

## **St. Albert the Great Gold Mass for Scientists**

St. Mark's College

16 November 2018

Dear Father Rob, Deacons Dileep and Hilmar, brothers and sisters in Christ:

### ***Introduction***

Once again it is a great joy for me to offer this Eucharist with all of you, especially with those associated in any way with the Society of Catholic Scientists whose purpose is to “witness to the harmony between the vocation of scientist and the life of faith.” Celebrating an annual Gold Mass on – or around – the feast of St. Albert the Great (which was yesterday), belongs to a long-standing tradition in universities of special Masses for members of a particular profession. We refer to today's Eucharist as the “Gold Mass” because the colour of the hoods worn by those graduating with a doctorate in science is gold.

In the university world of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, St. Albert stands out because of his enormous intellectual contributions, and not just in the so-called sacred sciences. In those areas his student, Thomas Aquinas, surpassed him, just as Albert said he would. He chastised the students in Thomas' class who made fun of him for his shyness and lack of contribution to discussion. They called him “the Dumb Ox.” Albert said, however, that one day the bellowing this Dumb Ox would be heard throughout the world. Perhaps this is a first lesson to be gleaned from Albert's life. Recognize and nurture talent that God puts on your path.

Humility is the first virtue of a Christian scientist and intellectual.

But Albert tells us something else. He was not narrow-minded in his intellectual interests. Nothing in God's world – whether natural or supernatural – was outside his interests. This curiosity led him to the pursuit of wisdom in nearly every other discipline then known, from theology to physics, from philosophy to chemistry, from astronomy to minerology, from botany to zoology. He embodied the truly wise person whom we heard described in this evening's reading from the Book of Wisdom: "Happy is the person who meditates on wisdom and reasons intelligently, who reflects on her ways and ponders her secrets" (Wis 15:1).

### *Friendship of Science and Faith*

In a more contemporary vein, Benedict XVI sums up why scientists chose St. Albert the Great as their patron. The Saint "reminds us – he said – that there is friendship between science and faith and that through their vocation to the study of nature, scientists can take an authentic and fascinating path of holiness."<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, the Church has a pressing need of you: faithful women and men who are willing to dedicate your life to this friendship between faith and modern science, a friendship which is often neither easy to explain

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<sup>1</sup> Benedict XVI, General Audience (24 March 2010).

nor easy to negotiate. Nonetheless, you go ahead and by this very act you tell a great truth to the world. That truth is this: a scientific culture is rooted deeply in the soil of the Catholic Church.

Earlier this week, speaking to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, itself a confirmation of the esteem the Church has for scientists, Pope Francis sounded an optimistic note on the relationship between science and faith: “The scientific world, which in the past tended to assert its independence and self-sufficiency, and to show a certain distrust vis-à-vis spiritual and religious values, seems today instead to be increasingly aware of the ever more complex reality of the world and of the human being.”<sup>2</sup>

This opening marks real progress in the relationship between science and faith.

### ***Mystery as the Starting Point***

Why is this happening? Why a decrease in what used to be called the “conflict” between faith and science?

I would suggest that the rediscovery of mystery has something to do with it. Before opening itself to the discoveries of the empirical sciences, the universe should be recognized as “a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise,” because “it speaks of God’s

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<sup>2</sup> Francis, Address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences (12 November 2018).

love, his boundless affection for us.”<sup>3</sup>

Already in 1613 Galileo, one of the founders of modern science, made an important distinction. He wrote that “Holy Scripture and Nature both proceed from the divine Word: one, as being dictated by the Holy Spirit, and the other, as the very faithful executor of God’s orders.” So he wrote in 1613.<sup>4</sup>

In any case, we must remember this: the mystery of the universe, which all science in one way or another seeks to penetrate, “is not irrational but is a superabundance of sense, of meaning, of truth.”<sup>5</sup>

### ***The Church Fosters Reason in the Search for Truth***

While Creation and all within it are to be contemplated as a mystery charged with God’s grandeur, they are also to be explored by our reason. The Church wholeheartedly supports these initiatives and tell us not to be afraid of them. On the contrary, she calls for a fruitful collaboration between the empirical sciences and philosophy and theology, as well as faith itself.

For believers, faith is not fearful of reason, since the light of reason and the light of faith both come from God’ (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa*

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<sup>3</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si*, 84.

<sup>4</sup> Cited by St. John Paul II, Address to the European Physical Society (30 March 1979).

