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# Realizing Catholicism: Faith, Learning, and the Future

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WALTER J. ONG, S.J.

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*Marianist Award Lecture/1989*

Realizing Catholicism:  
Faith, Learning, and the Future



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REALIZING CATHOLICISM:  
FAITH, LEARNING, AND THE FUTURE

by WALTER J. ONG, S.J.

Marianist Award Lecture  
1989

THE UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

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WALTER J. ONG, S.J. was born in Kansas City, Missouri, and before entering the Jesuits in 1935 he finished his B.A. at Rockhurst College and worked for two years in commercial positions. He did his studies in philosophy and theology (S.T.L.) at Saint Louis University, and earned degrees in English from Saint Louis (M.A.) and Harvard University (Ph.D.). Besides a lengthy teaching career at Saint Louis University, he has held visiting professorships and lectureships at Yale, Oxford, Cornell, Chicago, and Toronto. He holds various honorary degrees, one of the most recent from the University of Glasgow (Scotland).

Fr. Ong is currently Emeritus Professor of Humanities, William E. Haren Professor of English, and Professor of Humanities in Psychiatry at Saint Louis University.

A national and international leader in a wide spectrum of intellectual, religious, and cultural organizations, Fr. Ong is well known as a lecturer across the United States and Canada and on national radio and television networks in the U.S. and abroad.

The relationship of rhetoric and culture has been one area of study for Fr. Ong whose research also embraces literature, philosophy, psychology, linguistics, and theology. *Hopkins, the Self, and God*, a book on the English Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, is the most recent among his long list of works, which have been translated into French, German, Spanish, Italian, Korean, Japanese, and Swedish.

Fr. Ong was a member of the National Council on the Humanities from 1968 to 1974; served on the White House Task Force on Education in 1967; co-chaired the National Endowment for the Humanities Committee on Science, Technology, and Human Values, and is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

The brilliance, depth, and breadth of Fr. Ong's contribution to knowledge mark him as one of the foremost scholars in the history of American Catholicism.



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*The following lecture was given at the University of Dayton  
on the occasion of the presentation of the Marianist Award  
to Walter J. Ong, S.J., January 26, 1989.*





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## REALIZING CATHOLICISM: FAITH, LEARNING, AND THE FUTURE

### 1

When he asked me to accept the great honor of the 1989 Marianist Award, the President of the University of Dayton, Bro. Raymond L. Fitz, S.M., suggested that in my response to the presentation of the award I might comment on the relationship of scholarship and the Catholic faith as this relationship has appeared to me in the course of my own scholarly and faith life. This is what I propose to do. I shall understand scholarship here in the broadest sense of learning as embracing both humanistic and scientific subjects. My brief remarks could not begin to be theoretically exhaustive but will be by way of personal reflection.

Perhaps more than on anything else, these reflections turn on the meaning of Catholicism and some ways in which this meaning has been realized in our times. "Catholic" is often interpreted as meaning "universal." In fact, it appears to mean much more. The early Latin-speaking branch of the Church had at its disposal in its original Latin the term *universalis*, from which our "universal" derives. But in the so-called Nicene Creed we do not find, "Credo . . . in unam, sanctam, universalem, et apostolicam ecclesiam," that is, "I believe . . . in the one, holy, universal, and apostolic Church," but rather, "Credo in unam,

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sanctam, catholicam, et apostolicam ecclesiam,” that is, “I believe in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.” The Latin Church—so-called, we must remember, not because Latin was a special liturgical language, but because Latin was simply the language people in this part of the world had spoken in their ordinary life—refrained from using its own term *universalis*, preferring the Greek term *katholikos* instead. Why? Short of a massive historical study, perhaps a look at the etymologies of the words can offer a clue.

## Universal and Catholic

The terms “universal” and “catholic” approximate one another but are set up not quite the same way. *Universalis*, “universal,” is formed out of the roots for *unum*, one, and *vertere*, to turn. Details of the etymology are not quite clear, but the image one gets is that of describing a circle by turning around one point. The circle includes everything within it. But it is a line, and the line seemingly excludes whatever falls outside it. It has an inside and an outside. *Katholikos*, “catholic,” works differently. It means throughout-the-whole: it combines *kata*, which has among its meanings through or throughout, and *holos*, which means whole and indeed comes from the same proto-Indo-European root as our own English word “whole.”

