

**PANEL PRESENTATION – THE CTSA AT 75:  
LOOKING BACK, AROUND, AND FORWARD**

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**PAPER THREE – DISPATCHES FROM THE WASTELAND**

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I am honored to take part in this panel today and humbled to be in the company of scholars like Charlie Curran, Shawn Copeland, Vanessa White and Paul Lakeland. I am particularly grateful for the invitation to reflect on the history and future of this society, where I have found my scholarly home. This home has not always welcomed me without reservation and certainly not without disappointments and hurtful mistakes, but what home lacks those experiences? The moment I saw Charlie Curran and Roger Haight on an escalator at my first CTSA in 2003, I thought, “Oh my goodness, I’ve landed in Catholic Hollywood.” From that day to today, I have found our meetings to include moments of profound grace and inspiration that have filled me with a sense of shared mission, and have served as a wellspring of hope in our vocation as theologians. Some of my deepest friendships and collaborations have been forged in and through this community. You have accompanied me in graduate school and job searches, in the tenure process, in pregnancy, in grief, in parenthood, and in joy. I owe the CTSA a great deal, and feel truly blessed to be part of it.

But not everyone feels this way, of course. In an editorial in June 1997, Cardinal Bernard Law referred to the CTSA as a theological wasteland.<sup>1</sup> With my thanks to Tom O’Meara, who circulated this article on the day Cardinal Law was forced to leave Boston in disgrace, I’d like to use this wasteland frame to look back, around and forward at the seventy-five-year history and future promise of this society.

In calling the CTSA a wasteland, the cardinal exemplified a central tension that has existed almost since the founding of the society: the conflict between ecclesiastical authority and academic theology.<sup>2</sup> For Law, and many hierarchs like him, this is a body

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Law, “The CTSA: A Theological Wasteland,” *The Pilot* June 18, 1997

<sup>2</sup> This tension has bubbled over into public cases of censure and conflict. See the cases of Charles Curran, Roger Haight, Elizabeth Johnson, and Margaret Farley, among others. For a detailed account of the Johnson case, see Richard R. Gaillardetz, *When the Magisterium Intervenes: The Magisterium and Theologians in Today’s Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012).

that foments dissent, sows discord and thinks too freely. And yes, we have given audience to ideas like the necessary full and active participation of the eucharistic community, the reality that women are made in God’s image, the idea that racism and colonialism are antithetical to the will of God. Many here have pointed out that the church can be and has been wrong, is capable of sin both in its members and as an institution, and that it is permissible and advisable for the church to repent of those sins and seek to repair the harm done. That may have been what rankled the cardinal. (I’m kidding, of course. It was the suggestion that women’s ordination was thinkable.)

But as the makeup of the society has shifted from an all-clerical, all-male, all-white body to one that is mostly laypeople, and which includes academics from a variety of racially, ethnically, and sexually marginalized communities, the tension between ecclesiastical authority and academic expertise has increased, and possibly intensified. The power structures of the church and the academy can be described as nearly inverted, mirror images of one another. On the ecclesiastical side, we have an all-male mostly-white hierarchy in the United States. The academic power structure, on the other hand, is increasingly lay-led, includes women, LGBTQ+ persons, and members of minoritized races and ethnicities.<sup>3</sup> This dichotomy leaves theologians in a bit of a conundrum vis-à-vis authoritative pronouncements, academic freedom, and ecclesial belonging. After all, the relationship between the CTSA and the institutional church was clear at the time the CTSA was founded—all of its members were priests, and therefore clearly part of the institutional church. It is only as the CTSA has come to resemble the people of God a bit more (and I say a bit because we have a long way to go in decentering whiteness in this society) that the tension in our relationship with the hierarchy has intensified. Some of us wield a great deal of power in our universities and none in our church. Some of us are contingent faculty who wield power in neither sphere.<sup>4</sup> For the few of us who are ecclesially powerful, the CTSA could be considered an ally, but too often has been declared a liability. After all, who wants to be associated with a wasteland?

A wasteland is, more or less, a dump: useless, uncultivated and uncultivateable. A place where nothing can grow or be built. It is economically unproductive, ecologically polluted, subject to environmental degradation. Examples of wastelands include an empty abandoned playground, or a lot with a burnt-out building on it. All over the world, flooded marshlands, deforested areas, arid deserts are considered wastelands. One sixth of India is classified as wasteland. Two things seem apparent at the outset. First, our planet is increasingly a wasteland due to overconsumption. Second, racism, colonialism, and capitalism seem to leave wastelands in their wake.

