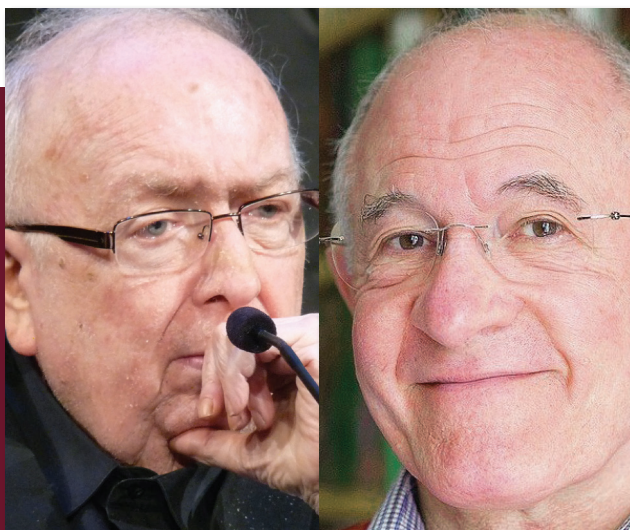


THE
INAUGURAL
ALBACETE
LECTURE
ON
FAITH & CULTURE



“CULTURE AS A BY-PRODUCT”

Dr. Rémi Brague

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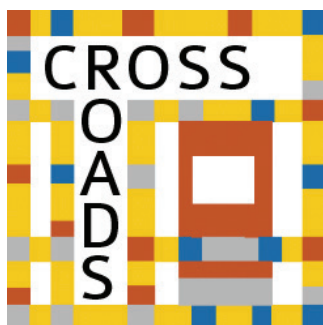
The Inaugural Albacete Lecture on Faith and Culture
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The Inaugural Albacete Lecture
on
Faith and Culture

“Culture as a By-Product”

October 22, 2016
The Sheen Center, NYC

With Dr. Rémi Brague, Professor Emeritus of Arabic and Religious Philosophy at the Sorbonne, Paris, and Romano Guardini Chair of Philosophy (Emeritus) at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich





Introduction

Monsignor Albacete chaired the Crossroads Advisory Board from its establishment in 2007 until his passing nearly seven years later, on October 24, 2014. In establishing and running a Catholic cultural center, he always warned us against focusing on a predetermined subset of issues, people, or ideas that would fall under the “Catholic” label. On the contrary, to him, being a Catholic cultural center meant precisely the opposite, that is, to be interested in everything, at a 360-degree angle. In one of his memorable addresses to the Advisory Board (now collected in a small volume, “Culture at the Crossroads of Reason and Reality”) he said: “Why should a Catholic cultural center be promoting things just because they are interesting? Because this is our redemption, salvation. This is what Christ has come to do—to revive, to give life to our interest so that we can recognize His victory, and therefore our victory, over those forces that diminish us, that reduce the experience of our dignity, that reduce even the range of our reason and of our desires. The only thing that can break through that shell constructed around our inner selves, our heart, by this culture of death, the only way to break through is with the power of the interesting.”

In order to honor his memory, to deepen his profound intuitions about the interaction of culture with religiosity and reason, and to follow his shining example of dialogue with people in various walks of life by meeting them at the level of human experience, we have established the “Albacete Lecture on Faith and Culture.” Its goal is to become an annual event and a meeting place, a “crossroads” where we may develop an understanding of why culture matters and where it finds its origin and sustenance.

We could not have a better person to help us in this goal than Professor Rémi Brague, one of the world's most knowledgeable scholars in the history of Western culture. We are very thankful to him for having accepted to give this inaugural lecture.

Culture as a By-Product

by Dr. Rémi Brague

First of all, I think I must express my deepest gratitude for the honor bestowed upon me with this invitation to give a lecture in this prestigious place, and devoted to the memory of a man who, quite obviously, was larger than life. I was given some hints about what my talk should deal with. I quote, literally, what I found in my mail-box: “The origin, relevance, and aim of Christian culture in light of the address of Pope Benedict XVI at the Collège des Bernardins.”¹ This is quite a tall order, so that I am not sure I’ll be able completely to fill the bill. Yet, I will do my best.

Let me begin with a personal remembrance. I actually was in Paris on September 12th, 2008, and I had the privilege of attending Pope Benedict’s lecture. The elite of the Parisian intelligentsia was there, and its predicament was huge. To judge by the puzzled expression on their faces, those big shots most probably could not make heads or tails of it. What was the Pope driving at? What was the upshot of this meditation on monkish life in the Middle Ages (i.e., on a walk of life that is not ours, and one that, moreover, belongs to a historical period that is not ours and that many of us have bidden good riddance to)? I must confess that my humble self in person understood only little of what the Pope was telling us. I had to read the text of his lecture more than once, and for a last time, in order to prepare the present lecture. Let me now endeavor to take better advantage of Benedict’s insights.

Culture

I will take my bearings from a working definition of culture. It badly needs refining. Culture is the set of the answers to the basic questions of mankind,

¹ Benedikt XVI, “Wurzeln der europäischen Kultur. Begegnung mit Vertretern aus der Welt der Kultur.” Paris 2008, in: *Die Ökologie des Menschen. Die großen Reden des Papstes*, Munich, Pattloch, 2012, p. 330-341..

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be they humdrum or lofty: Whom shall I marry? What shall I eat and how shall I cook my meals? How shall I behave with my social and natural surrounding? Whom shall I worship? In each case, a culture distinguishes a right and a wrong behavior, hence what we call “values.” What we call a culture or a civilization is a definite set of answers that distinguish a right way and a wrong one: *thou shalt marry a person belonging to this group, and not have incestuous commerce; thou shalt eat this food and not that disgusting filth; thou shalt worship this god of ours and not that foreign idol*, etc. Moreover, we must distinguish two sets of elements in which we tell our right way from the wrong way of the others. Some deal with the very foundations of human life: the life of the individual, with food, clothing, etc., or the survival of the group with marriage and education. Now, “culture” in this meaning is hardly common parlance; it is rather a high-flown word of art used by anthropologists.

