

Wonder, the Person and the Common Good
In Catholic Social Teaching and Catholic Higher Education
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In past generations he allowed all Gentiles to go their own ways;
yet, in bestowing his goodness,
he did not leave himself without witness,
for he gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons,
and filled you with nourishment and gladness for your hearts
Acts 14: 16-17

Introduction

“Without wonder, men and women would lapse into deadening routine and little by little would become incapable of a life which is genuinely personal.” So said St. Pope John Paul II (*Fides et Ratio* 4). Within the Catholic tradition the relationship between wonder and a “life which is genuinely personal” beckons our attention. The human person is the “way”, “the primary route,” of the Church (*Centesimus Annus* 53). We see this vividly in three important aspects of the Catholic tradition. The *common good*: The fulfillment of the human person is its purpose (*Gaudium et Spes* 26). *Catholic Social Teaching*: “It proclaims God and his mystery of salvation in Christ to every human being, and for that very reason reveals man to himself. In this light, and only in this light, does it concern itself with everything else” (*Centesimus Annus* 54). *Catholic higher education*: “[W]hat is at stake is the very meaning of the human person” (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae* 7).

Each of these interrelated elements of the Catholic tradition is animated by the tradition’s understanding of the human person and wonder is essential to *being* a human person. Only human persons wonder. Wonder puts us on the path to our final end, the beatific vision. The elicited, natural, and imperfect desire to see God, animated by wonder, introduces us to transcendence on the natural plane. With grace, wonder opens us, through the encounter with Christ, to God’s inner life of love, which makes us subjects of charity in the world. Wonder grounds social ethics. It is fulfilled in the

encounter with Christ, which is essential to Catholic Social Teaching. Cultivating wonder is the primary concern in a human and Christian education.

It is important to note John Paul's words, "without wonder" we cannot live lives which are "genuinely personal." Wonder is necessary. It is the beginning; however, it alone is not sufficient. Understanding, contemplation, judgment, development of a religious, moral, and social sense and living the human good and Christian charity must follow (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae* 23). But wonder is the continuing beginning that must always attend us and abide with us in our fundamental questions about and approach to life and meaning. Wonder is not the property of any age, race, gender, tradition, class, culture, or religion. Every human person who encounters God's creation can wonder.

This paper is intended to highlight the relationship between wonder and the human person within the common good, Catholic Social Teaching and Catholic higher education. It is intended to work within the Catholic tradition and it does not seek to break new ground. Rather, it aims to simulate a more robust consideration of the role of wonder and, thereby, help elucidate the theme of this conference.

The Common Good and the Fulfillment of the Transcendent Human Person

The common good is "a central and unifying principle of social ethics" (*Laudato Si* 156). Fundamental elements of Catholic Social Teaching such as integral ecology, work, human ecology, the family and the preferential option for the poor are inseparable from the common good (*Laudato Si* 156, 157, 159). Understanding the common good and the human person rests on the capacity of all persons, as appropriate to the natural and supernatural plane, to understand themselves in relation to other persons and creation in light of their transcendent relationship with God. Wonder is essential to this human capacity, therefore, to the common good.

Within the Catholic tradition, the common good is generally understood as the totality of social conditions which provide human persons and associations of human persons "relatively thorough and

ready access to their own fulfillment” (*Gaudium et Spes* 26). The common good has an essential transcendent dimension, given that God is the fulfillment of all his creatures (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 164-170).

The human person is a material part and a spiritual whole, at the same time and in the same being. As a material part of society the person needs society for the material goods and services, e.g. food, shelter, clothing, it provides. As a spiritual being, the core of personality, the human person is transcendent of the physical world, “directly related to the absolute,” and needs to communicate and commune with other persons, in “the order of knowledge and love” (Maritain, *Person*, 42). The person needs the cultural, moral and spiritual goods society can provide (Maritain, *Person*, 41, 42). The common good “presupposes ... persons and flows back upon them, and in this sense, is achieved in them” (Maritain, *Person*, 51).

The common good is not realized in the exchange and distribution of material goods, socio-economic opportunities and political power. Persons participate in the common good by giving themselves to other persons and to the community of persons and by receiving the gift of self from others. In order to help persons flourish, social conditions must facilitate this giving and receiving. Recognizing that this self-giving is “made possible by the human person’s essential ‘capacity for transcendence’” (*Centesimus Annus* 41) is crucial to achieving the common good.

So we face the question of understanding and promoting the common good, where each human person is a part of a community needing material and spiritual goods only others can provide. Yet, persons are also wholes (Maritain, *Person*, 58), transcendent beings who cannot be reduced to cogs in social machinery or molecules in a social organism and who fulfill themselves in giving and receiving the gift of self.

This fundamental anthropological question is addressed by reference to our ultimate end, the beatific vision where we eternally commune with God and other souls.

