

In Memory of Father Matthew Lamb: *Pater et Magister*

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IN HIS DOCTORAL COLLOQUIA on the ancients and the moderns, Fr. Lamb was fond of observing Socrates' final line from the *Apology*, "But now it is time to go away, I to die and you to live. Which of us goes to a better thing is unclear to everyone except to the god (*ho theos*).” A lifelong devotee of the wisdom of Plato and Aristotle, Fr. Lamb never hesitated to affirm the newness of the Gospel and its promise of eternal life. We now know that death has lost its sting and has become a *dies natalis*, a day of birth, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word.

The Book of Sirach chapter 44 writes, “Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers in their generations; ... leaders of the people in their deliberations and in understanding of learning for the people, wise in their words of instruction.” Such men “were the glory of their times. There are some of them who have left a name, so that men declare their praise.” In a priestly vocation and theological career in which he was in Rome during the Second Vatican Council and played a significant role in many of the theological debates of his time, Fr. Matthew Lamb was indeed among the “leaders of the people in their deliberations” who were “wise in their words of instruction.”

Fr. Lamb was born in 1937 to parents whom he frequently and affectionately would describe as loving and devout Catholics. He entered the Trappist monastery of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit in Conyers, Georgia just before his fifteenth birthday. He would often

say that he first went to the monastery because his mother invited him to go on a weekend retreat and he said to himself, “yes, I can get out of Saturday chores!” For many years, he immersed himself in the Trappist life of prayer and work, of silence and fasting, and of studying the Scripture, the Fathers, Aquinas, as well as some contemporary theological scholarship.

During the 1960’s, his abbot suggested that he go to Rome to earn advanced degrees in theology. There he encountered Bernard Lonergan—whose work he had previously begun reading—a scholar and teacher who inspired countless Catholic theologians who would go on to impact Catholic theology around the globe. In his later years, he would describe Lonergan’s influence especially in its relation to a deepening of his understanding of the wisdom found in Augustine and Aquinas. Studying in Rome during the council and its aftermath, Fr. Lamb witnessed firsthand many of the theological trends and conversations that would dominate the practice of Catholic theology in the subsequent decades. He would often tell stories to students about conversations with and among Karl Rahner, Henri de Lubac, Bernard Lonergan, Hans Kung as well as with notable Catholics such as Dorothy Day and Flannery O’Connor. After earning an STL from the Gregorianum in Rome, he went to study at the University of Münster, Germany under Johann Baptist Metz. He completed his Doctorate in Theology “Summa cum laude” and earned the University Prize for the best dissertation in Catholic Theology in 1974.

From that time forward, he dedicated himself to a singular task: the formation of doctoral students in the Catholic theological tradition. Already ordained a Roman Catholic priest, he was incardinated in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee to allow for dedication to teaching outside of the monastery. Fr. Lamb’s doctoral instruction would span five decades as he first taught at Marquette University, then Boston College, and finally Ave Maria University, where he founded and directed the Patrick F. Taylor Graduate Programs in Theology. Fr. Lamb’s doctoral students now teach across the United States and abroad, in seminaries, colleges, universities, and dioceses.

In 1990, Fr. Lamb published an epochal essay in *America Magazine* entitled, “Will There Be Catholic Theology in the United States?” In this essay, he went public with the beginning of what he would lightheartedly call “Lamb’s Lamentations.” He cautioned against what he termed the “Protestantization” of Catholic theology in which Catholic theologians were increasingly completing their stud-

ies at Protestant divinity schools, combined with the loss of knowledge of Latin and Greek that left students further estranged from the sources integral to the Catholic theological tradition.

Fr. Lamb continued to voice his concern over the trajectory of much of Catholic theology in a 1997 essay published in *Crisis Magazine*, “Catholic Theological Society of America: Theologians Unbound.” He began to sharpen his critique of theological dissent and became increasingly concerned that more and more Catholic theologians “no longer know what they don’t know.” He warned that over ninety percent of systematic theologians were doing dissertations focused on recent figures, with the result that real grounding in—as well as fidelity to—the dogmatic tradition was no longer being handed on to the next generation.

Fr. Lamb did much more than merely lament the state of Catholic theology. He labored many years to pass along to generations of doctoral students the intellectual patrimony he had received. During his career he would direct almost fifty doctoral dissertations, serve as a reader on almost the same number, and direct and assist with an even greater number of master theses. The combination of his teaching and directing served to help recover the study of the wisdom traditions as found especially in the writings of Augustine and Aquinas. Known early in his career for his reflections on suffering and history, as well as his insight into the necessary relationship between orthodoxy and orthopraxis, he would eventually publish over a hundred and sixty articles dealing with St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Bernard Lonergan, theological method, political theology, modernism, communication theory, and the writings of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI. Increasingly, he became concerned that without attention to the wells of orthodox doctrine—not mere conceptual play but our path into the creative and redemptive realities of faith—no real orthopraxis could be possible, given that what emerged was merely a shallow accommodationist attitude, indeed a betrayal of the radicality of Christian faith, separated from its true realities. In 2002, he received an honorary doctorate from the Franciscan University of Steubenville in recognition of his contributions to the renewal of Catholic theology.