There is in culture something else, which is not strictly necessary, and this is for the most part what we common people usually call by the name of “culture,” for instance, art, religion, philosophy and science. Let us call this “higher culture.” Aristotle makes an important point about this kind of culture, for which he chooses, for obvious reasons, the example of philosophical pursuits, summarized in the searching for causes. He observes that such an endeavor can arise only after basic needs have been met by various arts. He further points out that it requires a leisure class and gives as example the priests in Egypt, who had nothing very much to do, apart, as a matter of course, from the ritual deeds that were their job.²

Culture as superfluous

What the Greek philosopher tells us from Athens was taught in Jerusalem, too. Let me now have a look at the Bible and read a satire on the origin of idolatry which is to be found in the second part of the book of the prophet Isaiah (44:9-20). This passage is lampooning idolatry, poking fun at the stupidity of people who adore dumb and powerless statues of wood and stone. The theme is a hackneyed one in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim apologetics. It is

² Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, A, 1, 981b17-25.

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even trite in so-called “pagan” authors, like the Latin poet Horace, who, not sharing the bitter mood of Isaiah, contents himself with an indulgent smile.³

In Isaiah, the sculptor first cooks his meal and warms himself with wood, a part of which he is about to sculpt into a god. The prophet has the idol-monger say: “Oh! I warm myself and I look at the flame” (44:16b). The sentence is, at first sight, rather redundant and could very well be overlooked. Yet it expresses two important ideas: the first is *reflexivity*, knowing what one does. The second is the *aesthetic moment*. Fire is not only a way for us to warm our bodies or to roast meat and boil vegetables. It has a beauty of its own. We can spend long hours of day-dreaming while contemplating the burning logs of an open fire in a chimney.

A very important word is uttered by the author of the biblical satire on idolatry that I have quoted. The idol is made out of what is left (*šə'ērīt*) of the wood (44:17a). Culture is basically “superfluous,” a word that is more often than not taken with a derogatory shade of meaning. Yet its etymology teaches us something important: culture is, literally, overflowing. This is the first sense in which I claim that culture is a by-product.

The aesthetic sense

Human beings can get interested in things that are not useful, for their own sake. We need not look at the flame in order to feel its warmth. This property we find in some things we call “beauty.” In beauty, two meanings of “interest” clash against each other. Interest can designate what pays off, like the interest of a loan. But we know that what is interesting can exist beyond, or even in the teeth of, what is useful for us. This is, by the way, the classical definition of the beautiful by Kant.⁴

Beauty is lovable, but the love of beauty is of a special kind: it doesn't aim at getting its object, but keeps the distance that enables enjoying by

³ Horace, *Sermones*, I, VIII, 1-3. See too the parable enacted by the upstart Amasis in Herodotus, II, 172.

⁴ Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, §2; see footnote*, ed. K. Vorländer, Hamburg, Meiner, 1924, p. 41.

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contemplating. This is nicely captured by the word “amateur,” from *amare*, to love, but with the shade of meaning of detachment. Now, being an amateur is a specifically human feature. To quote C.S. Lewis: “Man is the only amateur animal; all the others are professionals. They have no leisure and do not desire it. [...] When God made the beasts dumb He saved the world from infinite boredom, for if they could speak they would all of them, all day, talk nothing but shop.”⁵

This presence of an aesthetic sense in primitive mankind receives a powerful confirmation from recent discoveries of paleontologists.⁶ They report the discovery in some prehistoric tombs of some weird artifacts, like primitive axes or knives, the so-called “bifaces,” or simply spheres made of flint, chert or basalt. Those objects were very carefully wrought, i.e., at the cost of many hours of labor, but they never were used for a practical purpose. On the cutting edge of the bifaces, there is no trace of use, and no tear and wear on the surface of those perfect spheres. They may have had a cultic purpose, a gift of sorts to the deceased, but this is anybody’s guess. In any case, those objects give evidence of some aesthetic sense in very ancient times.

To sum up, this “superfluous” dimension of culture was highlighted by the Greeks as well as by ancient Israel. They concur in a common matter, even if they express it in different styles—conceptual for the Greeks, narrative for the Jews. Now, this feature, being a by-product, holds good for culture in general. What about Christian culture? The question deserves to be asked all the more since this Christian culture is often described as blending Greek and Jewish elements, as hailing both from Athens and Jerusalem, either taking after both or building a fruitful tension between those two poles. Let us now have a look at this specific case and, to begin with, at the example chosen by Pope Benedict.

Salvaging ancient culture

⁵ C. S. Lewis, “Our English Syllabus” [1939], in: *Image and Imagination. Essays and Reviews*, ed. W. Hooper, Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 23.

⁶ See H. de Lumley, “Quand la culture apparaît-elle?” in: D. Ponnau, M. Morange & J. Duchesne (ed.), *Culture et transcendance. Chemins de la création culturelle* (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2015), p. 119.

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The example he puts at the center of his meditation is, as I observed at the outset, rather surprising: monastic life in the Middle Ages. According to Pope Benedict, the intention of the medieval monks was definitely not to create culture, not even to preserve an earlier culture. Now, it is the case that they splendidly achieved what they didn't want. Historically speaking, too, their cultural doings were by-products. Benedict is eager to remind his hearers of this fact and feat, but he simply mentions it *en passant*, as a side-issue.⁷

Let me briefly expand his allusion. Monks succeeded in preserving the legacy of classical Latin literature. This happened in troubled times, when the very survival of ancient culture in the Latin West was at stake. A watershed is the death of Boethius, in 524, five years before the events that led to the closure of the philosophical (Platonic) School of Athens by the emperor Justinian. Boethius, a Patrician of old stock, was among the very few Romans who had kept a good knowledge of Greek. Now, precisely because of the ebb of Greek knowledge in the West, he felt the need for a translation of the Greek philosophers of the Socratic tradition. He therefore endeavored to translate Plato and Aristotle, and to comment upon both of them. He could not fulfill his vast project, for, accused of a secret correspondence with the Emperors of Constantinople, who already were planning to conquer again the Western part of the Empire, he was thrown into jail, where he wrote his masterpiece, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, and was put to death.