The beatific vision is ... the supremely personal act by which the soul, transcending absolutely every sort of created good, enters into the very bliss of God and draws its life from the uncreated Good, the divine essence itself, the uncreated common Good of the Divine Persons (Maritain, *Person*, 21) [emphasis added].

Maritain proposes that the earthly common good of human persons is situated between the common good of the Holy Trinity, the common life we enter in the beatific vision, and what might be called the society of animals, a society of material beings. The Trinity is a “society of pure Persons” without the individuation of materiality. “Each one is in the other through an infinite communion, the common good of which is strictly and absolutely the proper good of each, since it is that which each person is and their very act of existing.” (Maritain, *Person*, 58, 59; See also *Caritas in Veritate*, 54).

In a society of animals each member is nothing more than an isolated member, only a part, “totally subservient to the proper good of the whole.” There is no good which is wholly common to or distributed to all (Maritain, *Person*, 59).

Human society is located in between these two. We are material beings, and in that sense, are isolated from each other. Yet, we need communion here with other persons lived “in anticipation of that perfect communion with one another and God in life eternal” (Maritain, *Person*, 59). So, the earthly common good is superior to the individual good of each person, “but [the common good] flows back on each” person. The earthly common good supports the movement of each person beyond physical realities to the gift of self. The social conditions which allow the human person to flourish are those conditions which minister to and help vivify each person’s orientation to the beatific vision, “the supremely personal act” (Maritain, *Person*, 21).

The common good is not simply an accumulation of material things and of opportunities to acquire them. It is not essentially a storehouse of divisible stuff to be distributed fairly (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* 164). The common need certainly is a part of the common good, but the common good is far more comprehensive. (Maritain, *Person*, 52, 53) The common good “can be understood as the social and community dimension of the moral good” (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* 164). The common good is not divisible, rather it is our shared moral life pursuant to which, *inter alia*, material goods and socio-economic opportunities are made available in society.

“Society as a whole, and the state in particular, are obliged to defend and promote the common good” (*Laudato Si* 157). The common good is the basis of all political authority and action (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* 168). Each person, with or without the gift of grace and faith, participates in the common good. Therefore, defending and promoting the common good requires us to understand the transcendence of the human person, the essential capacity for mutual self-giving, on the natural plane and its relationship to human transcendence on the supernatural plane of grace and faith. All persons must be able to perceive all creation, including themselves, as gift and so be moved to infer that the things of this world are not simply an accumulation of stuff available for our manipulation and distribution. Everyone must be able, as appropriate to nature and grace, to comprehend himself or herself in relationship to other persons and creation in light of the person’s transcendent relationship with God.

Wonder is critical to the common good because it is the natural movement toward a life lived in orientation to – in search of - God. Wonder, as the animation of the elicited, natural, imperfect desire to see God (Feingold 402, 403) and the first step to the beatific vision (Pieper 103), is the essential foundation of the natural human capacity for transcendence and for participation in the common good.

The Inexhaustible Light of Things

Plato (155d) and Aristotle (I.2, 982b-11) taught us that wonder is the beginning of philosophy and is the continuing animating force in our search for knowledge and meaning. This realization is the cornerstone of the perennial philosophy. Aquinas provided us with a profound development of our understanding of wonder. He defined wonder as

[A] kind of desire for knowledge; a desire which comes to man when he sees an effect of which the cause either is unknown to him, or surpasses his knowledge or faculty of understanding. Consequently wonder is a cause of pleasure, in so far as it includes a hope of getting the knowledge which one desires to have (*ST I-II. Q.32. A.8.*).

Only human persons wonder. Only humans have their relationship to God mediated through the created world. Aquinas argued that Christ was truly human because he wondered at the centurion's faith (*ST III. Q.15. A.8.*; Schindler 164) As Pieper said,

Only a spiritual capacity for knowledge that does not know everything it knows at once and perfectly is capable of becoming gradually aware of the deeper and more essential world behind the sensual, physical world – only the human spirit is capable of wonder (108).

Wonder continually moves us to seek the cause of the effects we see and it is a source of pleasure (Aquinas *ST I-II. Q.32. A.8.*). Wonder is not just the beginning of knowledge. Wonder animates all knowing, continuing to lead us on at every stage (Pieper 106, Schindler 173).

In wonder common things and events unsettle, shock and amaze us. "For although wonder is a disposition in us, it is awakened in us by things" (Schmitz 49). Wonder is not limited to miracles, unusual events or objects (Pieper 100). It can be an everyday experience. In wonder well known things present themselves as new. The smallest most ordinary thing never ceases to be a source of marvel. This does not plunge us into doubt and make doubt the beginning of knowing. Wonder is our way into the mystery of existence. Wonder "invites us in rather than keeps us out" (Schindler 167-169).

