

Reading the Signs of the Times: The Heritage and Promise of the GTU

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The invitation to recall some of the early days of the Graduate Theological Union made me quickly realize we will celebrate this institution's golden jubilee in 2012. John XXIII, who was pope during the founding years of the GTU, once declared that an anniversary is not just an opportunity but an obligation. One trouble with life, he indicated, is that it is "daily". We pick up a bit of the dust of the roads as we move along and slip perhaps into routine. Anniversaries provide us opportunity to burnish again the treasures in our lives. I therefore sense some license to anticipate the 50 years' remembrance, and I beg your indulgence as I view those years from the perspective of an aide to a key player in the Catholic Church's involvement in this grand enterprise.

The incorporation of the six schools in Berkeley and San Anselmo for doctoral programs and for bibliographical resource took place in 1962. My personal perspective enters here, because in 1962 the same Pope John XXIII gave East Bay Catholics the first bishop of the newly created Diocese of Oakland. The Holy Father appointed Floyd Lawrence Begin, a native of Cleveland. Within a year of his arrival, he reacted to the prospect of graduate theology in Berkeley as, "That is the work of the Holy Spirit. Dialogue at such a high level could not have been produced by mere human ingenuity."

We must, I believe, start by paying tribute to that era from whose soil grew the Graduate Theological Union. A prospectus from this institution in the early years quoted Karl Barth, "At the start of this century there was no question of my reading a book by a contemporary Catholic." Later, in the 1970s, Professor Martin Marty in his comprehensive work on the history of Protestantism would state, "Not until mid-century was it possible for most of Protestantism to take a second look at the means for overcoming problems of disunity." His scope was broad, but he had particular reference to the creation in 1948 of the World Council of Churches.

The mid-century saw a valuable heritage coming from a confluence of favorable events—the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference, decrying competition in the spreading of the Gospel; the 1925 Stockholm meeting of Life and Work, seeking to bring Christian principles into social life; and the 1927 meeting in Lausanne of Faith and Order initiating doctrinal conversations. The subsequent creation of the World Council of Churches received support from most Protestant communities as well as from the Anglican and Orthodox churches but did not resonate so well with evangelicals or Third World churches.

The Vatican's Holy Office reacted with traditional hesitancy over concerns for orthodoxy and indifferentism, but urged bishops to promote ecumenism and to appoint suitable priests for study and participation in the movement. In 1960, Pope John XXIII established a Vatican Secretariat for Christian Unity and appointed Augustine Bea, a venerable German Jesuit and biblical scholar, who shared the pope's own heart for the unity of Christians.

By 1962, I think it is safe to say that all of us had both understanding and experience of ecumenism, much of it promoted by the popular January Week of prayer for Christian Unity. During those years, I was chaplain at Mills College in Oakland, and I invited Dr. Victor Gold of the Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary to speak to a Mills gathering. He opened by saying, "I have come a long way in ten years. I do believe that there are Roman Catholics who are Christians."

Returning to GTU's history, 1959 was reported as "the beginnings of discussions among several San Francisco Bay Area schools, leading to an exchange of scholars and sharing of library resources. By 1962, the experiences had proved so promising that a common doctoral program was agreed upon and incorporated under the laws of the state of California as the Graduate Theological Union."

Also in 1962, the Second Vatican Council opened in Rome. Pope John XXIII invited sixty observers from Protestant, Anglican and Orthodox communities. Four of these came from Berkeley: the amiable and erudite Dr. Massey Shepherd, Professor of Liturgics at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific; Dr. Sherman Johnson, president of that institution; Dr. Stuart Leroy Anderson, the president of the Pacific School of Religion along with the historian John Von Rohr. Another distinguished Bay Area theologian and renowned ecumenist, Dr. Robert McAfee Brown, professor of religious studies at Stanford University, represented the World Alliance of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches at Vatican II. During Council sessions in St. Peter's Basilica, they occupied a prominent position close to the presiders' table and privy to papers, discussion and conversations. That Council in its third session produced a document on ecumenism with Protestant, Anglican and Orthodox participation, declaring with echoes of our own new bishop, "There increases from day to day a movement fostered by the grace of the Holy Spirit."

In such an atmosphere two personalities came together in the spring of 1963—John Dillenberger, the dean of the Graduate Theological Union, and Floyd Begin, the bishop of Oakland. Dr. Dillenberger with his gifts of imagination, diplomacy and clarity was congenial to the bishop. With vision and personality, the dean explained persuasively that the older isolation of seminaries was neither defensible nor desirable. A free standing seminary could not gather adequate library resources by itself. Scholarly areas of collaboration were immediately possible. The flexibility and adaptability that the dean presented to the bishop were gracious in considering the role of St. Albert's the Dominican school, Alma College of the Jesuits, St. Patrick's Seminary of San Francisco and mentioning also a planned center for Judaic studies and prospective Orthodox and Buddhist centers as well. "All of these institutions," Dillenberger explained, "cannot be related in equal proportions or in one pattern." With regard to maintaining identity, the dean was clear, stating, "An ecumenical thrust that would violate rather than encourage would be wrong."