Boethius was not a monk. But one generation later, in 555, another Roman nobleman, Cassiodorus, attempted something along very much the same lines when he founded in Calabria—the last tip of the Italian Peninsula, the toes of the riding-boot—the convent of Vivarium, whose exact location is still unknown to archeologists. This convent has as its essential part a large library, together with a scriptorium in which manuscripts were not only kept and read, but copied, hence preserved for posterity.⁸ Interestingly, Cassiodorus very consciously imitated the convent of Nisibis, at the Northern border of present-day Iraq, a convent which harbored also a school, in which the

⁷ Bernardins, p. 331.

⁸ See the recent synthesis of F. Cardini, *Cassiodoro il grande. Roma, i barbari e il monachesimo*, Milan, Jaca Book, 2009, specially ch. III, 3, p. 139-149.

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language of teaching was Syriac.⁹

The whole network of Benedictine abbeys, which spread all over Western Europe, was instrumental in our still having at our disposal Latin literature in spite of the vanishing of the Western Roman Empire. In a word, monks hardly contented themselves with singing vespers in the Temple of Jupiter amidst the ruins of the Capitol in front of Edward Gibbon.¹⁰ They were powerfully and efficiently instrumental in helping ancient culture over the gap that had opened between the ancient world and what was to become the so-called Middle Ages.

Christianity as a refuge for paganism

What is especially interesting is that those monks did not throw a buoy to, or build a raft for, Christian literary castaways only. The bulk of what they helped climb on board was pagan literature. Among pagan authors, some, to be sure, could be kind of baptized post-mortem. Virgil could be read as a prophet of sorts because of the long misinterpretation of the fourth *Eglogue*, and Seneca was believed to have had a correspondence with St. Paul, etc. But why did the monks keep the historians, or the bawdy Catullus, or the lewd Ovid, let alone Lucretius the Epicurean atheist?

All this was made possible by what I called elsewhere the Pauline revolution.¹¹ It drew a wedge between paganism and Judaism, which both were cultures as well as religions. On the one hand, Greek *paideia* was a package deal of sorts. It included what we would call high-brow literacy, as with the epics by Homer. It included, too, sport at the palestra. Finally, last and certainly not least, it included sacrifices to the civic gods. Tragedy arose as part and parcel of the feasts of the god Dionysus. Even the philosophers organized themselves as cult-guilds. We still call the places in which we keep what we consider precious “museums,” which means “temples of the Muses.” Roman

⁹ Cassiodorus, *Institutiones*, I, 1; PL, 70, 1005.

¹⁰ E. Gibbon, *Autobiography*, ed. J. B. Bury, London, Oxford University Press, 1907, p. 160.

¹¹ See my “Jew, Greek and Christian. Some Reflections on the Pauline Revolution,” in: *Expositions. Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities*, I, 1, March 2007, p. 15-28.

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education stressed military prowess and evolved into a cult of the Emperor as embodying the legitimacy of Roman rule over the Mediterranean. On the other hand, Jewish scholars already planned to extract from the Torah a whole system of rules, the “way of life,” in Hebrew *halakha*. In principle, the same as the later Islamic *sharia*, it was meant to provide, in principle, ready answers to whatever question about what is to be done in any situation. By this token, Pagans as well as Jews had full-fledged systems of culture embedded in a religion.

Now Paul brought about a sea-change. He severed culture from religion, over against the Greek *paideia* and the Jewish *halakha*. The Torah had to undergo a severe slimming cure. Of the 613 commandments it contains, Paul kept only the Decalogue in its literal sense and interpreted the other ones as allegories. Now, the *halakha* was supposed to answer whatever question could be asked on how to behave in all the circumstances of daily life. As a consequence, in front of the problem of the good life, the Christian believer was left empty-handed, barring some very general moral principles. He had to look elsewhere for precise guidelines. This “elsewhere” was found in many places: to begin with, the Roman polity, together with the Law that regulated it; and Greek philosophy was drawn upon, too. But both had lost their religious underpinnings. Pagan culture became only what we call today “culture.” It entered a Christian framework, without losing its specificity. In my vocabulary: it was not digested, but included.¹² When Christianity entered the scene of the Ancient World, the content of the framework was what happened to be available on the market of ancient Greco-Roman civilization. But the same framework could very well be filled by other contents. Later on, Germanic and Slavic mores, Celtic legends, Arabic and Persian lore and science, entered the melting-pot. The Jesuit missionaries didn’t object to letting Chinese mores into it in the 17th century, but their attempt, as is well known, regrettably failed. In the future, this failure might prove to have been only provisional. We meet here a paradox: Christian culture is not made of Christian elements.

¹² See my “Inclusion and Digestion: Two Models of Cultural Appropriation,” in: *The Legend of the Middle Ages. Philosophical Explorations of Medieval Christianity, Judaism, and Islam*, tr. L. G. Cochrane, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2009, p. 145-158.

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Culture not meant to be such

Let us come back to the observation made by Pope Benedict: The monks never dreamed of doing something cultural, let alone of building a Christian culture or civilization. Some may even have thought that their doings and the works of their making were doomed to disappear in a more or less near future. But this didn't prevent them from busying themselves with preservation or furtherance of cultural goods and even with innovation.

A good example is Pope Gregory the Great (540-604). He laid the foundations for the whole Middle Ages, not so much because of the Gregorian chant that was named after him, in both meanings of the phrase. But rather as the harbinger of important reforms in Church life, and as the last of the four Fathers of the Latin Church, as the author of a long commentary on the Book of Job, the first comprehensive treatise on morals written by a Christian. Now, people were convinced that the end was at hand, and he shared this feeling. He was sure to be the last Pope, or the last but one. He simply wanted to put things away, in the same way as we clean up our house, sweep the carpets, water the plants, feed the goldfish, etc., before leaving for a weekend. To some extent, the monks were no exception. They were rather the heirs to a millenia-long tradition that hails back to pre-Christian times. For the most part, the objects which our museums are full of were not meant to hang somewhere on the walls of a museum or to lie in a show-window. They were meant either to lighten the burden of mankind or to please the gods.

