

# Catholic Studies in a Secular University

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On behalf of Claremont Graduate University and the chaplains of the Claremont Colleges, it is a pleasure to welcome you to a conversation on “What Catholicism Shall We Choose for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” and the symbolic launch of our campaign for a Chair in Catholic Studies. In a moment, you’ll be introduced to today’s distinguished speaker, Peter Steinfels. For now, I’d like to introduce you to the importance of a Chair in Catholic Studies to our School of Religion.

CGU’s School of Religion teaches students what it means to be inside and outside a community of faith.

“Inside a community” means out there, beyond our secular and scholarly walls, seeing how religion is lived. Inside a community of faith we can get new insights into scripture, revelation, theology, ethics, and service. It turns out that most communities of faith are heterogeneous in beliefs, attitudes, and practices; this, too, is an important lesson.

“Outside a community” means that we also look across the faiths. The same lenses we used inside our particular community—lived religion, scripture, revelation, theology, ethics, and service—we now use comparatively. We also can examine variety within those other communities of faith.

Why does our School of Religion have this remarkable mission?

- First, because we believe this approach can stimulate great research and advances in knowledge.
- Second, because we hope it will improve understanding across the faiths, thereby addressing one of the great challenges of our time, religious conflict and misunderstanding.
- And third, because the insider-outsider perspective can enhance the depth and resonance of one’s own religious faith. We want our School of Religion to be a place of choice for seekers and also for the devout, in each of our faith communities.

A Chair in Catholic studies at Claremont Graduate University will add immeasurably to this mission. Let me suggest two exemplars for those of other faith communities, including those whose faith is in skepticism.

Is one of the greatest of Catholic theologians St. Thomas Aquinas, and one of his greatest works the *Summa Theologica*? Did you know that he left that work uncompleted? He did so because one day while celebrating a mass in Naples, something different and deep happened to Thomas, a mystical experience that though unique and ineffable had results we may recognize elsewhere in Catholicism, elsewhere in Christianity, elsewhere in all religions.

After this experience, Thomas wrote, “My writing days are over; for such things have been revealed to me that all I have written and taught seems of but small account to me, wherefore I hope in my God, that, even as the end has come to my teaching, so it may soon come in my life.”

Soon thereafter, in 1274, in his forty-ninth year, Thomas Aquinas passed away.<sup>1</sup>

The other exemplar is contemporary. At last month’s World Social Forum in Nairobi, 80,000 people gathered in a kind of counter-event to the World Economic Forum in Davos. According to *The Economist*, the biggest single group of anti-poverty campaigners comprised Roman Catholics, who accounted for about 20,000 of the delegates.

*The Economist* notes: “Many people in the rich world who are suspicious of the Vatican’s role in the developing world—because of its opposition to condoms and the curbs it has helped to place on American-financed family-planning aid—might be surprised by the scale of its humanitarian activities. It claims to look after 25% of AIDS patients worldwide. Caritas, its main aid organization, operates in 162 countries. In parts of Africa which don’t interest many other powerful folk, the Catholic church has been an advocate for the poor—even more so under Pope Benedict XVI. On his watch, the church has spoken up more in favor of debt relief, land rights, and fair elections.”<sup>2</sup>

A Chair in Catholic studies at Claremont Graduate University will help us enter into this great community of faith and encounter the greatest Catholic thinkers and doers, from Thomas Aquinas and Pope Benedict to those helping the sick and the poor around the globe. We will enter this community to analyze and compare their messages and missions with those of other faith traditions, and also simply to regard and admire. In exemplary experiences of God that go beyond theology, and in exemplary love and service that reach out to everyone in the world, there is much to learn for people of all faiths, and for secular universities like ours.

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 2d ed., Princeton, Princeton U.P., 1968 [1949], p. 355

<sup>2</sup> “Kingdoms of the World, and Otherwise,” *The Economist*, January 25, 2007, available at [http://www.economist.com/world/international/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=E1\\_RGDNJQQ](http://www.economist.com/world/international/displaystory.cfm?story_id=E1_RGDNJQQ)