The bishop found Dillenberger reassuring. He spoke of him to the archbishop of San Francisco as “a dependable man.” He noted to another, the dean’s integrity. The bishop accepted an invitation to be on the board of trustees. Within a year, he was encouraging the Dominicans at St. Albert’s “to enter for the good of the church as well as for the order.”

I have to say an important word about Bishop Begin with regard to this institution. His appointment was providential. Why? Because he was distinguished from other California bishops at the time with his developed devotion to ecumenism. At the 1962 investiture of Bishop Begin in Oakland, for example, an uncommon sight for many of us was the welcome and prominent position in the sanctuary of the Rev. John Bruyere, a Presbyterian minister from Cleveland. Also in September of that year, four months after his arrival and a month before the convening of the Vatican Council, without expressed support from his priests and to the dismay of some, Begin invited 120 Protestant ministers and spouses to dinner at the Claremont Hotel. Robert McAfee Brown was keynote speaker. The bishop in his remarks stated, “I do not know why I invited you here except to tell you that I love you,” words remembered into the 1990’s.

I would be remiss, however, if I intimated the bishop, despite his early prophetic recognition of the Holy Spirit’s presence, had no qualms. As the earlier GTU discussions took three years, it took four years before Bishop Begin could clearly and firmly see Catholic participation. He indicated in correspondence once that at times he had great enthusiasm for the project while at other times he wished that it would go away. Some of the questions facing him were easy, such as the sharing of library resources, the attendance of graduate student priests, or faculty participation from Catholic institutions. Already Dominican Father Kevin Wall, Sulpician Father Frank Norris and Jesuit Father Dan O’Hanlon were GTU instructors. Beyond that, the opportunity for international scholars coming was attractive to our bishop.

But the idea of young undergraduate seminarians in Berkeley was unsettling. That young men still in their formative years could be taught by Protestant professors or might

engage in Berkeley's ever ready public protests were concerns raised. As a matter of fact, these were not serious worries for the bishop, but he did pore over what the word autonomy meant and what were possible financial liabilities. He also pursued whether the requirements on priestly formation both from the United States Bishops' Conference and, more importantly, from the Roman Congregation of Seminaries and Universities would be adequately met.

In the end, however, enthusiasm prevailed.

In response to the draft of a letter he asked me to prepare for Rome, he told me, "The closing paragraph should be a little more direct. We not only seek the blessing of this Congregation, we seek its approval of our action and its permission to continue this cooperation with the GTU. Furthermore, we ask for any directives or suggestions Rome might make to perfect the program."

Perhaps, the settling moment for Bishop Begin consisted in securing the approval of a committee of bishops of the San Francisco province, including Archbishop Joseph McGucken of San Francisco and Bishop Leo Maher from Santa Rosa. Begin opened their meeting in February 1967 with his utter consistency, "Obviously this is the work of the Holy Spirit." The bishops recognized the soundness of the Graduate Theological Union, the reality of the continuing and welcomed presence of Catholic students and the need of a theological commission so that, in Begin's words, "precise harmony can be established, between the demands of ecclesiastical authority and academic freedom in the area of theological learning." Lastly, the committee decided that the presence of Catholic undergraduates was the concern and the responsibility of the particular religious community in conversation with the bishop of Oakland.

I can appropriately pay tribute to the precious mutual relationships and trust that have existed between this institution and the diocese. The original aim was seminary and the training of priests, but has moved to continuing education, sabbaticals, the formation of catechists and, what our bishop saw early on, the preparation of lay theologians, women

and men. Faculty and students have served our parishes; have been counsel for bishops and diocesan officials. Resources here have encouraged and promoted dialogue, for example, a decade of conversation that followed the American bishops pastoral letter on nuclear arms. Our institutions have returned the favor providing opportunities for pastoral experience and shared responsibility.

Today we remember achievements. Once there were only 23 enrolled in the Graduate Theological Union. A plan for bibliographical resources that early received such easy acceptance became as The Flora Lamson Hewlett Library a moment of commitment on the part of the individual institutions to the Union. This was an early focus. As far back as 1964, Dr. Dillenberger remarked, "Our library resources are in step with the great theological centers of Yale, Harvard, Columbia and Chicago...The Union is now the largest single purchaser of theological books in the country." A Sealantic grant of three quarters of a million dollars led to the accomplishment that is the library.

Intimately connected to GTU's history and achievement is what I would call the extraordinary grace of geography. A cliché comes to mind about three necessities for success in real estate or in commercial enterprises. The first of these is "location" and then that word is repeated two more times. We transfer that to location in the San Francisco Bay Area, location in the western edge of the United States and location in Berkeley.

First of all, the spread of Bay Area theological schools, representing a breadth of diversity, has been blessed with sufficient closeness for conversation. Those schools began discussions in 1959, and the words of an official document stated, "The ecumenical movement itself forms part of the program and objectives of a unique institution known as the Graduate Theological Union." Another blessing of the institutions was their clear identity. The word autonomy had sacredness about it. Dr. Dillenberger explained that it existed without sacrificing the integrity of any group. In faithfulness to academic purposes, he also said, "The Union does not attempt to

accommodate religious differences.” Claude Welch, so important in the early days expressed the same kind of sentiment.