Yet, the monks who salvaged ancient culture might have been more or less clearly conscious of a fact: there exists between Christianity and culture a link at the same time paradoxical and powerful. It can be described as a mutual need. Mutual, but not symmetric. On the one hand, Christianity needs culture as its content, and a culture that it has not produced directly. On the other hand, culture needs Christianity as its ground. In what follows, I will develop those two points.

The paradox of Christian culture

We remember the paradox: Christian culture is not made of "Christian"

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elements. Now, it is the flip-side of another surprising fact: Christianity never claimed to produce a full-fledged culture. Huge chunks of human experience are left outside of the pale and entrusted to human intelligence—created, to be sure, by divine grace, but unaided by a special revelation. This distinguishes Christianity from other religions. For instance, there is in Judaism a Talmudic cuisine, based on the rules of *Kasbrut*; there are Christian cooks, but there is no Christian cuisine. There is in Islam a so-called “Prophetic medicine,” based on the pieces of advice given by Muhammad in some cases and summarized in some collections of *hadith* which have this name, “prophetic medicine”¹³; there are Christian physicians, but there is no Christian medicine. There is in Islam an Islamic dress code: the Islamic veil for each grown-up female, the commandment to let one’s beard grow and trim one’s mustache for each male; yet while there are Christian tailors and hairdressers, there is no Christian fashion.

In a nutshell, there is no such thing as a “specifically” Christian behavior, no desire on the side of Christians to live their concrete, everyday lives apart from other people. This is already what is pointed out in a remarkable early document of Christian apologetic literature, the famous—albeit anonymous—*To Diognetus*. This work probably hails back to the end of the second century, shortly before AD 200. Christians don’t distinguish themselves from other people by a special abode, by a special language, by a special attire or a special diet.¹⁴ This has taken a fresh actuality since our Western countries have been confronted with a militant Islam, for which clothes and food have a religious dimension. There shouldn’t be, either, any intellectual yearning to claim some “specificity” for cultural achievements. More important and perhaps more provocative and difficult to swallow, there are no Christian morals, contrary to a common way of speaking. There is a common morality, what C. S. Lewis called the Tao or the “great platitudes,” and a Christian understanding of it. Too many people imagine that Christian mores can be put on the same level as folklore. Quaint foreign people have quaint ways—so charming, so

¹³ See Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Medicine of the Prophet*, tr. P. Johnstone. Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1998.

¹⁴ “To Diognetus,” V, 1-3; ed. H.-I. Marrou, Paris, Cerf (*Sources Chrétiennes*, n°33bis), 1965 (2d ed.), p. 62.

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interesting for tourists who see them from the outside. As such, they can be tolerated in the private realm, but nothing more. You may wear a kilt if you happen to be a Scotsman, you may eat frogs if you happen to be a Frenchman, you may refrain from killing the unborn in the womb of their mother if you happen to be a Christian, but... The Ten Commandments are a particularly successful summary of this common morality. They are hardly more than a reminder of the natural law that we would not have forgotten, were it not for the original sin and its aftermath in history. This at least is the doctrine of Thomas Aquinas, and it remained common knowledge for centuries. Pascal mentions this doctrine on the example of the prohibition of murder: the Gospel confirmed the Law, i.e., the Torah, and the Decalogue only renewed what human beings had received from God before Moses in the person of Noah, to whom each and every human being was to be born.¹⁵

Culture as praise

Let us get back to the monks. Since they never considered that their task was “cultural” in nature, what exactly did they do? The answer is obvious, and Pope Benedict reminds us of what is well-known, but not always understood in its depth: monks worked and prayed. The emphasis on work was grounded in a positive view of labor, hence of the material world, including the body and its humblest needs. This stemmed from a vision of the world as created by a good God, and thus as basically good.¹⁶ Let me develop the other aspect, i.e., prayer, in the same light.

Prayer is not only asking. It is praise, especially in the Psalms. Now, praising is the necessary consequence, hence the symptom, of a complete immersion in joy. To quote once again C. S. Lewis: “Fully to enjoy is to glorify.”¹⁷ We have here another kind of overflowing, which is very much in keeping with the former one I alluded to, vis-à-vis the overflowing of human creative activity, which is the positive flip-side of its superfluity.

¹⁵ Pascal, “Lettres Provinciales,” XIV; in: *Œuvres Complètes*, ed. L. Lafuma, Paris, Seuil, 1963, p. 435a.

¹⁶ Bernardins, p. 337-338.

¹⁷ C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* [1961], ch. 9, Glasgow, Collins, 1977, p. 77-83, quotation p. 82.

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Now, praise has very much to do with culture. It used to be a basic dimension of poetry. There was in ancient literary theory a genre, by the name of “epainetic,” from the Greek *epainos*, which means exactly “praise.” The leading figure in this genre was Pindar. Now, some literary scholars of the ancient world went so far as to characterize poetry as essentially “panegyric,” i.e., as laudatory, even if it doesn’t celebrate anybody or anything particular.¹⁸ Perhaps we could venture a step farther and claim that praise is the nourishing milieu of art *tout court*, and of culture. You can hardly, say, paint something, be it a landscape, a portrait or what not, without an implicit avowal of the fact that it is good that there should be this landscape or this person for you to paint them. You can scarcely write a story without the basic assumption that it is interesting, even if you’ll have to tell most unpleasant things.

Culture, cult and praise

Now, we may examine the conscience of our civilization a bit and ask ourselves: Are we still able to praise? Are we still conscious of possessing something for us to praise, to thank for? Do we still have access to somebody against whom we could be thankful? What becomes culture without the praiseworthy? Can what is “worth” (i.e., the so-called “values”) still be worthwhile without a metaphysical ground? The German literary scholar Hugo Friedrich made about the Romantic movement the following observation:

*for the life-culture of the ancient world, as well as for the ages that followed it till the 18th Century, the top psychological value was joy. It was the value which showed that the wise man or the believer, the knight, the courtier, the learned man of the social elite was about to attain perfection. Sadness, whenever it was not a fleeting state of mind, was considered as a negative value, and for the theologians it was a sin.*¹⁹

¹⁸ Hermogenes of Tarsos, “Peri ideon,” II, 10: Peri logou politikou, in: *Hermogenis Opera*, ed. H. Rabe, Leipzig, Teubner, 1913, p. 389, quoted in: E. R. Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*, Bern & Munich, Francke, 19738, p. 164.

