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Fons Vitae: An Initiative to Promote Catholic Learning at Duke

*For with you is the fountain of life,
and in your light, we see light (Ps 36:10).*

*Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him
will never thirst; the water that I shall give him
will become in him a spring of water
welling up to eternal life (Jn 4:14).*

God, the Fountain of Life

God is the *fons vitae*, the fountain of life.¹ The Psalmist nonetheless speaks in 36:10 of a twofold fontality, divine *and* human. First, God is both overabundant life and dazzlingly radiant light. Second, our vision of God occurs within the limited but real refraction of this generous gift of wisdom. Cisterns of water poured by those who intentionally rebuke the divine source of light and life are self-made, idolatrous fountains.² True light and true life are the guides. The refraction of divine light that supplies the fountain of life within a world replete with darkening shadows can therefore enable genuine learning, learning that brings us closer to God and learning that teaches us that a fountain of wisdom for the entire world is waiting to be discovered when we follow the path of the Lord.³ *Fons vitae* is simultaneously *fons sapientiae* and vice versa and therefore elicits both the love of learning and the desire for God.⁴

The Christian meaning of *fons vitae* has unfolded over time. It is often connected to the well of living waters that Jesus offers to the Samaritan women in John 4. The closely related connection to baptism as a first step in life and learning is also frequently invoked. Later traditions did not ignore the Biblical leitmotif. The term plays a pivotal but disputed role in Augustine's *Confessions* and seems to highlight the unique *societas* that exists between God and man when life is viewed through the person of Christ.⁵ Augustine focuses on Christ as the unique fountain of life and often imbues that attribution with Neoplatonic undertones. In Sermon 217 from the year 418, Augustine also adds to this theandric approach a new Trinitarian meaning for *fons vitae*:

Christ, you see, is man and God; he prays as man, he gives what he prays for as God. Now what you have to grasp is that he assigns everything to the Father for the simple reason that the Father is not from him, but he is from the Father. He gives everything to the fount from which he is derived. But he too is the fount

¹ Cf. Prov 13:14.

² Jer 2:13.

³ Proverbs 18:4.

⁴ Jean LeClerq's seminal study, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982, original French edition, 1957) remains a paragon for returning to the sources of medieval Christian thought for the sake of advancing new paths to experiencing God as the fountain of the intellectual life.

⁵ *Confessions* 3.8.16, 13.4.5, 13.21.31. See also *Confessions* 7.10.16. On the divine-human society in Christ, see Richard Dobbins, "Silence and Speech in the Ostia Experience: The Case of *Fons Vitae*," *Studia Patristica* 38 (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 64–9, here at 67.

born of the Father; he is himself the fountain of life. So the Father as fount begot the fountain; fountain indeed begot fountain; but begetting fountain and begotten fountain are one fountain. Just as God begetting and God begotten, namely the Son born of the Father, are one God. The Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Father; the Father is not from the Son, the Son is from the Father; but still Father and Son are one thing because of their one substance, and they are one God because of their inseparable divinity.⁶

In this passage the fountain of the Son is begotten by the fountain of the Father. The two fountains are truly distinct and equally inseparable within the one divine substance. When Jesus prays to the Father in the “Our Father” and elsewhere, he teaches humanity what it means to re-connect and to refocus life such that we recognize and affirm the Father as the fountain of fountains. Re-connecting and re-focusing the lives of individuals and communities in the light of God’s fontal wisdom lies at the center of the educational project that *Fons Vitae* aims to promote.

Fons vitae has both an ecumenical and interreligious significance. The German mystic Meister Eckhart turned to the Andalusian Jewish philosopher from the eleventh century known as Avicbron, who composed an influential treatise named *Fons vitae*. Through that engagement, Eckhart sought to clarify the fontal nature of the Christian doctrine of creation. Eckhart was interested in Avicbron’s universal hylomorphism, and later commentators and Church authorities became suspicious of this appropriation. This critical engagement with universal hylomorphism from the perspective of the Christian definitional difference between Creator and creature still has certain parallels in Albert the Great (as noted by James Weisheipl, O.P.) and also in St. Bonaventure’s metaphysics, as Etienne Gilson noted in his *The Philosophy of St. Bonaventure*.⁷ But Eckhart also found valuable insights in this speculative Jewish source for explicating Genesis 1:1 in terms of God’s creative font of life. The word that becomes flesh in John 1:1 is in Eckhart’s reading of Avicbron a cipher for the unity of all knowledge. These historical controversies will feed directly into an engagement with the doctrine of creation as it is being discussed today in the dialogue between religion and science.