However, it strikes me that the classification of something as “waste” is in the eye of the classifier. Allow me to illustrate with a personal example. When I was growing

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, the tokenism rampant in higher education cannot be overlooked nor should it be mistaken for genuine representation, shared governance, or inclusivity. Catholic higher education must commit itself to these values if it will remain truly Catholic in the future.

<sup>4</sup> Nor can we forget that many Catholic colleges and universities argue against living-wage proposals and unionization efforts of their contingent faculty and graduate students using distorted notions of Catholic identity. See Gerald Beyer, *Just Universities: Catholic Social Teaching Confronts Corporatized Higher Education* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021).

up, I spent a great deal of time at my grandparents' house in the area known as Little Havana in Miami. My grandfather bought and operated a gas station when he emigrated to the United States, but was retired and repairing cars in his yard by the time I was a child. There was an empty lot next to 854 Northwest 21<sup>st</sup> Avenue in Miami, and it's still there. Objectively, it's a wasteland. It's going to waste. There's no house on there, no farm. There aren't even cars parked back there in various states of repair, as there were when I was a child in the 70s and 80s. There are, oddly, two sidewalk ends that turn inward at that lot, but never meet, indicating that something went terribly awry in city planning. But when I was growing up, the lot was a land forbidden and mysterious, where all kinds of adventures could be had. There was sugarcane growing there. I'm certain my grandfather planted it. There were wild peppers known to some Caribbean CTSA members as *ajicitos dulces*, and some random, nameless berries that we never touched just in case. There were blue jasmine flowers, scientifically known as *plumbago indica*, or *embelezos* in Spanish, that had soft, sticky hairs at the bottom that meant they would attach to my earlobes like very fancy dangling earrings.

On the surface the lot looked hideous and overgrown: a wasteland. To me it was a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. It was the setting for many adventures, for reflection, for imagination. A place to escape from the noise of daily life. In many ways, the CTSA has become that kind of place for me, and for those of us for whom the church, while vitally important, is not a place where our authority and expertise is welcomed or acknowledged. This society, with its very real flaws, can be a place of inquiry and delight, of challenge and promise, and even of hope.

So as we look back around and forward, I want to use the rest of my time to make three points based on Charlie Curran's presidential address of 1970.<sup>5</sup> Consider them dispatches from the wasteland.

**First** – Curran prognosticates the future with some success. He states that the CTSA is still not the sum of all the theology in the US, and it never has been. I am not referring to the alternative societies that have sprung up and faded away due to ideological differences, but rather to the vast amount of theology done by Black, Asian, and Latinx Catholics that the CTSA failed to see for many years, and failed to take seriously for many more. While remaining mainly centrist in its ideological orientation, the society often chooses the path of least resistance, forcing scholars of color to make their own way, relegating them to the sidelines or viewing them as adornments to the “main” theology—the white European one. In his book Curran notes that from its inception the society intended to include Canadian members.<sup>6</sup> Mexico, while also part of North America, was not considered essential for membership. The emergence of Black Catholic scholarship at CTSA is minimal and embarrassing. Again, what I am pointing to here is an anti-Black, colorist, colonialist entrenchment that characterizes many institutions, and I'm saying we are not immune from this entrenchment nor are we beyond it. We must repent, all of us (I'm including myself), for the sin of racism

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<sup>5</sup> Charles E. Curran, “Presidential Address,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 25 (1970): 218-233.

<sup>6</sup> Curran writes, “It is interesting to note that they explicitly wanted to include Canadians in the society.” Charles E. Curran, *The Catholic Theological Society of America: A Story of Seventy-Five Years* (New York/Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2021), 10.

and exclusion. We must strive to center nonwhite voices, marginalized voices, as driving forces for our theological work, not as sidebars or enhancements.

**Second** – Charlie was also right to predict the migration of theology from the seminary to the university. This bifurcation has led to suspicion and an erosion of trust between the academy and the hierarchy, which I alluded to before in my comments about Cardinal Law. From time to time, particularly in the last twenty-five years, the society has watched the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) and/or the US bishops interfere with the academic process of discussion and debate of new ideas. We must not forget that each time the hierarchy has intruded on the academic freedom of a scholar here, that intrusion occurred against a backdrop where the same hierarchy was avoiding responsibility for sexual abuse and its cover up. Neither body has a monopoly on virtue, truth, or authority. As theologians we have a responsibility to the teaching office of the church, but we also have a responsibility to the victims of the hierarchy's mistreatment.