One is a member of the GTU without apology. I remember hearing Bishop Begin, speaking at a Christmas dinner at the Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology, begin his remarks by stating, “I am here as a Roman Catholic; you are here as Presbyterian, you are here as Episcopalian. Unless each of us comes immersed deeply in his own tradition, we are not going to serve this institution.” The bishop was not enfolded a new exhortation. He was reflecting the climate created that each person’s religious conviction and perspective would, of course, be broadened, but also strengthened rather than diminished.

Another blessing was the location on the West Coast. Early GTU documentation stated, “Joint use of facilities has been not only an administrative economy for the benefit of each institution but also an opportunity for interfaith contact on a continuing basis. As a seat of learning, the Union will also be a gathering of communication with the Orient.” As we noted, from the beginning, there was hope for a center for Buddhist studies. Now despite this early vision and a long history of Christian mission activity in Asia, alertness to the world across the Pacific was much more potential than actual as it was elsewhere. Indeed in Rome twelve years ago at a gathering of Asian bishops, the French cardinal overseeing the Council on Justice and Peace said with some dismay, “Asia is very far from Rome.” I responded that Asia was a long way from California.

This institution anticipated the growing appreciation of Asian demographics, economics and religions through its deliberate appointment of faculty members from Asia and the efforts to assure the presence of students from Asia. Recent conversations and visits with Asian theological centers guarantee the strengthening of relationships and enriching of the growing interreligious dialogue.

There is the blessing of the Bay Area. The blessing of the edge of the Pacific Rim. Lastly, there is the blessing of Berkeley. The Pacific School of Religion is as old as the

College of California that once existed in downtown Oakland at Fourteenth and Franklin Streets. The presence of member schools of the Union and the willingness of later members to move to Berkeley speak of the importance of the association with the University of California. The schools established themselves here purposely to take advantage of educational opportunities. In our time Cardinal Garrone, director of the Congregation of Seminaries and Universities in Rome, the Vatican office which had authority to approve or disapprove Catholic participation in Berkeley, would note even from his distance “the unusual cultural offerings” available.

The GTU rejoiced in the recognition that the University of California gave. “The recognition of the Union by the University of California, strongly secular in its reputation, is therefore a major breakthrough for religion and theology as an educational discipline...This relationship is plainly a recognition before the world of the significance of religion in our society—a recognition which has too often been lacking.”

These sentiments were in harmony with a December 1962 article from the California Law Review, written in conjunction with an effort in 1961 to establish a Department of Religious Studies at the University of California. The authors were the eminent Boalt Hall faculty member David W. Louisell along with Professor John H. Jackson. The authors quoted Thomas Jefferson, “The want of instruction in the various creeds of religious faith existing among our citizens presents therefore a chasm in a general institution of the useful sciences.”

Dr. Louisell concluded, “The problem of the place of theology in the university has to be faced. The dialogue of our intellectual community is not complete without the participation of theology. We cannot afford to leave its voice indefinitely muted or to hear it at most only tangentially and indirectly. Ideally this discipline overtly and forthrightly should resume its historic university role.”

Four years later, at a gathering at St. Albert’s College Dr. Louisell would state that “Catholic professors (and I am sure he would include others) were interested in a

platform for a hearing of the theological considerations in modern life, and that there is the corresponding hunger on the part of students for such information.” The collaboration of the University with the Union through the years, the cooperation regarding library resources, the joint programs, the presence of university professors on doctoral committees - all represent happy outcomes that were aims from the beginning.

But the early vision was more encompassing: “The GTU has a role in society and in the course of history which may rightly be termed crucial. The unity among theological scholars is far from being a matter of greater educational pleasantness.” The unfinished business of the founders may surprise us. “The theme of the Graduate Theological Union goes beyond the ecumenical movement and beyond interfaith programs to strike a much more profound chord in the life of the human family.” We may sense through the years from faculty, from the centers aligned to the Union and alumni the achievement of that broad perspective.

Looking back, one could judge the years as slow moving. Yes, but those making decisions had no existing models to draw from in an atmosphere where the ecumenical opportunity beckoned and the energies released from the ecumenical movement on the one hand and the Second Vatican Council on the other were making contrasting impacts felt. However, the ensuing and time-consuming consultations and conversations contributed much to the stability and success of the anniversary we shall soon be celebrating.

An English Dominican and preacher, renowned enough in the last century, Father Bede Jarrett, has a homily appropriate for our approaching Jubilee. “We are travelers,” he said. “Life is not really a growing up but a journey. . . . You have been driven by the relentless hand of God. You do not realize that you are being driven along, and you try to settle down. This means infinite pain and great dissatisfaction. You are a traveler, you must not settle down. . . . It is for the guidance of our attitude to life that we should always

remember that we are only pilgrims. The secret of a happy and holy life lies in remembering that.”

Amen. Best of wishes.

John S. Cummins, whose family home was in Berkeley, succeeded Bishop Floyd Begin, as the second bishop of Oakland in 1977. He retired in 2003.