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Remembering and
Giving Thanks as
Christian Practice

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Remembering and Giving Thanks as Christian Practice*

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For the liturgy ... is the outstanding means whereby the faithful may express in their lives, and manifest to others, the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church. It is of the essence of the Church that she be both human and divine, visible and yet invisibly equipped, eager to act and yet intent on contemplation, present in this world and yet not at home in it; and she is all these things in such wise that in her the human is directed and subordinated to the divine, the visible likewise to the invisible, action to contemplation, and this present world to that city yet to come, which we seek. While the liturgy daily builds up those who are within into a holy temple of the Lord, into a dwelling place for God in the Spirit, to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ, at the same time it marvellously strengthens their power to preach Christ, and thus shows forth the Church to those who are outside as a sign lifted up among the nations ...¹

In this second paragraph of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, it is always a surprise at how one of the most important statements in the minds of its authors – and it is clearly one of the most important because it comes first after the introduction - is about the church. It might be titled ‘liturgy as ecclesiology’. The liturgy- is the context and the actual avenue by which the mystery of Christ and the body of Christ take particular shape and form, for us, and for the whole world. The whole system is sacramental and symbolic: the human, outwardly expressed through sense and thought leads to the divine, all that is visible in the liturgy, created matter, points to the invisible; all the actions we do lead us to stillness and focus on the divine, and the now – the already of liturgical action – always leads

1 *Sacrosanctum Concilium* http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat_ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html

* *Text of an address delivered at the Irish Church Music Association Conference held in St. Patrick's College, Maynooth in July 2019.*

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to what is already and yet not fulfilled. The liturgy is to build up the body of Christ, in its individual members, yes, but above all as a corporate body – one born from the waters of baptism – and to send the gathered church out to show Christ and be Christ for all the world.

Sacrosanctum Concilium was promulgated fifty-six years ago now. To look at the fundamental theological principles of liturgy over the past fifty years is a huge topic, so taking a few particular lenses will help narrow the options. This essay will *first* use the lens of history (what is it and how do we use it theologically); *second*, a system of prioritizing some liturgical choices over others by their theological and historical weight; and *thirdly*, the ongoing developments of liturgy as both creation and expression of faith – what do we believe, and therefore what do we pray.

1. USING HISTORY AS THEOLOGY

We begin with a definition of history to counter the approach that implies history is something we can reconstruct. I very much like the short reminder from Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, who writes that the past is inaccessible, and therefore the best we can do is to say history is about “things that happen to have happened.”² Our access is always mediated, so the reality of what *was* is a mediated, and often inexact, truth. For a more detailed approach, we might turn to Teresa Berger, a German Roman Catholic who currently teaches at Yale in the US. In her very helpful 2011 book, *Gender Differences and the Making of Liturgical History: Lifting a Veil on Liturgy’s Past*, she articulates four stages:

- a. The actual past, history, which is inaccessible, this is what was, and to which we cannot return
- b. Historical sources – the dominant sources are textual, and secondarily, material culture (such as architecture). But these “are not transcripts” she reminds us, the authors of texts in particular wrote with their own biases and they are to be approached with what Sandra Schneiders calls a “hermeneutic of suspicion”
- c. Historiography – what we do with the sources today. How do we interpret them? Do we continue the biases that the original authors wrote through, or do we challenge the writings with other writings and other artifacts?

2 Rowan Williams, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd Limited, 2015) 1

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- d. Tradition – authorizing claims to the past. “Theological recourse to tradition” means that for many Christian communities, these past events (and their interpreted meaning) are a primary means of authorizing practices today, lending ultimate authority on some choices, for example ‘as the church has always taught’³

What we are often talking about when we speak of liturgical history then is tradition, the authorizing claims to the past for which we have filtered access. Now I should self-identify as someone who loves liturgical history – it has been a big part of my own studies, something I return to again and again in writing and research. But I raise Teresa’s scheme, and other versions of it to remind us to use the words with care especially phrases like ‘traditional liturgy’.