"[W]onder signifies that the world is profounder, more all-embracing and mysterious than the logic of everyday reason had taught us to believe. The innermost meaning of wonder

is fulfilled in a deepened sense of mystery. It does not end in doubt, but in awakening the knowledge that being, *qua* being, is mysterious and inconceivable, and that it is a mystery in the full sense of the word: neither a dead end, nor a contradiction, nor even something impenetrable and dark: mystery really means that a reality, the singular existing thing, is inconceivable *because* it is an inexhaustible source of light, and for ever unfathomable. And that is the fact which is experienced in wonder” [emphasis in original] (Pieper 105).

“Marveling sets one on a road that never ends” (Pieper 116). In wonder creation discloses to us that it is unfathomable. “It was the luminous depth in things that awakened wonder and led to the positive notion of mystery, underlying even physical things” (Schmitz 49). Wonder opens us to a reality that D.C. Schindler refers to as “abidingly question-worthy” (186). In wonder creation continuously invites and entices our deepest questions about the meaning of the world and our lives (Stebbins 7, 8; Giussani 100-109). “Asking the question ‘why’ in wonder... can be a way of giving oneself over to what gives itself to be known” (Schindler 195).

Wonder discloses the radical being of the world. We face a “reality which is not [ours], which exists independently of [us] and upon which [we] depend” (Giussani 101). We see the world as a gift, a creation that provisions us (Giussani 101). Wonder gives birth to an attitude of receptivity, listening, seeing and receiving which sets aside the human will (Pieper 102; Giussani 101). Creation is a gift, a good, we cannot circumscribe. This points to understanding that we live in a world where the notion that we are unbridled masters of nature whose task is to find out how the stuff of the world works so we can manipulate it to our will simply makes no sense. Indeed, we see ourselves, including our very bodies, as gifts - as inexhaustible sources of amazement.

This understanding is specifically challenged by modern philosophy, which has demoted things from the status of subjects to the realm of objects and further to mere phenomena. Things stand as a “given,” rather than as a “gift” from a “giver.” On this account, things are a starting

point, the “given,” in a system aimed at validating our “scientific knowledge” exercised in control of nature (Schmitz 76-79; *Laudato Si* 115).

Wonder holds us in awe of the smallest, most ordinary thing. Nature is not something we control. Indeed, as a source of unfathomable light it simply cannot be understood as a storehouse of stuff at the disposal of our will. We are presented with a gift to behold and to contemplate and whose source we seek.

The Natural Desire to See God – Natural Human Transcendence

Wonder leads us on a never ending journey in search of the first cause of the effects – including ourselves – we see in the world. This journey carries us to a most profound realization. Wonder is the natural assurance that we are capable of achieving our ultimate end to see God. Faced with the question of whether the created intellect could ever see God, Aquinas argued, from reason, that our natural desire, born of wonder, to know the first cause of effects we see in this world would be void if it was not capable of seeing God, the first cause of all things. This cannot be, so the created intellect, animated by wonder, is capable, with the gift of grace, of beholding God (*ST I. Q.12. A.1.*).

Wonder is a radically human capacity to move toward our ultimate end. Pieper calls it the first step on the ladder to the beatific vision. It is the first step, not the complete journey. On the plane of nature, this journey leads to the realization that by our nature we can behold only an imperfect and unsatisfying vision of God, the first cause and good which we continue to seek in wonder. We realize we are on “a road that never ends” (Pieper 116) – our natural capacities desire to start the quest, continue it and find its end. However, those same natural capacities comprehend that the quest cannot be completed by nature alone (Aquinas *ST I-II. Q.3; Feingold 3, 4*). This is the basis of our natural self-transcendence.

This extension of the elicited desire to know beyond the limits of what is proportionate to the human intellect is a necessary consequence of the fact that every intellect, by its very nature, wonders and seeks for the truth about universal being...[T]he created intellect naturally desires to know God, but cannot naturally know Him as He is. Our elicited natural desire transcends the innate capacity of our nature or that of any creature (Feingold 402, 403)!

Maritain notes the limitation on the natural capacity of the human person to satisfy the ultimate goal of the desire born of wonder requires something “not due to nature.”

To say that our intellect naturally desires to see God is to say that it naturally desires a knowledge of which nature itself is incapable. This desire is transnatural. It moves toward an end that is beyond the end for which the nature of man is constituted. According as it reaches thus for an end which transcends every end proportioned to nature, the desire to see God is an ‘inefficacious’ desire – a desire which it is not in the power of nature to satisfy, and it is a ‘conditional’ desire – a desire whose satisfaction is not due to nature. (*Approaches* 68)

Wonder leads us not simply to a place of yearning for more. There is a real fulfillment of human life on the natural plane which follows our natural, elicited desire, born of wonder, to see God (Feingold 1-9). We are led to contemplation and to understanding. Based on our natural capacities alone we can achieve a “true and certain knowledge of the one personal God, Who by His providence watches over and governs the world” (*Humani Generis* 12). But this understanding is limited and fragile without the help of grace (*Humani Generis* 12). It is finally unsatisfactory, for and we desire to see God as He is and this is given only through faith and grace (Feingold 1-9).