Note that “throughout-the-whole,” *katholikos*, “catholic,” does not suggest a boundary as “universal” does. It is expansive, open, growing. If the whole gets larger, what is “throughout the whole” gets larger too. This concept “throughout-the-whole” recalls Jesus’ description of the kingdom of God as leaven, yeast, placed in dough. In Matthew 13.33 (echoed in Luke 13.21) we read, “The reign of God is like yeast which a woman took and kneaded into three measures of flour. Eventually the whole mass of dough began to rise.” Yeast is a plant, a fungus, and it grows. It has no limits itself, but is limited only by the limits of whatever it grows in. The Church, understood as Catholic in this way, is a limitless, growing reality. Growth marks the Church often spectacularly in our own day. By

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contrast with the Church of a century ago, the present Roman Catholic Church shows itself as more and more conspicuously Catholic, representing all the races and regions of humankind. The faces of the participants in the Second Vatican Council and the appearance of its Catholics from across the world in the media today make it quite evident that the Roman Catholic Church is no longer a simply Western or European phenomenon.

This sense of Catholicism as a living and growing reality I believe has been a dominant feature of my own sense of the relationship between scholarship and faith. Earlier, I perhaps did not formulate the idea to myself or others so explicitly, but I know it was there, working away in my subconscious or unconscious.

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**T**he age in which I grew up was an intellectually exciting time. Many frontiers ultimately affecting the relationship of scholarship and faith were opening up at once. Some of these frontiers overlapped, and they can be discussed in various ways. Here I should like to view them insofar as they were the heritage of the Romantic Movement, which reference books tell us took place throughout Europe between 1770 and 1848 and which was most marked initially in northern Europe. In fact, of course few movements can be confined to the neat datings which reference works assign them. Belatedly, long after 1848, in the early and mid-twentieth century, the Romantic Movement had a tremendous, and I believe hitherto little discussed, effect in the Roman Catholic Church.

The Romantic Movement was, among other things, a reaction to the extreme rationalism of the preceding age of the Enlightenment. The two contrasting movements are not easy to

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describe in their entirety, but for our purposes here we can note that, whereas the Enlightenment undertook to reduce everything to rational explanation, Romanticism was not so sure that such reduction was entirely possible. By contrast with the Enlightenment, the Romantic Movement was more interested in the dark, obscure side of existence, in nature as a growing and largely uncontrollable actuality, interested in the limitless, the expansive, less interested in fixity and more interested in development. Romanticism preferred the countryside to the city. It tended to dwell on what was not fully formalized, what had not been brought fully under rational human control (this does not mean necessarily the irrational, for reason does not and never can completely control everything: reason is always surrounded by a context beyond its control). Romanticism was preoccupied often with the dark, the obscure, favoring the boundless imagination over neater, abstract thought.

Quite evidently, Romanticism was not invented in 1770. Some Romantic preoccupations are as old as the human race. For example, we find preoccupations of a Romantic sort in the Bible, perhaps most notably in Job, we find them in Virgil, in Shakespeare and in much Renaissance humanism, and in many other places and times, both in the West and elsewhere in the world. But, although traces of Romanticism have in such fashion always been around, never anywhere until the later 1700s was there a large Romantic *Movement*, a widespread, generalized surge of interest in a view of existence setting itself self-consciously against reliance on clear-cut, rationalist formulations. In the book *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology* I have suggested that the outburst we now know as the Romantic Movement was made feasible by the build-up of knowledge over the centuries, especially since the invention of print in Europe in the mid-1500s. By the 1700s there was a store of knowledge on hand, much of it in our modern, superrational scientific form, immeasurably greater than ever before, so that human beings generally—and not just a few—could without too much fear dwell and dwell on the dark side of existence, which had been there all along. At one's back, as one faced into the

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darkness, stood rationalized knowledge at hand, immeasurably greater than what was available before the accumulation made possible by print. In the world of thought, the store of stabilized knowledge counterbalanced a great deal of risk.