Does this uncertainty, or the reality that scholars today more freely admit how much less we know of our liturgical history than we thought, does this mean that we should ignore historical sources, our interpretation of them, or that tradition is unimportant? No, of course not – but over the past fifty years research has expanded our knowledge because of new resources or new willingness to look again. Two examples of this, the first particularly important ...

First – in liturgy and music, a fair amount of writing from the 1950s on wrote about how liturgy as well as liturgical music, was rooted in Judaism. Now, there is no denying that Judaism is ‘the rock from whence we are hewn,’ but to root early Christian liturgy in a pre-existing and fixed synagogue liturgy was in for a rude awakening! When – in a sadly delayed engagement – Christian liturgical historians got around to talking with Jewish liturgical historians, the Jewish liturgists shook their heads and asked: “what synagogue liturgy?” The earliest full liturgical texts for rabbinic Judaism are centuries later. Now, after three decades of cooperative work between Christian and Jewish liturgists, we recognize that both early Christian liturgy and rabbinic Jewish liturgy were taking shape in parallel ways - borrowing and loaning rituals and texts back and forth.⁴

Second – It is always interesting to re-visit Susan Ashbrook Harvey’s 2006 book *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination*,⁵ where she takes on the historical research on the use of incense. Her research is a superb example of a “new historiography” where one does not start with assumptions

3 Teresa Berger, *Gender Differences and the Making of Liturgical History: Lifting a Veil on Liturgy’s Past*. (surrey, England: Ashgate, 2011) see pages 1-6.

4 See in particular the series of volumes co-edited by Paul F. Bradshaw and Lawrence A. Hoffman, particularly volume 1: *The Making of Jewish and Christian Worship*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991.

5 Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015.

of what needs to be found, but lets the historical sources speak for themselves.

This was, of course, an instrumental approach to research in what we refer to as “the liturgical movement” – generally meaning from the mid-19th century up to Vatican II. This movement turned back to older sources with the understanding that *not* all historical periods are equal – the early church, not the high middle ages – is to be lifted up as more authentic, more highly valued than other historical periods for a number of reasons. These first centuries of Christianity were closer to Jesus the Christ and therefore closer to the source; they were rooted in cultures which had a better synthesis between scripture, theology, and cultural understanding, and they predate the ‘divided’ church (although each of these points require a bit of nuance).

We see the reflection of this aspect of the liturgical movement in various places in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, such as paragraph 50 on the Eucharist:

‘The rite of the Mass is to be revised in such a way that the intrinsic nature and purpose of its several parts, as also the connection between them, may be more clearly manifested, and that devout and active participation by the faithful may be more easily achieved. For this purpose the rites are to be simplified, due care being taken to preserve their substance; elements which, with the passage of time, came to be duplicated, or were added with but little advantage, are now to be discarded; other elements which have suffered injury through accidents of history are now to be restored to the vigor which they had in the days of the holy Fathers, as may seem useful or necessary.’

In addressing non-eucharistic liturgy, the same ‘*restoration*’ language is evident: “With the passage of time, however, there have crept into the rites of the sacraments and sacramentals certain features which have rendered their nature and purpose far from clear to the people of today; hence some changes have become necessary to adapt them to the needs of our own times. For this reason the sacred Council decrees as follows concerning their revision.” (62) So, subsequent paragraphs: “The catechumenate for adults, comprising several distinct steps, is to be restored and to be taken into use at the discretion of the local ordinary.” With regard to the divine office: “By tradition going back to early Christian times, the divine office is devised so that the whole course of the day and night is made holy by the praises of God.”