The decidedly speculative nature of Avicbron’s *fons vitae* stands in stark contrast to the practical nature of the ecumenical *fons vitae*. Here it is important to remember that it was the Protestant reformer John Calvin who gave *fons vitae* a primarily pneumatological meaning:

God’s life-giving power is indeed a Divine act, a gift passed on to us in our very being. Furthermore, it is a power which sparks life through our communion with each other, sharing the proclamation of the Word in and through the reading of Scripture, the sacraments and fellowship. But most of all, it reminds us that we can never forget that the Christian life is ultimately linked to the life-experience of Jesus Christ. This is true life, life in all its fullness.⁸

⁶ St. Augustine, *Sermons*, III/6 On the Liturgical Seasons, tr. Edmund Hill, O.P. (New Rochelle, New York: New City Press, 1993), 177.

⁷ On the Christian difference, see Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1982).

⁸ Wessel Bentley, “[Calvin and the Holy Spirit as *fons vitae*](#),” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 35/2 (2009): 77–85, here at 84. Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Fortress: Minneapolis, 1992), 281–5.

Calvin rightly discerns why Christians point to Christ as the source of true life. The search for true life can also bring multiple religious traditions in deeper conversation and can even engage those who feel alienated from religious traditions as such.

Other religious traditions besides Christianity have already noted the appeal of *fons vitae* as a guiding philosophical principle. Today a religious publishing house in Louisville, Kentucky is named Fons Vitae. It focuses on Sufism and other metaphysical works translated from Arabic and Persian but has Catholics on its board and includes a distinguished series of books on Thomas Merton's engagement with non-Christian religions. Fons Vitae at Duke will also work with multiple publishers and social media networks to disseminate the results of its initiatives and research projects.

A Center of Catholic Learning

Placing a center for Catholic learning at the heart of a secular campus is hardly without precedent. The model for Fons Vitae derives from the Lumen Christi Institute (LCI), which was founded in 1997 at the University of Chicago by Thomas Levergood and Paul Griffiths, both Catholic converts and scholars at the University of Chicago. Levergood served as the founding Director of LCI until his untimely passing in August of 2021, and Griffiths later accepted the inaugural Warren Chair in Catholic Studies at Duke Divinity School. A few weeks before he passed, Levergood gave his blessing to Peter Casarella of Duke Divinity School and Reinhard Hütter of The Catholic University of America (and formerly a Professor at Duke Divinity School) to start a new Catholic Institute at Duke.

Like LCI, Fons Vitae will grow according to scale to serve the needs of the university community and its friends. Initially, the idea that became LCI involved little more than *Lectio Divina* (rooted in the shared reading of texts like Psalm 36:10) and common reflections on the writings of the Church Fathers, and it later developed into an international network of collaborations and seminars that serves undergraduates and graduate students at multiple institutions, including Duke Divinity School. The niche that Levergood and Griffiths filled in the educational horizon in 1997 was the transmission of the rich wisdom of the Catholic intellectual traditions to Catholic students studying at non-Catholic colleges and universities. The number of Catholics at non-Catholic institutions who maintain an interest in Catholic thought has grown exponentially since 1997, as is evidenced by the In Lumine Network that includes multiple institutes modeled on LCI at the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard, the University of Southern California, the University of Virginia, and Cornell. Levergood and Griffiths never sought to influence any of the degrees or courses taught at the University of Chicago or its Divinity School. Their aim was to supplement in a Catholic way and enhance the learning of the university without taking anything away from it or its mission. They thus quoted the former President of their university, Robert Maynard Hutchins, who once remarked that the Catholic Church has "the longest intellectual tradition of any institution in the contemporary world." Admission to events at LCI was always open and not limited to Catholics, Christians, or believers. LCI was likewise never a substitute for Newman Centers or other services provided by Catholic chaplaincies or the Archdiocese that was its true home and place of gestation.

Fons Vitae will collaborate with Duke Catholic Center and will seek the approval of the Catholic Diocese of Raleigh as a lay apostolate. The first year of Fons Vitae will include two lectures sponsored by the Collegium Institute at the University of Pennsylvania through their Le Maître grants. This will include Sr. Damien Marie Savino, F.S.E. on *Laudato Si'* and Dr. Janet

Martin Soskice on Mary Midgelhy. Future engagements at Fons Vitae might celebrate other pioneers from Duke like Robert Cushman (Methodist Divinity Dean who attended Vatican II), Roland Murphy, O. Carm. (Old Testament scholar and first Catholic professor at Duke Divinity School), Fr. Edward Mahoney (Duke philosopher and expert on Renaissance Aristotelianism), and the recently deceased medical doctor and philanthropist Paul Farmer.