In 2003, Fr. Lamb delivered the academic convocation address at the quite small and newly-founded Ave Maria College (soon after to become Ave Maria University). He challenged the young institution to strive to unite the first millenium’s quest for wisdom and holiness within the monastic traditions and the second millenium’s

search for science and scholarship within the universities, a unity that he perceived had been severed over time causing great injury to the Church and the practice of theology.

To issue such a challenge took much understanding of the Church's theological patrimony and much experience of the Church's tradition of prayer. What took greater courage, however, was that Fr. Lamb was willing to leave his established position at Boston College and join this small institution with the fixed purpose of establishing and sustaining graduate programs in theology.

Under Fr. Lamb's guidance, the graduate programs at Ave Maria University would be dedicated to the sapiential unity of theology. Theological studies requires the intellectual virtues needed for functional specializations of biblical, systematic, moral, and liturgical studies. Nonetheless, theology remains one *sapientia*. Theology should reflect a unified attempt at seeking wisdom and holiness, science and scholarship. With the acquisition of skills and speculative habits of mind as its goal, the program of studies established by Fr. Lamb would be accompanied by communal worship and prayer, so that students may deepen their graced friendship with Jesus Christ and the communion of saints. They would thus experience how the gifts of wisdom and knowledge of our Catholic faith, far from contradicting the truths and light of reason, actually both further enlighten and redeem our minds and hearts in ways only the Triune God can accomplish. Fr. Lamb was fond of saying that fidelity to revelation does not decrease but rather increases the intellectual rigor needed to be faithful to the insights of faith and reason. In his fifteen years of teaching at Ave Maria, Fr. Lamb completed his final stage in his vocation of passing on of Catholic theology. His Ave Maria doctoral students, now teaching in institutions across the country, gathered for a 2014 conference held in his honor and published a (second!) festschrift dedicated to him in 2016 entitled *Wisdom and the Renewal of Catholic Theology*.

Fr. Lamb became a champion for an authentic reception of Vatican II as a renewal within tradition. These contributions coalesced into two co-edited volumes with Matthew Levering published by Oxford University Press in 2008 and 2017. His teaching, however, remains his most powerful witness. To know his students—his spiritual and intellectual sons and daughters—is to know a bit of him. His love of truth, his knowledge of the tradition, his joy at learning and studying, and even, yes, his lamentations! His students share in his most important formulations, including “the higher does not negate the

lower,” the significance of a participatory understanding of created reality, the properly dialectical relationship of the ancients and the moderns, the effort to reach up to the mind of the great Doctors of the Church, the emphasis upon contact with the realities of faith, the refusal to accommodate the Catholic faith to the narrow limits of America and Western Europe, the need for many years of study to gain insight into the theological patrimony of the Church, the appreciation for the contributions of the monastic schools against the constant temptation toward reductive rationalisms, the centrality of a real life of prayer and sacramental grace, the rejection of Pelagianism and the utopian visions of the left and the right, abandonment to divine providence, real friendship with Christ, the insistence upon the intellectual and spiritual requisites of a true theological faculty, and so on.

In *Fides et Ratio*, Pope Saint John Paul II wrote, “It must not be forgotten that reason too needs to be sustained in all its searching by trusting dialogue and sincere friendship. A climate of suspicion and distrust, which can beset speculative research, ignores the teaching of the ancient philosophers who proposed friendship as one of the most appropriate contexts for sound philosophical inquiry.” In Christ, Fr. Lamb fostered such relationships of friendship that sustained authentic inquiry into the realities of the Catholic faith. In addition to being a father and teacher to so many students, young and old, clerical and lay, he also became a friend.

St. Paul wrote about Christ’s presence in the Apostle’s own sufferings: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9). In a state of extreme physical weakness with full awareness of his mortal (pulmonary) illness, Fr. Lamb would celebrate his final private Mass from his bed in the intensive crisis unit. To inquiring caregivers and visitors, he would slowly whisper, with deep and abiding conviction, “I’m ready to go whenever the Lord wants. You go home to your family; I’m going home to mine, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” Fr. Lamb’s first book was entitled *Solidarity with Victims*. In his final illness, he expressed that solidarity, accomplished in Christ, with all of the victims across human history as a priestly victim, offered lovingly to God.

Fr. Lamb passed through the portals of death on January 12, 2018. He died, as was providentially fitting, with two doctoral students praying and keeping vigil at his bedside throughout the night. In the many funeral Masses he had celebrated for others, he would often say that “they now see what we only believe.” He would say this with

real joy, however, not with the sighs and half-hopes that one often feels. In his daily life, he felt himself in a living communion with Christ Jesus. Let us pray that through the abundant divine mercy he is now gazing in that most loving and beatifying vision upon the most holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. N:V