Remarks at the Award Ceremony for Mark McIntosh

It is an honor to be at Loyola University to celebrate with colleagues, friends, and family the accomplishments of Mark McIntosh and his person. Mark and I have tended to meet only intermittently over the years, but we have known each other for well over two decades. Our areas of scholarly expertise overlap: we are both scholars of Newman and von Balthasar, and we have both delved into the relationship between mysticism and theology, even if Mark has done so far more comprehensively than I – which befits him having studied under the incomparable Bernie McGinn. Mark is best known – indeed a person of world renown – for his explorations of the complex relation between spirituality and theology. He has not neglected either side of the relation. He has given equal attention to spirituality serving as backdrop and motivational structure with regard to theology and theology as expressing itself in particular forms of theology and shaping particular practices. Here Newman and von Balthasar serve as indispensable guides, Louis Bouyer as exemplar, as well, of course, the broad Christian tradition, both East and West, on which all feed. Still we should not ignore Mark’s specifically Anglican ancestry, proximally Rowan Williams, the Oxford Movement in general and not simply Newman, and, of course, the Caroline divines, almost certainly Lancelot Andrews and Jeremy Taylor.

Mark has already made an enduring contribution to this hugely important area of theological inquiry. Indeed, Mark’s status in the field is so unquestionable that it makes me somewhat self-conscious to appear to be supplying an affidavit as to his excellence and to seem to behave as something of underwriter of academic quality. Mark’s work requires no seconding. The experience that each of us has reading a book of Mark’s gives a testimonial to the quality of his mind, to his great love of the Christian tradition, to a sensibility of capacious hospitality, and to a mode of theologizing that weds fidelity and insight and elegance of expression with insight. A CV, however, no matter how impressive, is neither a life nor a soul, and often can be substitute for either or both. But it can also be an x-ray. I think it is an x-ray in the case of Mark. I am convinced that what Mark has written and how he has written it tells us something important about him. For someone like myself who knows Mark precisely in the manner that I would dearly like to know him better, Mark gives himself as a vital and non-aggressive presence of real class and consummate dignity. I grasp, therefore, in meeting him the same qualities I find in his writing. As I do so, I, together with other males of a certain age, pretend to ignore that Mark has always looked like someone from central casting (BBC not Hollywood): tall, straight, handsome, dark hair, resonant speaking voice, engaging and engaged, affable and warm. And when I and others manage to forgive him for these physical endowments and accept them as God’s bounty, we can properly place them among the constellation of the other gifts he presents to us, which definitely include empathy and a love of the physical world as expressive of the triune God’s infinite generosity that is mediated by the unsurpassable beauty of Christ in incarnation, transfiguration, and resurrection, but also the Cross and Holy Saturday.

Mark is neither solely body nor soul, but an embodied soul and soulful life of ample and varied virtue. Here I would like to recall my coming to see an expression of an unanticipated virtue that was not part of my operative catalogue. About twenty five years, while I was teaching in the Department of Religious
Studies at Yale, Mark was interviewed for a position in the Divinity School. Throughout the entire process he was mercilessly and shamelessly harassed by a person whose vocation was that Mark should not be given the position. This made the job-talk an ordeal, even if Mark handled himself in the Q&A with consummate class and style. The assault apparently continued at dinner, which effectively at Yale is the job interview. Unlike the job-talk, I am dependent on the report that came from one of the interviewers the day after. What I learned was that over the dinner in which the assailant aggressively asked the same questions over and over again, Mark put an end to hostilities by stating that the questions had been asked and answered many times over and that the particular line of inquiry should cease. A line drawn in the sand at an interview that definitely put an end to the prospects of securing a position. Only the extremely rarefied would think that this act is one of world-historical significance. Still, we academics by and large tend, despite our sometime bravado, to be a somewhat fearful lot. Still, for both myself and the very senior Yale colleague who reported this me, it stood out as a small act of bravery or gumption which we had not seen. For me especially, this very small thing, this nothing, had a huge effect and with respect to Mark moved the needle beyond a general and vague admiration where it seemed to be stuck. It led me confidently to impute to Mark a quiet, non-ostentatious courage that expressed his dignity and gave depth to his elegance. I am sure that in the vicissitudes of life, this courage has been on many times since. It does not take much imagination to guess that it has been called on a good deal this past few years. If I know Mark at all, doubtless he would downplay this. I can almost hear him say: you see what I don’t, but in any event courage is not really a personal quality, but more like the index of a cooperative in which there is the support of family, friends, and colleagues. Of course, Mark would not be wrong, and maybe even largely right. And the gratitude that would be the consequence of seeing and feeling this way would also be right. I accept all of this with just one qualification, which gets to my Irishness and thus my use of the double negative. I concede that this virtue which no less than all the others is not entirely your own, but is expressive of a we constituted by a web of mutual giving, sympathy, and support. Nonetheless, I still want to say that this virtue is not not your own. Even as made possible by a we, it is also a singular stance towards the world, others, self, and God.

I want to end by speaking to Mark as a reader of the spiritual masters of the Christian tradition. Mark has read and continues to read these spiritual masters, and probably over and over again. But I would like to say that he has also received their impress. In a certain way he has been read by them in that his mind and entire disposition has been formed in an by the reading of them. He has taken on their yearnings, their sense of mystery, their loving and folding into his life the insight that all loving is made possible by being loved. He has also taken on their joyous gratitude that scintillates in the dark as well as the light. He gives this to us in his person as much in his person as his writing, maybe even more. The appropriate response to this goes beyond admiration because it is a pointing away to a reality of which he is a lovely but fragile sign. He allows us to see what a disciplined and well-shaped response in faith, hope and charity to a God of terrible beauty looks like. And where can we find the eloquence to describe that?
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