

Thinking together in a time of fear

President Spina, Provost Benson, Deans and colleagues, and our very welcome guests,

It's a privilege for me to stand among these colleagues being honored today. This university community is astounding: in one space, we have scholars who have given their lives to studying the characterization of materials such as polymer and ceramic matrix composites; indigenous land rights; ecclesiology; the photothermal capabilities of nanomaterials for nano-based medical applications; business cycle dynamics; white privilege; and the measurement of our loss of glaciers.

We are in many ways strangers to each other, though we are united by wearing these outfits from time to time, but that's a reminder that we are connected by our commitment to seeking truth, even when that is inconvenient to ourselves or to others. That's the job. A teacher of mine told me long ago that good scholarship is more a result of courage than of intellect. It takes some nerve.

This month the Vatican is hosting the Synod on the Amazon. A synod is a consultative process by which the Catholic church, the majority of whose members now live in the southern hemisphere, tries to discern about some matter by discussion among those most involved. In this case the topic is a region, the Amazon, a key and fragile link in a global system already damaged in ways that threaten all life. Indigenous Catholics have brought their wisdom about the region and the faith to this process, and they have been officially welcomed. A number of bishops there to vote in the synod have also recently signed a pact to, among other things, "abandon... in our parishes, diocese, and groups, all types of colonist mentality and posture."¹

Indigenous Catholics from the Amazon brought with them a statue of a pregnant woman they identify as Our Lady of the Amazon.² The image, an expression of their faith, suggests

¹ Quoted from the photo in <https://twitter.com/EdwardPentin/status/1185825155844575233/photo/2>. For context, see Vatican News, "A group of Synod Fathers renews the "Pact of the Catacombs." <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2019-10/a-group-of-synod-fathers-renews-the-pact-of-the-catacombs.html>

² For more, see Liz Dodd, [The Tablet](#), "The Dishonest Cruelty of the Thief who Drowned Our Lady of the Amazon."

simultaneously the fecundity of God's word in Mary and the fecundity of creation. I'm happy to say, that at UD we often encounter images of Mary from all over the world, thanks to the Marianists and particularly the Marian library. Catholics, after all, have a long tradition of welcoming, we might say appropriating, local images that precede Christianity into the Christian story, including images from Germanic and Irish cultures. A devout Catholic who saw this image as pagan and therefore a threat to Christian integrity filmed him or herself stealing a number of the statues of Our Lady of the Amazon and hurling or batting them into the Tiber.

My theory is that the people who rejected those statues are feeling fragile. Questions about colonial histories and their legacies in the present, about racial injustice, about whether humanity should understand itself within or above creation, about gender and women's roles, about the credibility of Church leaders: these are questions that shake people.

Many of us are feeling fragile, but not all in the same way. For many people on the planet, fragility in the first place has to do with having enough clean air and water for life, enough food for health, shelter from the weather, medical help for injury and disease, enough peace for the children to go to school, protection from violence. For people of color on this continent, now as in the past, feeling fragile has to do with being targeted because of one's homeland, one's language, and because one's body on its own is perceived as a threat.

Some feel fragile because the ancestors they have loved, the systems they have trusted, the people and institutions that have cared for them and encouraged them turn out to have played more or less conscious roles in horrific injustice. Being called to change, to share power, to welcome someone else's knowledge, to speak truthfully about histories that create unjust privilege for us, for me-- that feels to people like a threat. The fragility of those who have benefited from, or even caused, injustice to others is not the same as the fragility of those who have endured the injustice. But it is a kind of fragility.

Fragility is not what we want. We need stability, for scholars to have libraries and laboratories, for parents to be able to plan for their children's futures, for societies to have systems that reliably handle their conflicts.