How is this use of historical sources and historiography of liturgical practice an issue of theology? Theology is the articulation

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of faith, ‘faith seeking understanding’ in the famous writing of Anselm of Canterbury.⁶ One way we understand and make sense of what we are *doing* is through what we have *done*. John Baldovin, writing on the reform of the liturgical reform⁷ in 2008 says this: “religious faith and practice are by nature traditional. Even as they might adapt to new times and situations, they appeal to history for their warrant. And so in any contest over the nature of liturgical reform it is inevitable that history – and especially understanding what continuity in history might mean – will have a major place.”⁸ Since 1963 there has been not only the composition and promulgation of the typical editions – authoritative embodiments of the blueprints written in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, but also rewrites, corrections, rebuttals, and ‘returns’ to less dramatic changes in the eyes of some. These uses of history are theology because practices based in tradition *have* meaning, *create* meaning, and *continue* meaning in their very patterns of changing. If we look at a such a notable scholar as Josef Jungmann and his important work on the Roman Mass from the perspective of history as theology,⁹ we see a sweeping overview of the history of the Mass that kept changing and evolving. The ultimate intent of the study, of course, was to show that because it had changed again and again in history, it could change again, setting up the unthinkable for some, that it had not always been celebrated this way, and that was okay.

To conclude this section on history as a theological principle, I turn to a more recent articulation, again from Rowan Williams. He writes that “good history is a moral affair because it opens up a point of reference that is distinct from us yet not wholly alien.” From studying history we can gain perspective and a more balanced identity as Christians: “good historical writing constructs our sense of who we are by a real engagement with the strangeness of the past.”

Theologically, above all, Williams reminds us that history is part of salvation: divine action is both a “set of historical events and an eternal act, the self-giving of the Son to the Father in the Trinity,”¹⁰ which returns us to the opening concepts of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* itself.

6 *Proslogion*, 1077-1078.

7 John Baldovin, *Reforming the Liturgy: A Response to the Critics*. (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 2008).

8 *Ibid.*, 36.

9 Josef Jungmann, *Missarum Solemnia*, originally published in 1948. In English, *Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development* Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1986.

10 Williams, *Why Study the Past?* 24. :

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2. REORDERING PRIORITIES

A *second* broad category of theological principle which shaped the liturgical movement, the work of Vatican II, and continues to shape ongoing liturgical reform is putting first things first. This is not to suggest that emphasizing some liturgies, or parts of a single liturgy was not already there (think of the shape of the Roman Canon in performance), but rather a conscious evaluation of how secondary or less important ritual and textual dimensions were *overshadowing* what is at the heart of each of the reformed liturgical actions. Although many would start with the paschal mystery I might begin with the Trinity - all of the Trinity - including the *Holy Spirit*, and the Spirit's work in everything, including the liturgy.

HOLY SPIRIT

The phrase “an impoverished pneumatology” has been batted around for decades in describing the Western church in the second millennium. Whether one agrees that the Spirit was difficult to find, along with an emphasis on eschatology, a christological and historical focus was dominant in both public liturgy and much private devotion in the Latin church, most notably in the eucharistic prayer. This often obscured “the Holy Spirit’s authority of the future”,¹¹ that uncontrollable aspect of the Spirit’s work in our midst. Reading through *Sacrosanctum Concilium* it is still difficult to find a balance between Christology and pneumatology. One sees more of the Holy Spirit in other documents, of course, such as *Lumen Gentium* in which paragraph 4 reminds us specifically of the work of the Holy Spirit:

‘When the work which the Father gave the Son to do on earth was accomplished, the Holy Spirit was sent on the day of Pentecost in order that He might continually sanctify the Church, and thus, all those who believe would have access through Christ in one Spirit to the Father. He is the Spirit of Life, a fountain of water springing up to life eternal. To men, dead in sin, the Father gives life through Him, until, in Christ, He brings to life *their* mortal bodies. The Spirit dwells in the Church and in the hearts of the faithful, as in a temple . In them He prays on their behalf and bears witness to the fact that they are adopted sons and daughters. The Church, which the Spirit guides in the way of all truth and which He unified in communion and in works of ministry, He both equips and directs with hierarchical and charismatic gifts and adorns with His fruits. By the power of the Gospel He makes the Church keep the freshness of youth ...’