<sup>5</sup> Benedict XVI, General Audience (21 November 2012).

*contra Gentiles*, I, 7) and cannot contradict each other.<sup>6</sup>

Let's remember that Christianity is the religion of the *Logos*, the Word who was in the beginning and was made flesh in time and history (cf. Jn 1:1,14). We do not “relegate faith to the sphere of the irrational.”<sup>7</sup>

Although many of our contemporaries fail to understand this, from the outset the Catholic tradition has rejected “fideism,” which holds that to believe is precisely to go against reason, and almost exultantly. “I believe because it is absurd” is not a formula that expresses Catholic teaching. Indeed, God is not absurd; if anything, he is a mystery. This mystery, in turn, is not irrational but is a superabundance of sense, of meaning, of truth.<sup>8</sup>

In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis, himself a chemist by professional training, put the relationship between science and faith this way:

The Church has no wish to hold back the marvellous progress of science. On the contrary, she rejoices and even delights in acknowledging the enormous potential that God has given to the human mind. Whenever the sciences – rigorously focussed

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 242.

<sup>7</sup> Benedict XVI, Address to the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery of the Agostino Gemelli Polyclinic (3 May 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, General Audience (21 November 2012).

on their specific field of inquiry – arrive at a conclusion which reason cannot refute, faith does not contradict it.<sup>9</sup>

What the perspective of faith brings to scientific research “is found within – neither superimposed nor juxtaposed – the keen and tenacious search for knowledge.”<sup>10</sup>

### ***People of Faith Bring Ethical Questions to the Fore***

A last point which bears repeating is one frequently raised by Pope Francis, especially in his ground-breaking encyclical *Laudato Si'*. In the strongest terms he affirms that every ecological imbalance leads to harm for humanity. Scientists are not to treat nature as a slave but to take inspiration from the Canticle of the Creatures by St. Francis of Assisi, who considers our common home as “a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us.”<sup>11</sup>

For Pope Francis, the whole ecological debate must ultimately be framed in ethical terms. Science provides the foundation, but it cannot avoid the ethical implications entailed in how we treat our common home. Scientists should come up with adequate responses aimed at protecting the health of our planet and its inhabitants. Just as the

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<sup>9</sup> Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 243.

<sup>10</sup> Benedict XVI, Address to the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery of the Agostino Gemelli Polyclinic (3 May 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 1.

scientific community has made progress in identifying the risks of climate change, for example, “it is now called to propose workable solutions and to convince societies and their leaders to pursue them.”<sup>12</sup>

In all scientific research, at every step of the way and in all its technological applications, we have to ask the fundamental question: Does this seeming progress and advance make human life on earth “more human” in every aspect?<sup>13</sup>

St. John Paul II established a criterion by which to judge scientific and technological progress: Does it serve the whole person in all their spiritual and bodily subjectivity? Respect for the human person is “the supreme test for judging every employment of science and every concrete planning of new experiments that could be made possible by technology.”<sup>14</sup>

Repeatedly, Francis urges that greater attention must be paid to the values that are at the foundation of scientific research, which must always be “aimed at promoting the integral advancement of each human being and of the common good. . . .The scientific community is a part of society, and must not be considered separate and independent; indeed, it

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<sup>12</sup> Francis, Address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences (12 November 2018).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. St. John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. St. John Paul II, Address to a Group of Noble Prize-Winners (22 December 1980), 3.

is called to serve the human family and its integral development”<sup>15</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

Let me conclude with the words of our Archdiocese’s secondary patron, after the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. John Paul II:

At the dawn of the third millennium, the rich panorama of contemporary culture is opening unprecedented and promising prospects in the dialogue between science and faith, as between philosophy and theology. Devote all your energies to developing a culture and a scientific approach which will always let God’s providential presence and intervention be disclosed.<sup>16</sup>

May your research benefit all, so that the peoples of the earth will be fed, given to drink, healed and educated; may political life and economy of peoples receive from you indications on how to advance with greater certainty towards the common good, for the benefit especially of the poor and those in need, and towards respect for our planet.<sup>17</sup>

✦ J. Michael Miller, CSB  
Archbishop of Vancouver

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<sup>15</sup> Francis, Address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences (12 November 2018).

<sup>16</sup> St. John Paul II, Homily, Jubilee for Scientists (25 May 2000), 5.

<sup>17</sup> Francis, Address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences (12 November 2018).