¹⁹ H. Friedrich, *Die Struktur der modernen Lyrik. Von der Mitte des neunzehnten bis zur Mitte des zwanzigsten, Jahrhunderts*, Rowohlt, 1967, p. 30. My translation.

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Romanticism, or at least some aspects of the momentous, all-European Romantic movement, turned all this back to front: joy and serenity left the stage, they were frowned upon as commonplace, not to say ridiculously bourgeois, and replaced by melancholy and angst. The old sin of *acedia*, the “noonday devil” who assaults the monk when the heat in his cell becomes unbearable, so that he would dream of forsaking his vocation, received a positive valuation. Intellectual honesty, which faces the ugliness of reality, displaced the love of truth and became, so Nietzsche said, “our last virtue.”²⁰ In other words, and in words that play on each other: Can culture survive where cult has no other object than the ego him/herself? *The Cult of the Ego* was the title of a work by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century French writer Maurice Barrès. It has swollen into an epidemic ever since, under several names: personal development, self-fulfillment, wellness, and pursuits of that ilk.

Pope Benedict is eager to point out that creativity is not enough.²¹ In order to substantiate this claim, let us look at what happens when the only aim of culture is “expressing oneself,” as we frequently hear. If this is the case, we need not ask whether there really is something inside of us that deserves to be drawn out and shown to the audience. Anything goes. An Italian, Piero Manzoni (1933-1963), had the pluck to answer my question with great clarity. In May of 1961, he defecated into ninety tin cans, sealed them (thank goodness!), and sold them under the title: “Artist’s Shit.” The market price for each of those cans is now around \$30,000. Whatever Manzoni’s intentions may have been, the fact exposed the absurdity of the idea of the artist’s self-expression.

If the alleged human “creativity” is not enough, then, if there should be culture, then something like an implicit faith in God’s creation is required. This will be the last idea that I elicit from Pope Benedict’s speech.

²⁰ Nietzsche, “Morgenröte,” V, §456; *Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. G. Colli & M. Montinari, Berlin, De Gruyter and Munich, dtv, 1980, t. 3, p. 275.

²¹ Bernardins, p. 334.

Culture of Being

Pope Benedict puts a special emphasis on song and music in monastic liturgy. First, to be sure, because of his own gift for and interest in music. But there is far more to it than mere personal taste.

In the speech which I am now commenting upon, there is in the original German a passage, a matter of one half-page, which was not pronounced in French.²² It is indeed a side-issue: Saint Bernard, or the unknown author of the treatise *De Cantu* (On singing) which is commonly ascribed to him, implicitly assimilates singing out of tune to a fall in the “place of dissimilitude,” in the Platonic-Augustinian *regio dissimilitudinis*, in the loss of the divine resemblance in which Adam was created.²³ On the occasion of this digression, Benedict drops this rather weird sentence: “The culture of singing is also a culture of being” (*die Kultur des Singens <ist> auch Kultur des Seins*).²⁴ At first sight, the phrase is puzzling and sounds like a tautology. How could a culture be something else than a culture of being? What would a culture of nothingness look like? This reminds us of another phrase by Pope Benedict’s friend and predecessor on the papal throne, St. John Paul II, namely: “the Culture of Death.”²⁵ Again, one should ask whether every culture has not to be a culture of life.

In the German-speaking world, some authors already had pitted the “Culture of Being” against other possible forms of culture: of Having, of Knowing (H. von Keyserling), of Making. In such an outlook, culture is understood as what man does, and whatever is meant under “being” or the other notions that are set up against it is only a dimension of the human. The question is whether human beings should have something, know something, make something, or simply “become what they are.” This may make a great deal of sense.

²² Bernardins, p. 333-334.

²³ Ps.-Bernard, *De Cantu*, 7; PL, 182, 1128a. On the origin of the phrase, see Plato, *Statesman*, 273d and Augustine, *Confessions*, VII, x, 16.

²⁴ Bernardins, p. 334.

²⁵ John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* (March, 25th 1995), §12 *et passim*.

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Yet let me here take “being” seriously, i.e., in its broadest scope, and capitalize it. In the present case, we may ask: What has singing, as an example of culture at large, to do with something like ontology as its underpinning? What does ontology teach us about culture? Or, to put it the other way, what does culture teach us about Being? What sort of thing must Being be, or better, how must Being be for it to have something to do with culture? What must be its relationship to culture? Is Being the aim and object of a culture? Or instead its origin and ground, its nourishing soil? You’ll have guessed that the latter is my hunch.

Singing is celebrating, praising. Now obviously we can sing, hence praise only what is good. We can move in the element of praise, which is the condition of culture, if and only if there is something praiseworthy. In the last analysis, there can be culture if and only if we are convinced that, in the teeth of whatever evil is rampant, Being is intrinsically good. Which is kind of an ontological choice. This choice is presupposed in any culture-grounding activity. Our task doesn’t consist only in producing cultural goods. This is a necessary and highly recommendable activity with which I have no quarrel. At a deeper level, however, our task consists in making culture possible in the first place. And we do that by asserting the goodness of what is, by confessing something like our faith in Being. This is the last, basic sense in which culture is a by-product.

QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

Question: Thank you for your wonderful talk which did much more than comment on the talk by Pope Benedict to the Collège des Bernardins, but you showed us how it stretches far outside of Christianity, how culture has been a by-product, as Aristotle describes in Egypt, in Jewish tradition, in any tradition.

I was particularly interested in one of your core comments that there is kind of a symbiosis between Christianity and culture: Christianity needs culture, and you documented how it happened historically; but also culture needs

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Christianity, so this leads me to my question, because as a Christian I am obviously very interested in culture; I realize there is this need for culture to live the Christian experience. I want to go to the title of your talk, “Culture as a By-Product.” I am interested in culture, and yet culture happens as a by-product, so I cannot simply say, “I’m rolling up my sleeves and I’m producing culture”; however, I can also not ignore the point that we live in a time of uncertainties where I feel that I do have a task, I’m called, I have a task in this time. So in a certain way, how do you see my task, our task, given that culture is a by-product? Given, in fact, that we need culture and culture needs Christianity?