11 Quote borrowed from Fr. Martin Smith, Sewanee summer school, 2019.

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Here in particular, the return to the early church meant, unavoidably, a return to dialogue with and mutual enrichment from Eastern Christianity, with its abundant pneumatological emphases in liturgy and life which is still unfolding for western Christians.

SCRIPTURE

Another *priority* was to restore, or perhaps better, to balance the words of the church *to* God (our prayer compositions throughout the centuries) with God's word *to* us – scripture. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, subsequent Vatican documents, national documents, and a revised lectionary for the eucharistic liturgy and other rites expanded the opportunities to hear, reflect on and study scripture. It brought to an end (ideally) the dichotomy of Word versus Sacrament, of ignoring scripture because that's what Protestants did, or, on the other hand, downplaying Sacraments because that's what Catholics did. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (paragraph 24) calls for the fruits of the ecumenical scripture research and translation done throughout the 20th century to be made manifest in the liturgy:

‘Sacred scripture is of the greatest importance in the celebration of the liturgy. For it is from scripture that lessons are read and explained in the homily, and psalms are sung; the prayers, collects, and liturgical songs are scriptural in their inspiration and their force, and it is from the scriptures that actions and signs derive their meaning. Thus to achieve the restoration, progress, and adaptation of the sacred liturgy, it is essential to promote that warm and living love for scripture to which the venerable tradition of both eastern and western rites gives testimony.’

Again, at paragraph 51, we read: “The treasures of the bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God's word. In this way a more representative portion of the holy scriptures will be read to the people in the course of a prescribed number of years.” These texts emphasise that the liturgy of the Word is not simply an appetizer for the only real event at the altar but is itself intrinsic to the overall eucharistic liturgy as it is with other sacraments. Christ is present “in His word, since it is He Himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the Church,” a reality reflected even in the architectural enhancement of a place for the Word. The return to scripture as central, the norm, is an abiding principle of liturgical reform in the past 70 years.

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FULL AND ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

The principle of highlighting what is primary also impacted the *structure* of liturgy, an approach that was again a product of the liturgical movement, especially through theologians and historians like Anton Baumstark and the Anglican liturgist Gregory Dix. Liturgy had really been a field of philology – of texts studied and compared – until work in the liturgical movement began to articulate that the very structure of liturgy gave meaning – it meant something. The key paragraph in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* to which the past 50 years has returned again and again is number 21:

‘In order that the Christian people may more certainly derive an abundance of graces from the sacred liturgy, holy Mother Church desires to undertake with great care a general restoration of the liturgy itself. For the liturgy is made up of immutable elements divinely instituted, and of elements subject to change. These not only may but ought to be changed with the passage of time if they have suffered from the intrusion of anything out of harmony with the inner nature of the liturgy or have become unsuited to it. In this restoration, both texts *and rites* should be drawn up so that they express more clearly the holy things which they signify...’

The catch, however, is how do we know what belongs in which column? What is an *immutable* element divinely instituted, what is an element subject to *change*? What cannot change, what should change? Or, to put it another way, what is primary, what is secondary? *Sacrosanctum Concilium* suggests that a fundamental priority is the full participation of the whole body of Christ:

‘Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that fully conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy. Such participation by the Christian people as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people” is their right and duty by reason of their baptism. In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy, this full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered *before all else*; for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit...’

Setting aside the ongoing conundrum of articulating the depth and meaning of “full and active participation” this might commend elements of the rite which by their very nature and structure engage

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participants in a multiplicity of ways. One example is the restoration of the prayers of the faithful (the intercessions). *Sacrosanctum Concilium* –describes this *return* of a New Testament teaching and the practice of the early church pattern by writing: “especially on Sundays and feasts of obligation there is to be restored, after the Gospel and the homily, ‘the common prayer’ or ‘the prayer of the faithful.’ By this prayer, in which the people are to take part, intercession will be made for holy Church, for the civil authorities, for those oppressed by various needs, for all humankind, and for the salvation of the entire world” (53).