As the first step toward the beatific vision, wonder impels us to seek God through his created things. Wonder allows us to hear the testimony of nature. We are led to understand that God created the world as gift, to see ourselves and other persons as transcendent of physical realities, and to yearn for a fulfillment that is beyond us. The experience in wonder of the inexhaustible light of things raises human society above a mere arrangement for the distribution of socio-temporal goods and animates a common good of persons whose relationships are based on who they are in relation to their natural desire to see God.

With Grace Comprehending the Inexhaustible Light as the Revelation of God's Inner Life of Love

Wonder “reveals itself to be a gift of God’s own inner life” (Schindler 228). In the grace of God’s love, wonder is seen as a path to the inner life of the Trinity, the perfect love of the Divine Persons and the model of the human common good.

Grace perfects the natural desire to see God. In wonder we seek the source of the effects we see in the world. We ask why creation, including ourselves and other persons, exists. In wonder we experience that “the singular existing thing, is inconceivable *because* it is an inexhaustible source of light, and for ever unfathomable” (Pieper 105). We take the first step toward the beatific vision. In grace, we find a satisfaction, appropriate to our earthly life, of that desire to see God which is “not due to nature”(Maritain, *Approaches*, 68) and which is “God himself in a gratuitous gift” (Pinckaers, *Morality*, 30). In grace, wonder allows us to comprehend that the witness who testifies to God in nature is Jesus, Truth and Love in Person.

Caritas in Veritate affirmed what revelation holds is the source of that inexhaustible light we experience in wonder. “[E]verything has its origin in God's love, everything is shaped by it, everything is directed towards it” [emphasis in the original] (*Caritas in Veritate* 1).

No thing is just stuff. Things can help lead us to God because each thing is filled with God’s love. Things are not just objects, they are subjects (Schmitz 63, 64). “Deep within each physical thing, dwells the glory of the Creator God” (Schmitz 46). “The loving vision of God is revelation’s true, complete answer to the spontaneous question raised in every human heart” (Pinckaers *Sources* 11).

God’s love, the source of and the light from each thing, is the relationship of the Persons of the Trinity. This love, given to us through Jesus Christ, is our life of charity, the Christian animation of the common good and the basis of Catholic Social Teaching.

Charity is love received and given. It is “grace” (*cháris*). Its source is the wellspring of the Father's love for the Son, in the Holy Spirit. Love comes down to us from the Son. It is creative love, through which we have our being; it is redemptive love, through which we are recreated. Love is revealed and made present by Christ (cf. Jn 13:1) and “poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit” (Rom 5:5). As the objects of God's love, men and women become subjects of charity, they are called to make themselves instruments of grace, so as to pour forth God's charity and to weave networks of charity.

This dynamic of charity received and given is what gives rise to the Church's social teaching, which is *caritas in veritate in re sociali*: the proclamation of the truth of Christ's love in society [emphasis in the original] (*Caritas in Veritate* 5).

The “dynamic of charity” is the truth of our relationship with God and each other. Charity is “the principle not only of micro-relationships (with friends, with family members or within small groups) but also of macro-relationships (social, economic and political ones)” (*Caritas in Veritate* 2; *Laudato Si* 231). We build networks of charity through the virtue of solidarity by which we give ourselves to other persons through the common good (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* 38-40). Here we return to Maritain’s explanation of the common good. “To weave networks of charity,” wherein charity is the principle of micro and macro human relationships in the light of the Trinity, is to live and to give ourselves most fully “in anticipation of that perfect communion with one another and God in life eternal” (Maritain, *Persons*, 59). In grace, wonder ushers us into that communion of love. This is a radical way of living which calls us to identify, challenge and dismantle entrenched “structures of sin” (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* 38).

D.C. Schindler proposes that we can understand God’s love within the Trinity as the perfect wonder of the Father for the Son transpiring in the truth of the Holy Spirit, sounding “the depths of the mystery of God.” Our wonder can be seen as a distant sharing in this perfect wonder of God. Wonder is both received and given with God’s love (228).

Pope Francis put the matter more directly.

We are losing our attitude of wonder, of contemplation, of listening to creation and thus we no longer manage to interpret in it what Benedict XVI calls “the rhythm of the love-story between God and man. Why does this happen? Why do we think and live

horizontally, we have drifted away from God, we no longer read his signs (*General Audience*).