Brague: Let me begin by enlarging my own thesis. I would venture the following idea. Whatever is really interesting, worthwhile, whatever has a value, is always a by-product. Let me take as an example the idea of the pursuit of happiness. You Americans may have heard of this formula somewhere. Not to be overly provocative, I would say the pursuit of happiness is bunk for the following reason: if we mean by the pursuit of happiness that I wake up in the morning, roll up my sleeves—to take up your phrase—and I tell myself, “Ok, you must be happy! Do whatever is required for you to be happy. Forget all the rest. Aim at happiness”—this won’t do. It’s a common experience. I don’t have to justify that. All of us know that the best way for us not to be happy is to put “happy” as number one on the list of our tasks. Whereas if we will do our duty—the word is not exactly a favorable, fashionable word—if we do our duty, if we abide by the laws, the virtues, if we try to lead an honest, orderly life, happiness will come unexpectedly as a godly surprise. It’s just an example, but an important one for us who think that happiness is *the* thing we must be driving at.

As far as our task and the present day is concerned, I would say very much the same thing in an analogous way. We don’t have to tell ourselves every morning, *Let’s do culture, let’s build a culture*. Not even a culture of love, to pick up the beautiful phrase launched by Pope John Paul II. Let us try to do what we should, and this will build this culture of love. Let us try, for instance, to love each other. The first way for us to build a culture of love is not to say, Let’s do cultural things—painting, singing, highbrow activities. Let us begin at the grassroots level with love, with justice, with benevolence,

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and simple fair like that and a culture will arise.

I alluded to this at the very end of my talk when I spoke about faith in the goodness of Being. I might very well look at the world in a gloomy mood, and we would have good reasons for doing that; but in spite of all that what is most clear is that it is nevertheless in the final analysis good, and if we take our bearings from this most basic assumption, culture will arise, culture will grow without our having to pull on the blades of grass for them to grow more quickly. Our task is essentially a preparatory one. We have to till the soil and the seeds will produce the trees or plants or whatever, spontaneously.

Question: Thank you very much for this beautiful lecture. I am French. You will recognize my accent, I guess. You mentioned that Christianity has nothing special to say about morals. I want to make sure I understood what you said. When we look at the life, death, and Resurrection of Christ, isn't there something specific for Christians to say about morals? To give them a significance that they wouldn't have by themselves? Isn't there a way of living a Christian moral life that philosophers wouldn't have been able to talk about because it is specifically Christian? It's something that Plato or Aristotle wouldn't have thought about: humility or poverty, which were virtues not developed or lived out...

Brague: Well, I was expecting a question along those lines. I'm quite conscious my thesis had something provocative about it. What I meant is as follows: Christianity is first and foremost what Jesus Christ did. To the best of my knowledge, he never introduced any new commandment. There is a passage in the Gospel of John in which he says precisely that. It is extremely interesting if we look at it through the lens of the audience. "I will give you a new commandment," says Christ. People are picking up stones in order to throw at him. This is what they should do if they are abiding by the law of Moses, in which it is said that it is criminal to add anything to or to detract anything from the Law of Moses. This is the *the* sin—adding a new commandment. What is this new commandment? What follows immediately is the greatest platitude that you could imagine, a literal quotation from Leviticus 17:19: "Love thy neighbor," which is expressed in a semitic language that does not possess the reciprocal pronoun. They can't say, "Love each other." They say,

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“Love thy brother or thy neighbor or thy fellow,” and so on.

A quotation from the Old Testament, and people let drop those stones that they wanted to throw at this awful criminal who had the cheek to add something to Moses’ Law. But what comes after that is still more interesting: “Love each other in the same way I loved you.” In other words, “Love each other as I did when I anticipatorily sacrificed myself, when I died for you.” What is new is not the content of the commandment, it’s the context. The context of the First Commandment of the Decalogue—just have a look at the way the Decalogue is set in its context in Deuteronomy. They are about to enter the Holy Land, about to perform Easter, to perform Pasqua, the passage from the heathen way of life to God’s country. We have here a new Easter, and a new Easter gives a new context to an old command and makes it, to some extent, new, although the content of the commandment is the same. This is, in my opinion, the basic fact: what we call more often than not by the name of Christian morals are in fact the counsels, not the commandments.

There are no new commandments. There is a commemorality which receives different interpretations from different religious traditions. The Ten Commandments could be read, let’s say, in a Hindu key: If I fail to abide by those commandments, I will load my karma; I will let my karma plunge. You can interpret them in the key of Islam: I will displease God. I will disobey him. You can interpret them in the key of a pagan, in aristocratic ethics: I will do what a gentleman is not supposed to do. Or you can interpret them in a Christian key: I will lack love. The content is the same, but the mood or the color is hugely different. And for this reason there are no Christian morals, but there is a Christian way to be moral.

Question: Thank you so much for the talk. You sparked an idea in me which I want to bounce off of you. I am struck by this ontological passivity that you were alluding to. If I took your theory further, could I say that culture is the by-product of the faith between the faith and the goodness of Being, and silence in front of that Being; silence born from the awe in front of that Being.

Brague: It would be interesting to try to get a clear idea of what silence

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is about on the basis of the understanding of singing that I suggested. No sound is possible without silence. No music is possible without a right way of putting silences between the sounds. There is a beautiful saying by a fellow countryman of mine who was not a musician, but a painter, and he had almost the same surname as my humble self, *Braque*: he said that a vase, jar, or jug gives a form to the void, and music gives a form to silence. It is most important that music might be silence as the backdrop on which it becomes possible.

Perhaps I could adapt this idea in my way by saying that no culture, no culture-creating activity is possible without the silent contemplation of what is; if you really look at something, you must shut up. I'm sorry, but quite concretely when we really admire—ah!—you must stare and remain open-mouthed to some extent before what you look at and what you admire. No culture without this element of admiration, which puts a stopper on our big mouth, in contradistinction to the eternal chat and to...you know, Pascal said, "The eternal silence of those infinite spaces frightens me." From time to time, I must say that the eternal chat of those confined spaces is unbearable; I hate this! In a restaurant, you can't get silence; silence is becoming the most expensive of all worlds. Well, perhaps it could be good from time to time to listen to what Cardinal Sarah said in his most recent book, which is precisely about the worth and need for silence. And I won't have to answer your question; I'll content myself with a word—right on.