But this might also beg the question, why not conclude the intercessions with the early church pattern of sealing the prayers with the *kiss of peace*? The answer is that it is not just an argument from historical tradition, but rather that the structure of the rite – the juxtaposition of elements – was also a matter of shifting theological interpretations. The kiss of peace *was* restored to the whole worshipping community but as an immediate preparation for the reception of communion rather than the reconciliation prior to the whole body of Christ celebrating the eucharist. We could look at any number of other decisions where something primary to liturgical theology has been restored to the liturgy but with a multiplicity of issues shaping *how* and *where* it is restored. “Full and active participation” becomes one factor in prioritizing immutable and changeable elements.

INCULTURATION

Another factor, discussed at the Council and since Vatican II, is the accommodation to culture and the impact of culture on liturgy. Liturgical *inculturation* is a complex and multi-faceted reality that has always been a part of the church’s liturgy - it was not invented with Vatican II. But *Sacrosanctum Concilium* is shot through with the “full and active participation of all” achieved by means of the vernacular, local adaptations, and the recognition of a plurality of cultures. *From* “the Church has no wish to impose a rigid uniformity in matters which do not implicate the faith or the good of the whole community; rather does she respect and foster the genius and talents of the various races and peoples. Anything in these peoples’ way of life which is not indissolubly bound up with superstition and error she studies with sympathy and, if possible, preserves intact” *to* “because liturgical laws often involve special difficulties with respect to adaptation, particularly in mission lands, people who are experts in these matters must be employed to formulate them”. Adaptation presumes by its very nature that the immutable elements are first to be identified with “the substantial

unity of the Roman rite” and the changing or secondary elements are those which can be adapted in new liturgical books “to different groups, regions, and peoples, especially in mission lands”.

But since 1963, reflection on the relation between liturgy and culture has been shifting, as has the lived experience of many cultures at worship. The late Anscar Chupungco wrote extensively on the expanding terminology and differences between adaptation, acculturation and inculturation. One example from his own experience in the Philippines was the importance of the presider receiving communion last – as would be consistent with a culture of encouraging others to eat and drink first. Does a rearranging of the order of receiving communion matter?

This example represents the tip of the inculturation iceberg – what is the theology of liturgical diversity? What is the relationship between liturgical uniformity and unity in faith and the body of Christ? Why is the inculturated liturgy of *one* place and time the norm for *all* places and times? While recognizing that inculturation of the Gospel begins with the ministry of Christ himself, the accelerating pace of engagement with the topic culminated in the promulgation of the 1988 document *Faith and Inculturation*. The last decade has again seen a flurry of writings with new insights and challenges.

In 2004 Cardinal Paul Poupard, president of the Pontifical Council for Culture, wrote that “Inculturation is- the ever-renewed incarnation of the mystery of Christ, which in turn is the supreme model and perfect realization of authentic inculturation.” Just as ‘the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,’ so too the ‘good news, the word of Jesus Christ proclaimed to the nations, must take root in the life situation of the hearers of the Word, because inculturation is precisely this insertion of the Gospel message into cultures.’¹² Pope Francis’ 2016 *Amoris Laetitia* represents the ongoing expansion of the gospel principle (and therefore liturgical principle) of inculturation.