Pope Francis said that inner peace, reflected in a “capacity for wonder which takes us to a deeper understanding of life,” is “closely related to the care for the common good” (*Laudato Si* 225). Wonder calls us to listen to the words of love in nature and to contemplate God who is present to be found, not contrived (*Laudato Si*, 225). Recall that St. John Paul II claimed “[w]ithout wonder, men and women would lapse into deadening routine and little by little would become incapable of a life which is genuinely personal” (*Fides et Ratio* 4). Without wonder, we cannot live in anticipation of that “supremely personal act” of the beatific vision. Without wonder, perfected in grace, we cannot live as objects of God's love who become subjects of charity, who give themselves as “instruments of grace, so as to pour forth God's charity and to weave networks of charity.” On the planes of nature and grace, wonder leads us to understand, to promote and to defend the common good.

Wonder and the Common Good in Catholic Social Teaching

Wonder is woven into Catholic Social Teaching, because wonder is essential to the human person and to the common good.

St. Pope John Paul II demonstrated the critical social and political dynamic of wonder in his critique of the anthropological basis of two systems of human organization each of which treats the human person as a part and not as a whole: socialism which “considers the individual person simply as an element, a molecule within the social organism” and Enlightenment rationalism which “views human and social reality in a mechanistic way” (*Centesimus Annus* 13).

If we then inquire as to the source of this mistaken concept of the nature of the person and the ‘subjectivity’ of society, we must reply that its first cause is atheism. It is by responding to the call of God contained in the being of things that man becomes aware of his transcendent dignity. Every individual must give this response, which constitutes the apex of his humanity, and no social mechanism or collective subject can substitute for it. The denial of God deprives the person of his foundation, and consequently leads to a

reorganization of the social order without reference to the person's dignity and responsibility...[T]here is a denial of the supreme insight concerning man's true greatness, his transcendence in respect to earthly realities, the contradiction in his heart between the desire for the fullness of what is good and his own inability to attain it and, above all, the need for salvation which results from this situation (13).

This critique traces the social and political significance of the movement of wonder in our elicited and imperfect desire to see God.

Within the common good lives the call of God in the being of things. Pope Benedict told us, “The book of nature is one and indivisible ... [t]ruth, and the love which it reveals, cannot be produced: they can only be received as a gift. Their ultimate source is not, and cannot be, mankind, but only God, who is himself Truth and Love” (*Caritas in Veritate* 51). Wonder allows us to hear God’s words of love and truth in nature. It opens us to the “call of God in the being of things.” The depth of wonder’s presence in the common good is shown in Catholic Social Teaching’s presentation of care for the environment, human work, human ecology, the family and the preferential option for the poor.

In Catholic Social Teaching care for the environment and human work are both expressly based on wonder and seeing creation as gift. Pope Francis pointed to the wonder of St. Francis as the basis for integral ecology, our comprehensive care for our common home we have been given by God (*Laudato Si* 11). Regarding human work, he said “Any approach to an integral ecology, which by definition does not exclude human beings, needs to take account of the value of labour.” The “correct understanding of work” is part of “the relationship between human beings and things.” (*Laudato Si* 124)

Underlying every form of work is a concept of the relationship which we can and must have with what is other than ourselves. Together with the awe-filled contemplation of creation which we find in Saint Francis of Assisi, the Christian spiritual tradition has also developed a rich and balanced understanding of the meaning of work... (*Laudato Si* 125).

Pope Francis followed Pope John Paul II's exposition of the relationship between work and care for the environment.

In *Centesimus Annus* John Paul II said that our "capacity to transform and in a certain sense create the world" by our own work "is always based on God's prior and original gift of things as they are. (37). This echoes his statement in *Laborem Exercens* that, "In every phase of the development of his work man comes up against the leading role of *the gift made* by "nature", that is to say, in the final analysis, by *the Creator*. At the beginning of man's work is the mystery of creation" [emphasis in the original] (12). In order "to cooperate with God in the work of creation" and maintain our proper relationship with nature we need the

disinterested, unselfish and aesthetic attitude that is *born of wonder* in the presence of being and of the beauty which enables one to see in visible things the message of the invisible God who created them [emphasis added] (*Centesimus Annus* 37)

Just as the natural environment contains a message from God for its proper use so does the human person and human society. This is Catholic Social Teaching's understanding of human ecology, which is based on accepting the gift of nature.

Not only has God given the earth to man, who must use it with respect for the original good purpose for which it was given to him, but man too is God's gift to man. He must therefore respect the natural and moral structure with which he has been endowed. (*Centesimus Annus* 38)

This understanding of the relationship between gift and the moral order, including respect for human life at all of its stages, has been expressed by Pope Benedict (*Caritas in Veritate* 51) and Pope Francis (*Laudato Si* 115). In *Laudato Si* Pope Francis said that accepting God's gift of one's own body in its femininity or masculinity is essential to accepting the world as gift, to seeing oneself in another person and to accepting "the specific gifts of another man or woman" (155) This giving of self and receiving the gift of others is central to the common good.