Question: Since you said that there is a specific Christian context and flavor for morality, I was wondering if there is a specific Christian flavor and context for culture.

Braque: Well, it should be very much the same thing—i.e., culture not understood as a way for us to strut about with our achievements, not a way for us to show how big screaming deals we are, but a cult of sorts—we should not hesitate to use this word that has an obvious religious connotation: culture as cult, culture as admiration, culture as bringing about in us a humility of sorts. When we listen to great music, when we look at a great painting, well, we feel small—and this is quite a positive feeling. We are not crushed by this feeling of our inferiority. There is this wonderful sentence by Goethe that is in the

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Elective Affinities, in one of his novels, there is in the dialogue of one of the female characters the following sentence that I am trying first to remember in the original, and then I'll try to translate it: *vis-à-vis excessive superiority, the only remedy is love*. When somebody or something is hugely superior to us, we could experience resentment, envy, jealousy, all kinds of negative feelings, and the only way out, the only way upwards is love, admiration, gratitude; we must be grateful towards the existence of this superior work of art or person or achievement. Together we have a feeling grateful towards. If we have the luck to be a believer, we'll be grateful towards the Creator of all beauty, of all greatness. This might be the only way out, and if we don't do that, we'll have to indulge in hatred; still worse, in envy. It will tell us how it is that I could not do that? How is it that I cannot be as good, as clever? Love is the solution, so to speak.

Question: I would like to know if you've given any thought to the influence of relativism upon our Western culture, as well as its effect upon our sense or degree of faith today?

Brague: In a world where there are so many people for whom relativism at present is supposed to be the arch villain in the plot of the movie—*relativism* meaning that there is nothing absolute, nothing that has a worth in itself, as a consequence, everything has to be submitted to our whims—the snag being that my whims are not your whims, and a third person will have another way for him or her to evaluate things. This is for the most part what is meant by relativism and what is aimed at by the critique, by the often-leveled critique against relativism. Well, perhaps we should qualify this attitude and try to look at the positive sides of relativism, for there are such sides. It might be another notion of relativism that the one which is aimed at—for instance in Pope Benedict's utterances—is about this theme, in which he says that relativism is something we could try and stave off from our culture. Relativism can mean that we are not the absolute, and in this meaning relativism is something healthy. Our opinion, our interests, our doings and so on and so forth, are not necessarily the best thing that can exist. But there is a far cry between this modest, this prudent attitude towards oneself, on the one hand, and the will for us to drag whatever possesses a value down to the level in which things can be exchanged, the one for the other. When this, if I may add this rider to the

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critique of relativism—I think I could have it both ways, i.e., first as a useful implement against ourselves, against our...I was about to say nature, but we are fallen beings. Our nature was corrupted. It could be an implement against an over-confidence in our fallen nature and in its choices, on the one hand. And on the other hand it should relativize ourselves, vis-à-vis the values which we stand for. This is the same gesture when we acknowledge the superiority of an ideal, or even of the realization of this ideal, and we relativize ourselves vis-à-vis this superiority of this ideal, and by this token I come back to what I've just been saying, i.e., love is sort of a way for us to relativize ourselves, to realize that we are not that fantastic, that we have to learn. This is the first stance necessary to build a culture. We have to learn, we have to admire, we have to confess the goodness of Being, and so on and so forth. All of this is a kind of a relativism, certainly not the one that felt the flack in Pope Benedict's encyclical.

Question: Thank you for an excellent inaugural lecture in memory of Msgr. Lorenzo. My question is: If culture is a by-product of the human experience, what is of the essence, if anything, of the human experience?

Brague: That's a taller order than what was proposed to me in Angelo Sala's email! This is not a cop out. I really feel the challenge. You could hardly ask for a full-fledged definition of human culture, but let me perhaps get back to the two points of departure: one in Athens, one in Jerusalem, i.e., Aristotle telling us that science and philosophy at large could arise because the Egyptian priests could twiddle their thumbs after the cultic acts. So in order not to get bored stiff, they had to invent intellectual pursuits, not only games, but geometry, other kinds of highly interesting intellectual pursuits, on the one hand, and on the other hand we have this idea that idolatry is what is left. The idol is quite concretely made of what is left of the wood that was used in order to warm our bodies, to cook our meals, and possibly to give our eyes some pleasure. If we look at the common point of those two rather different worldviews from different contexts, we see that there is in human nature something like an excess—the ability to do more than what is strictly necessary, the ability to go beyond the satisfaction of our basic needs, an ability that can give vent to the creation of idols. And this is the bad side which Isaiah the prophet is criticizing. But there is quite a good side to

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it. The openness to the whole spectrum of possibilities, the openness to the question about the origin of what is there—this is what Aristotle alluded to when he understood philosophy as looking after the causes: How is it that things are what they are? All this points to the essence of human culture, i.e., what I should call for want of any better word—excess. Well, if we look for a more bombastic formula, we'll have to translate this into Latin and speak of transcendence. The ability for us to transcend ourselves, to be our own ladder to climb ever higher rungs in the direction of good or evil—idol or God.

Biographical Notes on Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete

Lorenzo Albacete, a noted priest, theologian, lecturer, author and television personality, was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico, on January 7, 1941.

He moved to Washington, D.C., to study at The Catholic University of America, where he obtained a degree in Space Science and Applied Physics. His scientific studies caused him to search for the roots and meaning of life and existence. A chance encounter with Blessed Paul VI led to his vocation to the priesthood, of which he had no serious thoughts previously. This encounter led him to study for the Archdiocese of Washington at Washington Theological Seminary, earning a Master's Degree in Sacred Theology from Catholic University.

Ordained in 1973 for the Archdiocese of Washington, he served as a parochial vicar, and then became secretary to William Cardinal Baum, Archbishop of Washington, as well as advisor to his successor, James Cardinal Hickey. Fr. Albacete received his doctorate in Sacred Theology from the Pontifical University of St. Thomas in Rome, in 1983.

