we encourage them to participate in partnerships with other churches around the world—partnerships that do the hard work of building trust and learning from each other. We also encourage them to carry on an open, loving, and respectful conversation, and to build networks, with people of other faiths in their own communities.

Our calling requires denominations to ask questions such as:

How does our denomination express its catholicity? Do we encourage our members to consider themselves first of all members of the church catholic, or members of a particular denomination or theological tradition? Are we so bound by our distinctiveness and our traditions that we obscure the tie that binds us together with all Christians?

We urge denominations to define and plan their programs in the light of the *missio Dei*, and in partnership with other denominations. A commitment to catholicity should be manifested in all programs, and particularly in budgets and the allocation of

personnel and resources. We urge all Christians to practice unity within their own denominations as well as with others.

Churches within a nation must not confuse their mission with national goals, dreams, grievances, and causes. In a world divided by the conflicting interests of nations, cultures, and ethnic groups, we urge the churches to live and proclaim in their own contexts a catholicity that goes beyond such conflicting interests.

A Word to All

To those who follow another faith, or no faith at all, we, as Christians, ask your forgiveness for the times when we have been intolerant, when we have acted as if God loved only us. We are sadly aware that we have done this quite often, and still do it. In such cases we have failed to be true witnesses to God and to our faith. We know something of your pain, because sometimes Christians too have suffered from the intolerance of others. We wish to enter into fuller conversation with you as those who must find ways of living together in peace and justice in this one world.

To those who have power to make decisions impacting others, to political leaders, to the media, to those who shape the world's economy, we appeal for greater understanding of the tragedies the misuse of power can cause, and of the good properly used power can do. All power ultimately belongs to God and is to be used for the common good. Therefore we appeal to you, that the power you have may be used to promote the unity of humankind, the health and preservation of creation, and the furtherance of peace and justice. If you do not heed this call, it may well be not only at your own peril, but also at the peril of the whole world.

We have confidence to say these things, not out of our own wisdom or out of our own courage, but because of the God whose promises we trust, and whose plan for the whole of creation guides us, "in the fullness of time to gather all things" (Eph. 1:10).

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. (Jer. 29:11)