Further, the migration of theology to the university presents us with new problems. As corporate models of governance take over higher education, we must beware and tend to our lots, our wastelands. We must resist the neoliberal conflation of usefulness with productivity, the endless drive to create more content and data, to curate more brand, to be more available, do more invisible work, produce more writing. Academic theology needs apophasis, too. One lesson of the pandemic year has been that doing less is fine and even necessary.

**Third** – One place Charlie may have missed the prognostication mark are his comments on popularization and activism. Early in his address, he points to a tension between scientific theology and popularization. He writes, "In a sense, any Christian who is interested in the mission and function of the church shares the desire to bring the theological renewal to more people in the church. ... The professional theologian cannot devote the majority of his time to this important mission without allowing his theological expertise to suffer."<sup>7</sup> Later he warns of activism as a pitfall for students of theology, preventing them from developing a deep understanding of the discipline. "The danger of those who want immediate results from their study lies in the fact that these students will often gain a superficial knowledge or smattering of many things but will never really have an adequate theological understanding."<sup>8</sup> Flippantly, we might wonder whether Curran is a bit of a clairvoyant who foresaw Catholic Twitter before the internet was a glimmer in anyone's eye.

More seriously, while the desire for "scientific" theology is very real, as someone who contends on social media with self-proclaimed experts on race, theology, and sexism, I certainly agree that expertise cannot be rushed. At the same time, this desire for purity, untainted by activism or popularization, might be an objectivist fiction. The lay takeover of the society means that most of us are not only academics. We are parents, community members, people who vote and run for office. In particular, some, like me, are members of marginalized communities and/or allies to those communities who have suffered unjustly in church and society and who should not have to wait for results. The academy cannot afford to cut itself off from popularization and activism, and neither can the church, because for many of us it is our real lives, the lives of our

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<sup>7</sup> Curran, "Presidential Address," 221.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

parents, the lives of our communities. Theologians bring the joys, hopes, dreams, and anxieties of the world to their work. Those joys hopes dreams and anxieties are reflected in popular culture, in popular religion, and in popular movements. Because we are immersed in our daily struggles, our *lucha*<sup>9</sup> and theologize out of those contexts, we cannot, and should not, hope for a theology that is apart from these realities. This has been a constant theme of Latinx theology—to begin from the everyday experience of the people of God, and thereby to highlight that ALL theology is perspectival, even that which calls itself “scientific.”

To conclude, let’s draw our attention back to the wasteland, in poetry. Commentators note that T. S. Eliot wrote *The Waste Land* as a response to the mess of the modern world. This poem, which many consider his masterpiece, is filled with religious language and imagery, as a rejoinder to what he perceived was the growing irrelevance of religion in his day. That context certainly resonates today in our world of anti-institutional sentiment and growing numbers of disaffiliated Catholic youth. After World War I, Eliot saw desolation everywhere, an old paradigm passing away with no metanarrative to order the future. This remains true in our contemporary, fractured context. We are at a precipice as a society, a nation, and a global church, marked by polarization, chaos, inequality, and death. Where do we go from here?

These lines in particular struck me as an orienting moment. They are from the second part of the poem, “A Game of Chess.” In a moment of despair the narrator says,

“Do

“You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember

“Nothing?”<sup>10</sup>

One year of pandemic and isolation, of loss and polarization and uprisings and death has left many of us numb. We feel nothing. We want to do nothing. But here is where God is making all things new. And so I ask, as we battle the feelings of nothingness: who is our theology for? God doesn’t need our theology. Is it for ourselves and our careers? Our universities? The academy or the church? Or is it for the victims of history, the suffering, marginalized and the erased? Those who were abused & discarded? Or those who are lynched? Or those left to die in the Florida Straits or the Sonoran Desert? For the disheartened and disillusioned with nothing left to believe? Those who have nothing, have become nothing, are erased, like so much nothing. The God who became nothing on a cross. Let us remember. Nothing. And endeavor with the Holy Spirit to bring forth from our wasteland something new. Thank you.

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<sup>9</sup> Mujerista theologian Ada María Isási-Díaz popularized the use of “*la lucha*” to describe the messy struggle of human life and the grace contained therein. See her *En La Lucha/In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), *La Lucha Continues: Mujerista Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> T. S. Eliot, “The Waste Land,” accessed July 29, 2021, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47311/the-waste-land>.