The family, based on marriage and “the mutual gift of self by husband and wife,” is “the first and fundamental structure of ‘human ecology’” (*Centesimus Annus* 38). John Paul II pointed to the “primordial wonder” of Adam at his first sight of Eve and the bridegroom’s wonder at his wife in the Song of Solomon as the basis of human sexuality that finds its fulfillment in family (*Gratissiman Sane* 19).

Understanding the earth as a gift is the basis of the universal destination of property and the preferential option for the poor. “God gave the earth to the whole human race for the sustenance of all its members, without excluding or favouring anyone. This is *the foundation of the universal destination of the earth’s goods*” [emphasis in the original] (*Centesimus Annus* 31). The universal destination of all goods and the dignity of the poor which is embedded in Christian belief, in turn, form the basis of the preferential option for the poor, “an ethical imperative for effectively attaining the common good” (*Laudato Si* 158). Our response to the call of God contained in the gift of the earth for all is to act to make earthly goods appropriate for a dignified human life available to all, especially those most in need.

Wonder moves us to see creation as a gift revealing the call of the Creator in things and so wonder moves us to see our transcendence of earthly realities. We are ushered beyond the visible and beyond ourselves by the “disinterested, unselfish and aesthetic attitude that is born of wonder.” This attitude is marked by the continuing question why and by acceptance of the mystery of existence.

Through wonder we encounter “the contradiction in [our] heart[s] between the desire for the fullness of what is good and [our] own ability to attain it.” Through wonder all human persons can see that the satisfaction of our desire for “the fullness of what is good” “transcends the innate

capacity of our nature” (Feingold 402,403). This discloses to us our “need for salvation.” Our deepest questions yearn for a response that is beyond us.

Through grace, wonder leads to an apprehension of what salvation means. As summarized most recently by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “salvation consists in being incorporated into a communion of persons that participates in the communion of the Trinity. (*Placuit Deo* 12). This communion is foreshadowed in the earthly common good (Maritain, *Person*, 59).

Political ideologies and structures that block, deny, ignore or obscure the truth that each and all human persons can see in each thing the gift of the inexhaustible light of the call of God will finally distort and deform the social order. These ideologies try to shut down the questions we are impelled by our humanity to ask. Today, some assert that it is the very seedbed of oppression to claim that the human person is transcendent of social constructs and is capable of perceiving the “being of things” as normative through a “disinterested, unselfish and aesthetic attitude.”

Political and social structures must be open to and minister to the person’s “need for salvation.” Pope Benedict reminded us that

development requires a transcendent vision of the person, it needs God: without him, development is either denied, or entrusted exclusively to man, who falls into the trap of thinking he can bring about his own salvation, and ends up promoting a dehumanized form of development (*Caritas in Veritate* 11).

Here can see why John Paul II said Catholic Social Teaching is essentially evangelical. It “proclaims God and his mystery of salvation in Christ to every human being, and for that very reason reveals man to himself. In this light, and only in this light, does it concern itself with everything else” (*Centesimus Annus* 54). Through grace, wonder allows us to hear and to receive that Christ is decisive in fulfilling our desire to see God and to live fully the common moral life of justice and charity. The encounter with Christ is the

only true satisfaction of our deepest “whys” (Bergoglio 83) and is the essential Christian act (*Deus Caritas Est* 1).

The Pre-Tuned Meeting Place of Nature and Grace

The natural desire to see God, vividly present in the realization of the “need for salvation” (*Centesimus Annus* 13) serves as “a point of meeting” between the order of nature and the order of grace. (Feingold 432) Servais Pinckaers noted,

St. Thomas shows how much the desire for God resides secretly in the consciousness of every person. It rests at the root of the moral life and cannot be fulfilled by any good except God himself in a gratuitous gift. In this way nature and grace are pre-tuned to each other by a foundational harmony composed of the two notes of truth and goodness that form our spiritual being (*Morality*, 30).

Wonder keeps us out of the “trap” that denies the transcendence of the human person. Wonder is essential to maintaining the moral and cultural life of society (Bergoglio, 83). All persons alive to wonder can live a shared, rich moral life. By animating the natural desire to see God, wonder ushers us to a meeting point for all persons to collaborate in promoting and defending the common good. At this “pre-tuned” meeting point, Christians have an enhanced opportunity to fulfill their vocation to weave networks of charity and help each and all persons to live more and more “in anticipation of that perfect communion with one another and God in life eternal” (Maritain, *Person*, 59).