<https://www.thetablet.co.uk/blogs/1/1313/the-dishonest-cruelty-of-the-thief-who-drowned-our-lady-of-the-amazon>

But fragilities are what we have, and that does offer opportunities. I've been reading, at the suggestion of a colleague, a book about some European thinkers-- TS Eliot, Simone Weil, Auden, Lewis, Jacques and Raissa Maritain-- in the early 1940s, when they were all having a remarkable period of artistic and scholarly productivity.³ One of them wrote that, "the war creates no absolutely new situation; it simply aggravates the permanent human situation so that we can no longer ignore it. Human life has always been lived on the edge of a precipice."⁴ This is what Flannery O'Connor was talking about when she had one character say of another, "she would of been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life."⁵ Facing our mortality can be good for us. I read once that the problem with experts is that they never learn anything new, because if they did, they would no longer be experts. Being fragile helps us with that problem.

This is a good time for the big questions. Who am I, in this history and this creation that I did not make and cannot control? What kind of justice can we make from these histories? What kind of hope can we give our children? What is the point of living through suffering?

Who are we? Why are we?

In case you friends and family members are wondering, the best gift you can give an academic is a deep, important question. So this is good. We have those. The second best gift is a good opponent, someone who takes the time to understand what we are saying and demands we do it better, who doesn't let us get away with fudging the details. If we are not yet good at understanding each other and having our arguments well, then we can remember, as Eliot wrote during World War II, we are laboring "under conditions that seem unpropitious... For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business."⁶

A university has the gift and the challenge of trying to be a place where we can talk well with each other about what is important. We need good work from sociology and law, on the

³ Alan Jacobs, *The Year of Our Lord 1943: Christian Humanism in an Age of Crisis* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁴Jacobs, 58.

⁵"A Good Man is Hard to Find," *O'Connor: Collected Works* (New York: Library of America, 1988),153.

⁶"East Coker," from the Four Quartets. <http://www.davidgorman.com/4quartets/2-coker.htm>

progress of climate change and on the role of the church in this world, and on caring for bodies, building what will be sustainable, organizing business so that it gets us what we need in the ways that we need.

And as we do that, we are all trying to answer questions about who we are and why we are. We need that, our students and our world need it. We can face change, loss, suffering, mortality, when we have to, but humans have to wrestle with meaning. What's the point?

That's hard to do. At least it is for me. I've been teaching about human social orders as spiritual realities for more than twenty years and I still hesitate to speak honestly about big questions. For one thing, I know we will not all agree and I'm reluctant to get into the conflicts it will open up. More, I want to make the world better, to fix things, and it's not clear that those conversations will. If I'm honest—I want to look like a hero, an expert, but these conversations make me feel my limits. I'd prefer to fix the world without having to be part of its fragility myself. The common good is one thing. Common suffering is another.

We don't and in many cases won't agree about responses to those big questions. We know this. Still, for us to discover how we can as human beings and as scholars face this moment of uncertainty, of fear, of conflict, being fragile human creatures together, that will be a great contribution.

This week also saw the appearance of a pastoral letter from the Bishop of El Paso, Mark Seitz. Drawing extensively on the work of Chicana and Latina thinkers, among them UD's Neomi DeAnda, he writes about racism, white privilege, and the massacre, matanza, of twenty-two people in El Paso that preceded the shooting in Dayton by only hours. Let me leave you with a few of his words about Our Lady of Guadalupe, the apparition of Mary to an indigenous peasant, speaking the language and wearing the clothes and sharing the physical features of his people, whose feast is celebrated in dancing and feasting each December 12.

With her knee raised in dance, Guadalupe invites us to leave behind fear and join her in the work of advancing justice in America with joy. We are called to die to an attitude of fear and rise with a will to encounter others in vulnerability, to appreciate the gifts of every culture and people, with a willingness to be changed for the better

by right relationships with God, others and the earth. In the Resurrection of Our Lord, now 'there is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear' (1 John 4, 18).⁷

So don't lose your nerve. If you feel fragile, find someone to dance with. The traditions of this university hold that trying above all to save yourself is the way to lose yourself. Keep seeking the truth that makes us more human, not less, and be encouraged by those, like the founders of this university, who have taught us that the deepest truth of this creation is joy.

To those who have made gifts to support these chairs, we thank you for sharing our conviction that in the midst of this change and fear, in a climate of mistrust, you share the conviction that our slow, cantankerous, uncomfortable work of seeking truth together is a worthy project. We will make good use of your gifts.

⁷#57, <https://www.hopeborder.org/nightwillbenomore-eng>