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Summary of Roundtable Conversation

The conversation following Julian Bourg's and Colleen Mary Carpenter's essays began with observations about the lingering traces of romanticism that cohere with a Catholic perspective on modernity: specifically, the hunger for wholeness that gives rise to an alternate language to that of modernity's rationalism. The romantic impulse, several participants acknowledged, had a place for brokenness, mystery, and doubt. Calling to mind the work of Stephen Schloesser, one participant suggested that it was the mass experience of trauma that brought Catholicism back into dialogue with modernity, since the theme of redemptive suffering is at the heart of Catholic tradition, whereas modernity has little use for such a theme.[1] Indeed, that theme of trauma marks for some the rupture of the modern metanarrative itself, giving rise to a postmodern turn that is critical of modernity's conceit. For if modernity produced, *inter alia*, secular technologies and structures of power that yielded the massive traumas of world wars, gulags, cultural revolutions, and the like, then it is no surprise that a certain romantic current still runs through the literature of of the twentieth century.

Yet even analysis itself is not immune from criticism of the modern. Two respondents highlighted a theme that arose in earlier conversation during the Roundtable weekend, namely that English departments have become too enamored with analysis, perhaps insufficiently conscious of the ethical dimension of literary interpretation. One dimension of the Catholic approach to history is precisely its interest in what Julian Bourg identified as the *longue dureé*—that is, the long view of history as "the waiting room of eschatology." One dimension of the modern conceit, mastery through technology, masks what emerges as a deeper truth about the human engagement with the world, namely that it is desire, rather than possession, which makes us human. Such a position is arguably closer to a romantic view of the human subject.

Yet modernity cannot be pinned down so easily. Another participant argued that modernity is too complex a phenomenon to reduce to this or that problematic. Another participant invited reflection on the dimensions of the modern with which Catholicism has had to grapple for its own integrity. Responses included that Catholic faith has had to come to terms with the relationship between human beings and nature (the ecological question); social emancipation, particularly of women; and the historicity of knowledge.

1 See Stephen Schloesser, *Jazz Age Catholicism: Mystic Modernism in Postwar Paris, 1919-1933* (University of Toronto Press, 2005).

Yet another participant pointed to the figure of John Henry Newman and his questions about development of Christian doctrine, which anticipated themes that the Second Vatican Council would take up over a century later.

Picking up on this theme of development, another participant observed that the common challenge for any organization is to discern what is essential and what must change. That challenge is evident today, noted another, with the shift in Catholicism's center of gravity away from the North Atlantic toward South America (Pope Francis's home), Africa, and Asia. The Church is developing new epistemologies and new cultural perspectives in light of new encounters with historic others. In light of these changes, noted another participant, the real miracle is stability. That an organization like the Church can retain stability amidst the dynamics of modernity and postmodernity itself reflects a dynamic process of discernment.

One participant dwelt on this organizational question, querying whether there is anything in modernity which really represents a rupture. She commented that the perennial challenge of Christian faith is discerning the balance between transformation in Christ, on the one hand, and appropriation of culture, on the other. Another participant explored this thesis by describing the Incarnation as the way that God becomes a broken subject, thereby becoming a rupture in human history that becomes generative in relationships both among human beings and between human beings and God. It may be the case that modernity itself does not represent a rupture, but rather one more historical period in which human beings called by Christ into communion must practice a perennial form of discernment—that is, of encounter with broken others on the margins of a social order.

The conversation moved to questions about how the relationship between Catholicism and modernity impacts Catholic university life. One participant suggested that a pedagogical challenge is to help students see what they are missing: to attend to those experiencing brokenness and suffering. Our students are irreducibly modern, opined another, in their appropriation of the historicity of knowledge and meaning, but they are prone to a lazy relativism that denies any kind of transcendent principles, even those firmly embedded within modernity such as "reason is a sure guide to truth." We must challenge students to critique culture, mindful of earlier observations about the moral dimensions of critique itself. Our methodology, several others commented, must be mindful of the way that teaching itself has changed as a consequence of modern personalism. Calling to mind the example of Matteo Ricci, one participant suggested that his method of engaging others in conversation is a model for this approach. Another pointed to Pope Francis, whose method of "walking around" divisive issues, rather than naming them in a confrontational way, is suggestive. Our challenge is to "walk around" students' unformed notions about the world, about suffering, about meaning, and about God, in order that they might see past modern fictions. Such pedagogical challenges point to broader institutional questions about the distinctiveness of a Catholic university's encounter with modernity and, in particular, with others—a theme that has proven to be important in a number of Roundtable conversations.