Wonder and Catholic Higher Education

Wonder is the entry point and the continuing animation for the search for truth and meaning. We must be able to hear “the call of God in the being of things” in order to respond and reach the “apex of our humanity” (*Centesimus Annus* 13). In *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* students of Catholic colleges and universities are challenged,

Most especially, to continue the search for truth and for meaning throughout their lives, since ‘the human spirit must be cultivated in such a way that there results a growth in its ability *to wonder*, to understand, to contemplate, to make personal judgments, and to develop a religious, moral, and social sense’ [emphasis added, internal citation omitted](23).

Without wonder education moves inexorably away from truth, meaning and Truth in Person.

Without wonder education moves inexorably away from justice, charity and the promotion of the common good... Therefore, without neglecting the entire experience of “the search for truth and for meaning,” the primary and continuing concern of Catholic undergraduate education should be the cultivation of wonder. This is a radical idea that challenges important considerations: the primacy of the disciplines, accreditation and assessment, student career preparation, prestige, rankings, faculty and administrator career advancement, and more.

Of course, any person, young or old, anywhere, can see the rains, the fruitful seasons, a butterfly or even a fly and wonder. Nevertheless, the question can be put whether a course of study can cultivate wonder and help move the student into the search for knowledge and truth with wonder always abiding. A course of study that can guarantee that each student will wonder is not available. The truth that a student is the agent of her or his own education reveals itself most clearly in any attempt to cause a student to wonder. So, courses *about* wonder are not the answer; a student can perfectly recite the definition of wonder and never wonder about it.

Our experience of wonder is marked by our questions about the world and ourselves; by our asking “why” in which we give ourselves “over to what gives itself to be known” (Schindler 195). Wonder, the opening to the fathomless mystery of existence, abides with this receptive and disinterested questioning. The first step is “blowing the ashes suffocating the burning embers of the fundamental whys ... to make sense of the questions that are hidden or buried” (Bergoglio 80-81).

While recognizing there are other paths to eliciting wonder, I propose a prudent wager might be placed on a Great Books course of study that invites, vivifies, amplifies, deepens and pursues the students' own questions – *their* “fundamental whys.” I will take as my example the Integral Curriculum of Liberal Arts at St. Mary's College of California. The Program, as it is called, is distinguished from other Great Books curricula in that it operates within the Catholic tradition and yet has been greatly influenced by St. John's College and, in particular, by Jacob Klein, a distinguished former St. John's tutor (Cortright 4, 16).

Eliciting wonder as an essential act of the human person is expressly central to the Program's mission.

[T]he Program frames the enactment of liberal education in terms of eliciting students' *wonder* and of fructifying it by fostering students' acquisition of liberal artistry... It addresses each [student] according to the dignity supposed by the Christian understanding of the human person: rational creature whose wonder the Creator, lovingly become Truth in Person, lovingly addresses with intimations (ρήματα) of spirit and life [emphasis in original] (Cortright 3).

How does the Program proceed to fulfill its mission? Following the students' questions is crucial. Professor Klein described the kind of question which the Program aims at eliciting in students (Cortright 18, 19).

We do . . . experience a kind of question which, as it were, tends to smash the bounds that limit us. We do occasionally stop altogether and face the familiar as if for the first time—anything: a person, the street, the sky, a fly. The overwhelming impression on these occasions is the strangeness of the thing we contemplate. . . . We suddenly do not feel at home in this world of ours. We take a deep look at things, at people, at words, with eyes blind to the familiar. We re-lect. Plato has a word for it: *metastrophē* or *periagogē*, a turnabout, a conversion. We detach ourselves from all that is familiar to us; we change the direction of our inquiry; we do not explore the unknown anymore; on the contrary, we convert the known into the unknown. We wonder. And we burst out with that inexorable question: Why is that so? . . . But this “why” . . . does not lead us to any discovery or recovery. It calls myself in question with all my questioning. It compels me to detach myself from myself, to transcend the limits of my horizon; that is, it educates me. (Klein 52)

The Program's course of study is worthy of students' deepest questions and is, therefore, particularly fit to cultivate wonder (Cortright 19). The Program traverses the Western Tradition through what are called the Great Books, primary, seminal works of literature, philosophy, theology, mathematics and science that plumb the mystery of existence. They are, simply put, "great documents of . . . seeing, hearing, imagining and understanding" (Klein 264, 265). The Program does not propose these books as simply testaments to the past. Rather, it sets the goal of helping students to "read [these books] by way of revivifying the insights from which they spring, appropriating the insights as objects of critical reflection '(Cortright 19).