Fons Vitae will serve Duke University, its faculty, staff, and students. Fons Vitae will collaborate with Duke's many institutes dedicated to religious, spiritual, and intercultural questions. The staff and partners of Fons Vitae will work with Duke Divinity School (and especially the Catholic Fellowship at Duke Divinity School), the Kenan Center for Ethics (including INIRE, its international program of interreligious learning), the Department of Religion, the Center for Jewish Life, the Center for Muslim Life, the Trent Center for Bioethics, Humanities, and the History of Medicine at Duke Medical School, the Program in Theology, Medicine and Culture, the Center for Christianity and Scholarship, the Duke Initiative in Theology and the Arts, the Center for Reconciliation at Duke Divinity School, and Reality Ministries, which serves those with disabilities in Durham.

Neither the Divinity School nor the Department of Religion at Duke have developed programs that bring members of the Abrahamic and other traditions together for a sharing of perspectives on faith. The current chaplaincies do have programs like this, and Duke Catholic Center recently showed some interest in moving into this area. Fons Vitae will be a resource in this regard that builds upon Vatican II's Decree on Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*. Fons Vitae could accordingly be a center that fosters interreligious approaches to Scriptural reasoning and allows for sharing faith perspectives on diverse issues, including those relating to social engagement.

The Mission of Fons Vitae: The Love of Learning and the Desire for God

Fons Vitae will sponsor programs that promote God as the fountain of life and help Catholic learners from diverse fields and backgrounds to grow in wisdom and knowledge. It is focused on discernment, especially discernment in vocations that can be supplemented by Catholic learning. It counters the culture of careerism without being averse to sapientially-infused professional development. The guiding principles of Fons Vitae are accordingly fourfold:

1. To contribute to the intellectual life of Duke University by providing a platform and set of resources for making the community of learners at Duke more aware of authors and processes of learning on a variety of topics (including intercultural, interreligious, medical-moral, and ecumenical matters) that have been formed by both ancient and modern traditions of thought and practice handed on through multiple epochal transformations by the global Catholic Church.
2. To contribute to the promotion of the unity of intellectual, spiritual, liturgical, and moral formation in the life of undergraduate and graduate students at Duke University. Fons Vitae will work in tandem with Duke Catholic Center and its staff in promoting this set of goals.
3. To offer the Catholic Diocese of Raleigh as well as other religious bodies in the Triangle and beyond a think-tank and center of Catholic learning that is at the service of the People of God. Assisting in the on-going formation of permanent deacons is one dimension of this collaboration.
4. Given the worrisome prevalence of unrestricted relativism as well as increased polarization in the Church and the world, Fons Vitae will establish an initiative to promote the Common

Good that will explore the topic of *De bono communi* in its historical, theological, and socio-political dimensions through a partnership with Catholic Research Economists Discussion Organization (CREDO, an offspring of LCI) and Duke’s Center for the History of Political Economy.

We invoke the intercession of *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* to guide us in these efforts. *María de Guadalupe, María Tonantzin*—she is the seat of all wisdom and the starting point for a new dialogue of cultures. In the spirit of *Fides et Ratio*, we see “a lucid image of true philosophy” in her and thus aim in all that we do for the sake of building up *Fons Vitae* to do so while philosophizing in *la Morenita*.⁹

⁹ Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, Encyclical of September 14, 1998, #108: “And just as in giving her assent to Gabriel’s word, Mary lost nothing of her true humanity and freedom, so too when philosophy heeds the summons of the Gospel’s truth its autonomy is in no way impaired. Indeed, it is then that philosophy sees all its enquiries rise to their highest expression. This was a truth which the holy monks of Christian antiquity understood well when they called Mary ‘the table at which faith sits in thought.’ In her they saw a lucid image of true philosophy and they were convinced of the need to *philosophari in Maria*. May Mary, Seat of Wisdom, be a sure haven for all who devote their lives to the search for wisdom. May their journey into wisdom, sure and final goal of all true knowing, be freed of every hindrance by the intercession of the one who, in giving birth to the Truth and treasuring it in her heart, has shared it forever with all the world.”