The Romantic Movement was sweeping and its effects are certainly permanent. I remember the remark of a colleague of mine at Saint Louis University a few years ago: "Books often contrast Romanticism with the Neo-Classicism that went before it. But Romanticism contrasts not only with Neo-Classicism. It contrasts with everything that went before it. Nothing like this had ever happened before, and it would affect the human mind and lifeworld permanently. Even anti-romantic movements from now all will be romantically cast." I believe this is true of anti-romantic movements in our world today. Looked on as a whole, even our science is romantic, too. However science enlarges the field of rationality, as it does justifiably and necessarily, science itself is intimately aware today that the boundaries of science are not fixed in rationality but run off into darkness and into mystery.

## **The Church and Romanticism**

In the earlier part of the twentieth century, one of the things that made Catholic intellectual life in my time especially interesting was that it was finally, belatedly, experiencing the fuller effects of the Romantic Movement, as we have described the movement here. The Church in its origins had been Mediterranean and curiously urban. In the early days of the Church, non-Christians tended to be considered, rather typically, countrified. We can see this is the word "pagan." The word "pagan" comes from the Latin word *paganus*, which means simply country person, country bumpkin—the same root that gives us the English word "peasant" and its cognates in many other European languages. In the West, the Church's intellectual heritage had been largely Greek, in the highly urban Platonic-Aristotelian tradition. Romanticism, as just noted, had developed largely in northern Europe, filtering southward slowly, and it

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tended to focus attention as never before on the country, the untamed, not on the city. The Christian faith of course had long been acclimated to the country, but its intellectual heritage had been largely of urban provenience. Romanticism provided new ways of focusing intellectually on the nonurban, the nondomesticated, the more purely natural.

Looking at Romanticism as concerned with the dark, the obscure, the rationally recalcitrant features of existence, the developmental, the natural, rather than the completely "formed," I have to note how much in the early twentieth-century intellectual world in which I grew up was marked by attention to such features. This was the age when, as instanced for example in the work of Freud, awareness was spreading of the force of the subconscious and unconscious in art, literature, history, politics, and the work of reason itself. It was the age when organic evolution was commanding more and more widespread attention and when ideas of evolution were spreading from the organic world to the study of all existence. Einsteinian physics had opened the way to a developmental cosmology, as against the older, fixed Newtonianism. Historicism—implemented by the massive documentation made possible by print—was taking over in all the humanities: in language studies, in literary studies, in political science, in philosophy, in biblical studies, and in theology.

In Catholic intellectual circles, the "Thomism," so-called, earlier taken for granted as a fixed, infrangible plenum was examined historically, and found to be in depth not really the basic teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas but an adaptation thrown together by later ages for reasons which were historically and culturally complex and not at all entirely conscious. Etienne Gilson's persuasion that Thomas was in a valid sense an "existentialist" drastically resituated Thomas and set on edge the teeth of those who had innocently believed themselves true programmatic Thomists. In biblical studies, Leo XIII's encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* in 1893 showed a certain hostility toward the historicism of non-Catholic scholars but was not

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entirely set against all historical exegetical studies, and, while the Modernist crisis, and much else that was developmental-historical at base, held back for some years the development of Catholic biblical studies and other historically grounded studies among Catholics, in 1943 the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* of Pius XII appeared, the Magna Charta of modern Catholic biblical scholarship. With it, the way to fuller study of the development of the Bible was open to Catholic scholars.

## **Our Frontier Mentality**

Of course, our own American self-consciousness has taken much of its own distinctive shape in the world dominated by the developmental-historical interests we have been noting here. Ours is a frontier mentality, very likely more so than the mentality of any other country ever. We think of ourselves as frontier people, a people permanently and deeply involved in change. This self-image shows in our literature, our movies, our heroes, our heroines, our folklore of every sort. The frontier mentality has not always been well managed, for at the hands of those of us who are of European descent it has at times made for the oppression of those of us who are Native Americans and, less directly but just as really, for the oppression of those of us who are black. But the frontier mentality is not strange to any of us, those of more or less direct European descent, Native American, blacks, Hispanics, or more recent immigrants from across the world. It is a major part of us all, one way or another, and it suggests that the mind-set which I have here connected with Romanticism has a particular urgency on the American scene. In my own case, I feel confident that an at-homeness with the developmental-historical patterns we have been discussing here was strengthened by the United States milieu into which I was born. In this way, I believe that the scholarship-faith relationships in my own life were helped by the United States milieu.