3. LEX ORANDI, LEX CREDENDI

Thirdly, the dance of the relationship between what we *believe* and what we *pray* is an over-arching principle shaping liturgical discourse in a particular way in the past 100 years. The liturgical catchphrase, *lex orandi lex credendi*, is really a 20th century creation. Although many claim its roots in Prosper of Aquitaine’s famous 5th century dictum regarding the general intercessions, I

12 Paul Poupard, “Inculturation de l’Evangile et evangelisation des cultures, Jean-Paul II,” Zenit: Le Monde Vu De Rome. Zenit, May 14, 2002. [https://fr.zenit.org/articles/inculturation-de-l-eva ngile-et-eva ngelisation-des-cultu res selon-jean-paul-ii/](https://fr.zenit.org/articles/inculturation-de-l-eva-ngile-et-eva-ngelisation-des-cultu-res-selon-jean-paul-ii/)

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think our modern adaptation is a more general and broadly applied tag that we pray what we believe and believe what we pray.

Monsignor Kevin Irwin is a professor to whom I often return when thinking through the inseparable relationship between belief and practice. In an earlier reflection (which he has since changed), Irwin articulated three different approaches to this relationship.¹³

Since that 1990 publication, Irwin has returned again and again to the relationship, articulating that theology is always engaging with liturgy in a multiplicity of ways. Liturgy creates and expresses theological articulations – no one (or rarely) comes to liturgy as a completely blank theological slate, therefore individually and corporately we come with theological presumptions that are reinforced or challenged in the liturgical action and texts – in *how* they are done, *when* they are done, and by *whom* they are done.

But there is also the growing recognition in recent years that to reflect on what it is that God is doing to us in the liturgy is an essential dimension of liturgical formation. Kevin Irwin wrote in 2003 “In the end, liturgy is primarily about what God does among us and for us. All that we do in the liturgy is but a response to the over-arching, grace-filled initiative of God ... there is a delicate balance in liturgy; divine initiative and human response, the action of God and the sanctification of humanity. How one ‘achieves’ this is part and parcel of liturgy as an art and a craft ... but even then it is not about what we achieve but what God works among us and through us ... we tip this delicate balance at our peril.”¹⁴ More recently, the Lutheran theologian Michael Aune and the Anglican Roman Williams have both engaged the same issue – here Rowan Williams in a more popular version:

‘Church is not primarily an event in which we do something, think something, feel something; it is being together in a situation where we trust God to do something and to change us – whether or not we notice it, let alone fully understand it.’¹⁴

CONCLUSION

This reflection has explored several of the ongoing principles of liturgical reform and life, specifically history as theology through the lens of tradition, the unchanging and ever changing nature of liturgy as a whole, and the specific elements of sacramental rites.

13 Kevin Irwin, *Liturgical Theology: A Primer* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990).

14 Rowan Williams, “Address to the Fresh Expressions National Pilgrimage, Coventry Cathedral, December 2008” in S. Croft, I Mobsby, S. Spellers, *Ancient Faith, Future Mission: Fresh Expressions in the Sacramental Tradition*. (London: Canterbury Press, 2009), 7.

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Part of each of these is the inseparable relationship between what we believe (what the church teaches), and how we pray. All of these, and many more, circle around the ever deepening understanding of where the Holy Spirit is leading the body of Christ in moving into God's constant gift of faith. How do we pray all of this in the corporate prayer and worship and glorification of God which is our sanctification and salvation?

Fear and freedom. Most people in the western world do not fear God in the sense of being afraid of God. The mainstream trust in the achievements of science and the freedom of living in democracies. On the other hand, however, there are new fears; 'Do I earn enough money? Does my life have any value? Will we live in peace in the future? What about all these strangers entering our countries?' Luther's rediscovery of freedom and justification by grace through faith is still a gift for us today. Believing in the living God means that we see our lives as a gift from God. Each day is a gift. So we can accept what happens and we should be free from fear because we are bound to God's love. Galatians 5.13: *For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.* Fear is not a good advisor. It is up to Christians to share this understanding of life. Life without fear opens up for us to find the right answers to all daily, cultural and political challenges.

– Gesa E. Thiessen (ed), *Called to Freedom* (Dublin: Wordwell Ltd.) 2019. p.168.