In 1987 he was the co-founder of, and a professor at, the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family at The Catholic University of America. He was an advisor on Hispanic Affairs for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Northeast Hispanic Catholic Center. From 1996 to 1997 he served as President of the Catholic University of Puerto Rico in Ponce. Invited by John Cardinal O'Connor, Archbishop of New York, he taught at St. Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers, N.Y. He became the spiritual advisor to the ecclesiastical lay movement, Communion and Liberation.

He was a columnist for The New York Times, The New Yorker, Slate, and The New Republic and was a frequent guest on CNN, PBS, The Charlie Rose Show and EWTN. In 1997, Helen Whitney invited him to be a consultant for a documentary she was producing for the PBS show Frontline, which dealt with the challenges to contemporary culture in the teachings of St. John Paul II. Afterwards, at the Ritz Carlton Hotel in Pasadena, C.A., he was approached by several critics and journalists with questions, not just about the Pope, but about faith, life and death, good and evil, science, religion and politics. This led to his 2002 book, God at the Ritz: Attraction to Infinity. A Priest-Physicist talks about Science,

Sex, Politics, and Religion.

Msgr. Albacete's simple and clear way of "explaining" Jesus Christ attracted both ordinary people (particularly agnostics and those with doubts) and prominent figures he met. In 2008, the noted atheist Christopher Hitchens chose Albacete for a highly popular television debate on faith, sponsored by the Templeton Foundation.

Msgr. Albacete credited his association with the lay movement Communion and Liberation as one of the most important in his life. This grew out of his personal friendship with its founder, the Servant of God Msgr. Luigi Giussani. He was Chairman of the Advisory Board of the Crossroads Cultural Center and of the New York Encounter. Both initiatives find their inspiration in the life of Communion and Liberation.

Msgr. Albacete died on October 24, 2014, at Cabrini Nursing Home in Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.

The current President of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation, the Rev. Julián Carrón, said of Msgr. Albacete: "[He] witness[ed] on the dramatic front where faith engages with a modernity in search of meaning. He sought this encounter with anyone, challenging the American intelligentsia with the sole weapon of his witness, as a man who had been seized and transformed by Christ in his reason and in his freedom... With his tireless work, he witnessed to us how faith can become 'intelligence of reality,' with his ability to recognize and embrace anyone without ambiguity, but for love of the truth that is present in every person."

Dr. Rémi Brague

Prof. Rémi Brague is a French historian of philosophy, specializing in the Arabic, Jewish, and Christian thought of the Middle Ages. He is Professor Emeritus of Medieval and Arabic Philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris, and Romano Guardini Chair of Philosophy (Emeritus) at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich. He is member of the Institut de France (Academy of Moral and Political Sciences).

Educated primarily at the Sorbonne in Paris, Prof. Brague began his career as a student of Greek philosophy, developing a phenomenological account of Aristotle's conception of the world. From there, he was led to study Hebrew, in order to read the Old Testament. Finally, he turned to a study of Arabic in order "to read the Jewish philosopher Maimonides' The Guide for the Perplexed in its original language." Accordingly, most of his work has taken place at the intersection of the three Abrahamic religions, as they developed out of the ancient world, formed themselves in dialogue with one another, and eventually gave rise to modernity.

*He is the author of more than 20 books translated into various languages, and hundreds of academic articles on classical and medieval intellectual history, religion, national identity, literature and law. He is perhaps best known in the English-speaking world for his books *Eccentric Culture: A Theory of Western Civilization* and *Law of God: The Philosophical History of an Idea*.*

Prof. Brague is the recipient of numerous international awards, including honors by both the French National Centre for Scientific Research and the Academy of Moral and Political Science. Among them, in 2009 he received both the Josef-Pieper Preis and the Grand Prix de Philosophie de l'Académie Française. In 2011 he was named a Chevalier de l'Ordre National de la Légion d'Honneur. In 2012 he was awarded the Ratzinger Prize for Theology and in 2015 the Aquinas Medal. In 2016 he received the All European Academies Madame de Staël Prize for Cultural Values.

Additionally, Prof. Brague has been a visiting professor at Penn State University, Boston University, Boston College, and many other academic institutions around the country.

Crossroads Cultural Center

Crossroads Cultural Center (“Crossroads”) was established in 2004 by some members of Communion and Liberation—the international movement in the Catholic Church that was founded in 1954 by the Servant of God Msgr. Luigi Giussani—who shared an interest in the relationship between religion and culture. We operate in New York, Austin, Denver, Houston, and Washington, D. C., and we are supported by the work of 40 volunteers. Our goal is to offer opportunities for education, making it possible to look with openness, curiosity and critical judgment at every aspect of reality, and our ideals are summed up by St. Paul’s suggestion: “Test everything; retain what is good.”

At its deepest level, Crossroads was born from the experience that belonging to the living Body of Christ opens us up to all of reality in a profound and new way. It makes it possible to look, behind the appearances, for the truth of everything and to recognize in every particular that “vanishing point” that gives perspective, profundity, and substance to everything; it provides a new point of view that allows us, finally, to see things in their full dimension. In other words, by revealing the ultimate meaning of reality, Christianity has launched us with an open, curious, and cordial spirit into that adventure that is common and proper to every human being: the adventure of knowledge. And knowledge is not a hobby for intellectuals; it is indispensable in order to face, and possibly satisfy, the urgent and unquenchable thirst for meaning and truth that makes us human. In this sense, Christianity has enabled us to be ourselves. We can look at this thirst that we share with everyone else squarely in the face, without fear or embarrassment.

THE ALBACETE LECTURE ON FAITH & CULTURE

Monsignor Lorenzo Albacete, soul, mind and mentor of Crossroads, chaired its Advisory Board from its establishment in 2007 until he passed away on October 24, 2014. In order to honor his memory, to deepen his profound intuitions about the interaction of culture with religiosity and reason, and to follow his shining example of dialogue with people in various walks of life by meeting them at the level of human experience, Crossroads has established the “Albacete Lecture on Faith and Culture.” Its goal is to become an annual event and a meeting place, a “crossroads” where we can develop an understanding of why culture matters and where it finds its origin.



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