For many, of course, the romantic concern with the dark, the obscure, the unfinished and developmental as against the

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bright, the totally clear, the fixed, appeared as a threat. Too much attention to history rather than to fixity, it was feared, would end in pure relativism, where questions of truth or falsehood were meaningless. It seemed to many that if knowledge could not be somehow lifted out of history and constituted in a landscape of timeless, discrete building blocks, nothing could be known and complete chaos would reign. But historicism, in depth, did not volatilize all knowledge. Far from that, it made knowledge more weighty. What appeared clear-cut could be true and could be understood, but it could not be understood merely in itself: it always connected with a great many other things. The situation was one not of destructive relativism but of constructive relationism. Truth can indeed be laid hold of, but truths are all related to each other and, when we know a given truth, we find it involved with other truths, all of which we cannot surface here and now.

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**T**he scholarship-faith question is affected today by the incommensurability of the universe as we know it today and the universe as persons in biblical times conceived of it. Although in a sense the relationship of Christianity to the future is always the same—Christianity is an incurably future-oriented religion—in another sense the relationship of Christianity to the future has changed almost beyond conceiving. Scholarship takes place in and devotes itself to a world of physical and psychological size and complexity totally unimaginable not only in biblical times but even a few hundred years ago, and we know that we are headed through ages of unknown duration to still greater unknown complexities. The human world that existed in the time of Christ was a world which had not the slightest idea that it was shaped to produce eventually spacecraft and computers or that such developments can be only beginnings of still newer creations of humankind. This world that recent



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discoveries have revealed, not the world as imagined by our predecessors, is the world in which Jesus was born and died. The eschatological future cannot be independent of this real created world. The interrelation of the two is not clear, but the relationship is undeniable and it raises stupendous theological questions involving modern science and modern humanities—questions to which, it appears to me, we do not even yet sufficiently attend, although I must admit the questions are so stupendous that I do not know how to go about compassing them. And the questions are stupendous even without the awful question of human suffering, some of which is due to the forces of nature but much of which is due to human villainy, and all of which we routinely advertise on our television screens so as to make disaster a permanent part of the human lifeworld as it has never been before.

## **The Challenge of Technology**

The world that God created understandably troubles us today. It troubles many persons largely because of its burgeoning technology, so far away, it seems, from the distinctively human, from nature. Some are inclined to blame our present woes on technology. Yet there are paradoxes here. Technology is artificial, but for a human being there is nothing more natural than to be artificial.

Technology can dehumanize us and at times has dehumanized us. But it can also humanize us. Indeed, technology is absolutely indispensable for many of our absolutely central humanizing achievements. Technology is needed for any scholarship. Writing is a technology, requiring artificial codes and complex equipment; as some of you are aware many of my own books and articles undertake to explain this at length. Writing does not simply reproduce oral discourse in visual (and tactile) form. It transforms thought, making possible thought patterns and making accessible kinds of material quite unavailable to a purely oral culture. Without the technology of writing, the kind of thinking that goes into the discourse we commonly use today

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is quite impossible—even the thinking that goes into much of our oral discourse, which is shaped by the thought patterns we know through writing and reading. Without writing, the kind of listening you have been engaging in here would have been impossible—even if you are bored.

Perhaps even more evidently than through writing, technology humanizes us through music. We speak of musical “instruments.” Instruments are tools. The modern orchestra, made up of hundreds of astonishingly complex musical tools and machines—the organ must be described as a machine—is a triumph of high technology. Ancient Greeks and Romans could make music on “pipes of oaten straw” or perhaps on recorders (not the electronic kind of recorder, but the kind of recorder you blow into). You could play this simple kind of recorder by stopping the holes with your bare fingers. But the ancients were totally incapable of making any precision instrument such as the clarinet, much less a piano or an organ. Precision technology of any sort until just a few centuries ago terminated in something at about the level of a good pair of scissors. The modern orchestra is the result of technological developments of only the past three hundred years. Before that, all the deeply humanizing effects produced by the highly technological musical instruments in our orchestras were denied to human beings. Like all human developments, technology has its dangers, but it has its deep and mysterious humanizing effects, too.