In the Program the conversation is not isolated to one text, to one "discipline," or one historical period. It does not follow a preset theme or syllabus. Rather, it follows the students' questions and experience as they are sharpened and deepened over four years immersed in the richness and interrelatedness of the Western Tradition. In 1945 an eventual founder of the Program described this process as follows:

The young man who is reading Homer and his teacher who is reading it with him can say something valid about the love of Helen and Paris or of Hector and Andromache only if he considers carefully what Homer says of them. He can only judge of this by reconsidering and evaluating his own experience. The judgment that he then makes will be challenged again when he reads Plato's *Symposium*, or he when consults some further and more significant private experience. This process of fructification of experience by reading and of enrichment of reading through experience can go on through the first Epistle of St. John and the *Troilus and Criseyde* of Chaucer straight up to Graham Greene and Huxley. [We can add whatever writers seem significant in the last 70 years.] In short his education will enable the student to comprehend and judge his own experience and that of his contemporaries. It will be aiding him to do humanly and in a Christian manner what he now does so badly in "bull sessions" and the reading of cheap magazines [Today we might reference social media.] (Smith 17).

The extended inquiry described above is part of a full curriculum. As currently existing in the Program's course of study is described, with some humor, as follows:

8 chronologically ordered seminars at the center of studies—the great books encountered in all-or-nothing conversational inquiry twice weekly, each semester, over four years;
8 chronologically ordered mathematics tutorials, devoted to *quadrivial* triumphs from Euclid's *Elements* to *Relativity: The Special and General Theory*;
8 language tutorials devoted to *trivial* excellences in grammar, logic, rhetoric, and in *poiesis*, hermeneutics, dialectic [including 4 semesters of ancient Greek];
4 laboratories devoted to the ancients' "unofficial fifth quadrivial art," the inquiry into *ta physika*, into the nature-things that yield to observation, classification, measurement, the modern physics and chemistry that brought home the Bacon, Darwin, Mendel, Watson and Crick;
1 semester ... music as *practicum* (Cortright 2).

All students take this same curriculum and all teachers, over time, teach most or all of the courses. So as the conversation continues, the question of love will be seen in light of the Trinity, "the one and the many," modern psychology (Smith 18), the common good, and perhaps more of what creation gives of itself for us to know. What students do with the question of love can also be experienced with other critical questions such as personhood, identity, social justice, change and motion, our relationship to nature, and who Jesus Christ is. By hazarding the students' questions to decide the course of the conversation, few matters of significance to humanity will be missed over four years of the curriculum.

How does this elicit wonder? We return to *Centesimus Annus* 13 where John Paul II said

It is by responding to the call of God contained in the being of things that man becomes aware of his transcendent dignity. Every individual must give this response, which constitutes the apex of his humanity, and no social mechanism or collective subject can substitute for it.

The Program attempts to avoid any substitute for the students' own response to the being of things.

The curriculum helps blow the ashes off the student's questions –and provide some kindling for the embers - by bringing students into engagement, as directly as possible, with an ongoing conversation that has profoundly considered fundamental "whys." Through hands-on-laboratories, it opens students to closely looking at physical nature. The Program gives students the opportunity to –and expects them

to - linger over and reconsider their own questions together with other students and teachers on the same journey.

The curriculum is an invitation for students to realize that their own experience and questions are fully worthy of direct engagement with the greatest minds and with profound considerations of the human person. This consideration is not simply in the “abstract;” it is about each student as a “concrete” person who is “the way” of the Church (Centesimus Annus 53) and “whose wonder the Creator, lovingly become Truth in Person, lovingly addresses with intimations (ρήματα) of spirit and life” (Cortright 3).

Accordingly, the Program never proposes that students’ questions can or should terminate in a correct answer on a test, the completion of the teacher’s syllabus, the acquisition of the skills of a particular discipline, an “assessable outcome,” or the affirmation of any ideology. Rather, the Program is a continuing invitation, expectation and opportunity for students to follow their own “whys” deeply into the mystery of existence where those questions may smash the bounds that limit students and where they may experience *metastrophē* or *periagogē*. Their own “whys” may lead students to transcend the limits of their natural horizon, to be more open to hearing the intimations of God in the being of things and to yearn more for the encounter with Truth and Love in Person.

Conclusion

Wonder allows each person to be drawn out of himself or herself by the encounter with the inexhaustible light of created things, the gratuitous witness to God and his goodness. As the animation of the natural, elicited and imperfect desire to see God, wonder moves us to understand that we must transcend ourselves to be fully persons. This transcendence is our capacity for self-giving. It is fulfilled only in our encounter with Jesus Christ who gave himself that we might live as subjects of his charity and be incorporated into the Trinity in the beatific vision. It is in living as fully as we each are given by

nature and grace, on the way to eternal life with the Trinity that we promote the common good and incarnate Catholic Social Teaching. So we must risk, refuse to live without wonder, blow the ashes off our “fundamental whys” and feed the embers with kindling.

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