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**W**hat is the task of Catholic scholarship in the world we have described here? If the scholarship is truly Catholic, it will seek to understand the whole of actuality. It will keep itself moving on a quest which is impossible to realize entirely but which is promising always, and often exhilarating, even in the face of

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overwhelming human suffering and evil. For much evil, there is no human answer at all, but for the Christian, if there is not a simple answer, there is a response, in God's own response. The response is that we must counter evil with good. In the incarnation of the Son, in Jesus Christ, the infinite God responds to evil by entering into the human condition, with its suffering and its subjection to evil, to overcome suffering and evil by good, culminating in the obedience that Jesus expressed on the cross. We have a faith that seeks understanding—*fides quaerens intellectum*, as St. Anselm, in his learned humility, put it some 900 years ago. Our quest for understanding lives in Christian hope, a hope in Jesus Christ, who became incarnate in this world still opening more and more to our view. Since all this world is God's creation, all learning not only about God but also directly about this world can further our quest to understand our faith.

In my own life, the biblical and Catholic conviction that, however vast the universe in time and space, God made it all, has, I trust, been the sustaining force uniting faith and science and scholarship of all the kinds with which I have been in contact. The intellectual developments here discussed in relation to the romantic outlook have opened us to immeasurable cosmic vastness but should lead to no ungovernable fears. In my own life as in the lives of many others, St. Ignatius of Loyola's quiet insistence in his *Spiritual Exercises* that human beings are "created to praise, reverence, and serve God, our Lord," and thus to save their souls and that "The other things on the face of the earth are created" to help human beings in attaining this end, builds on this Catholic and biblical belief. Ignatius and his contemporaries of course had no idea of the magnitude of creation as we know it today. Ignatius' "on the face of the earth" has to be extended beyond measure today since our forays into space, far more extensive than Ignatius could ever have imagined. But if Ignatius could not help being limited in his vision, he nevertheless meant to be inclusive. Ignatius believed that God made all that existed outside God himself, even though he had very deficient paradigms for imagining what "all" was. Ignatius' faith and the depth of prayer response to that faith

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in the *Spiritual Exercises* were not measured by the deficient cosmic vision of his day. Nor was the faith and the depth of prayer of Guillaume Joseph Chaminade, when in 1817 he founded the Society of Mary, measured by the improved but, by present standards, still deficient cosmic vision of his time. Nor was the faith and the depth of prayer of Adele de Trenquelleon, who with Chaminade founded the Daughters of Mary Immaculate in 1816. Christian faith and prayer go beyond such matters. Today, with our knowledge that we live in an evolving world, faith and prayer are faced into the future in new and breath-taking ways that merit our attention, but ways not discontinuous with the past.

## **Tradition and the Future**

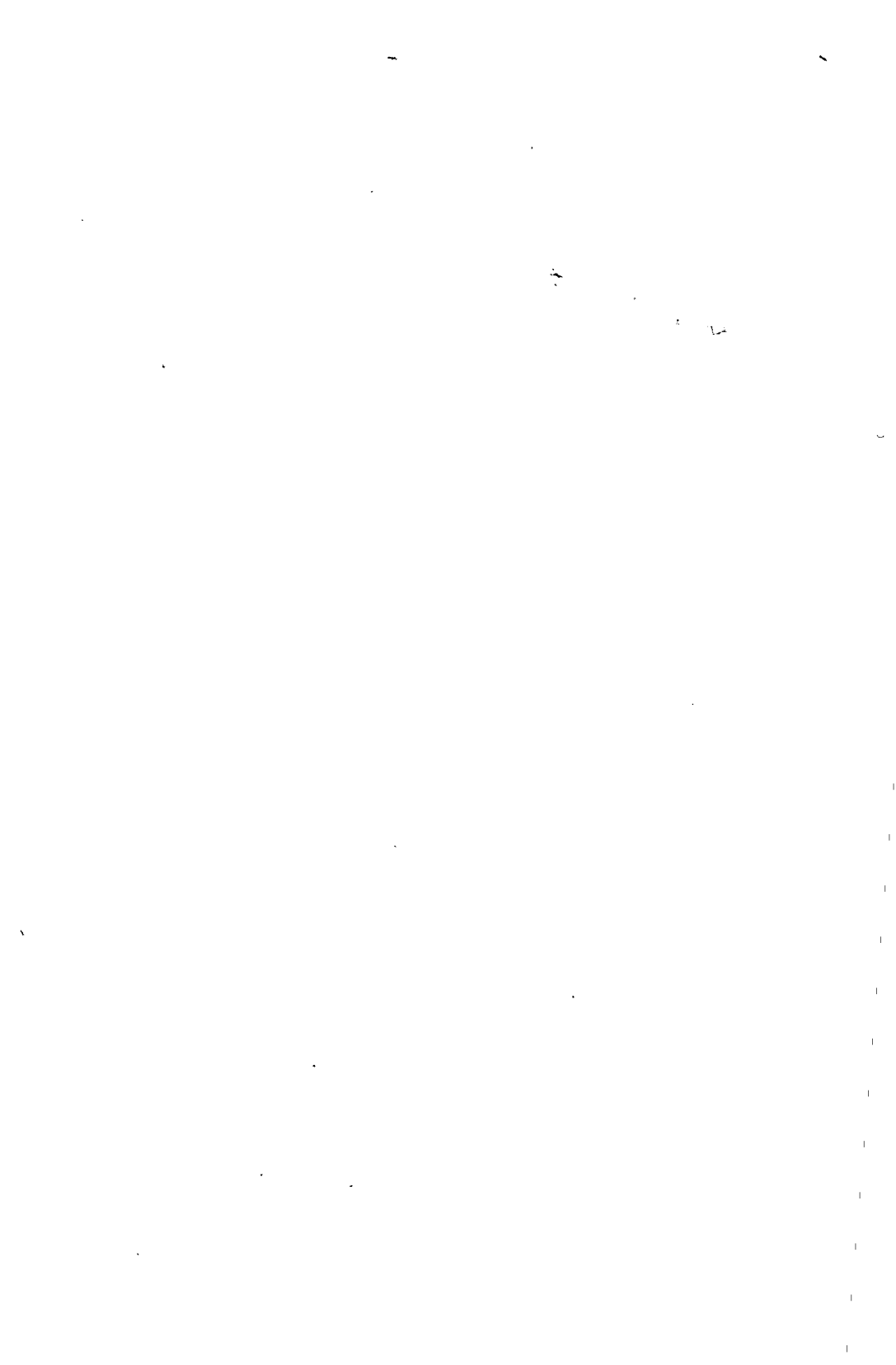
The Catholic Church builds on the past, of course, on tradition. But the faith is not retroactive. As I have earlier suggested, there is no way to recover the past, even if we wanted to. And who would want to? I have never met anyone who knows in scholarly detail any age of the past who would prefer that age to the present, however threatening and dangerous and ugly many things in the present may be. If you know the past in detail, it was in its own ways threatening and dangerous and ugly as well as beautiful and consoling. Tradition builds on the past but it always faces not into the past but into the future.

In the past and the present and the future, there is one constant that I can only point to here in closing, but that is supremely important. This is the individual, the "I" that each one of us is. Some four billion persons in the world today can say "I" or its equivalent in languages other than English, and every one of them means something completely different by the term. Yet only such beings can and must realize themselves in the love of others and in community. And only in such unique persons can either faith or scholarship exist. In this vast universe, spread through space and time, each of us relates to God in his or her own inimitable, personal way. This awareness gives us heart in faith and in scholarship both. It means that the ultimate values even of the exterior universe rest in the personal. For only persons can know and love.

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In my end is my beginning. May I remind you now, as when I opened this talk, that there are innumerable other things to say about the relationship of faith and learning besides the few limited reflections I have advanced here. There are no bounds to the study of faith and to the realization of the potential of scholarship in God's created world. The object of our scholarship, humanistic and scientific, will continue to expand indefinitely for us.

The person of faith has no reason to fear that scholarship will expose anything incompatible with faith. This has been the assumption with which I have always lived, as other Christian scholars commonly have. The faith does not confront the universe. The faith penetrates the universe. However overwhelmingly huge and complex that universe may be, this is the universe in which the humanity of Jesus Christ is rooted, the universe in which the Son of God became a human being who died for us and rose to bring us to a new life. Our scholarship, like all else in our lives, rests on trust in the living and loving God.



## THE MARIANIST AWARD

Each year the University of Dayton presents the Marianist Award to a Roman Catholic distinguished for achievement in scholarship and the intellectual life.

Established in 1950, the award was originally presented to individuals who made outstanding contributions to Mariology. In 1967, the concept for the award was broadened to honor those people who had made outstanding contributions to humanity. The award, as currently given, was reactivated in 1986.

The Marianist Award is named for the founding religious order of the University of Dayton, the Society of Mary (Marianists). The award carries with it a stipend of \$5,000.

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