At the dawn of the new millennium: What Franciscan universities have to offer

I am very grateful to you for the invitation to speak with you today about the significance of the Franciscan universities and the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition for today. In our work as educators, and everyone here is an educator, it is important to be able to identify both what the “signs of the times” tell us about our age, but also what our spiritual and intellectual traditions have to offer. In my own work on John Duns Scotus, a Franciscan Friar of the late 13th and early 14th century, I have come to discover the unique Franciscan way of integrating the life of the mind with the heart of the Gospel. As I hope my remarks make clear, there is something very special in the Franciscan charism and in the way this charism expresses itself in the ministry of education, wherever this occurs: in the classroom, in the administrative offices, by support staff, student services, housekeeping, safety and security. In a Franciscan institution the work of education is formative of persons: this occurs everywhere and is the task of each person.

I’ll say this in another way: within the broad and inclusive tradition of Catholic thought, sometimes called the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, there are several approaches: the Dominicans emphasize truth and its centrality, the Jesuits emphasize justice and its centrality, and I think the Franciscans emphasize love. If we imagine each approach as a “variation on a theme” rather than a totally new creation, then it is clear that in each approach all elements are present (truth, justice and love), but in each particular tradition, the point of convergence may be different.

Now, I don’t want to give the whole talk away at the beginning, but I will show my hand here when I say that your tradition is more profoundly aesthetic than the others.
By this I mean that Beauty is a central spiritual insight of Francis and his followers. In this way, any educational model that does not emphasize beauty and our attraction to the beautiful cannot lay claim to a Franciscan identity. And, in its emphasis on beauty and its centrality, I would argue that the Franciscan tradition has much to offer our world today. As Hans Urs von Balthasar has so perceptively argued, when a culture loses its sense of beauty, the loss of truth and goodness cannot be far behind. As we look around us in our country and in our world, we see that beauty appears lost, though in many ways it is what our students long for in their lives.

Professor Elaine Scarry, the Cabot Professor of Aesthetics at Harvard University, highlighted the importance of beauty in her 1998 Tanner lectures. In both talks, recently published under the title *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton University Press 1999) she argues for the recovery of beauty and of a sense of the beautiful, in any authentic educational model. Beauty is neither a distraction nor a frivolous object for human meditation. It is, rather, the central human experience that is needed today. Indeed, as she argues, the experience of beauty holds the key for any authentic intellectual growth, and this, because of its three characteristics. First, beauty transforms the individual and her perception of the world. Second, beauty calls forth and inspires “replication”, that is creativity and generativity. The work of art, inspired by an experience of beauty, reveals the dignity of the artist and the value of the creation. In this, beauty is life-saving and life-savoring. Finally, the experience of beauty holds the key to what she calls “lateral distribution”: that is, the extension of the concerns for beauty beyond the particular beautiful object that is initially encountered. As she develops this idea of “lateral distribution”, she concludes that the direct result of our experiences of beauty includes
not just awe and gratitude, but also \textit{concrete acts of justice}. These acts, born of an individual’s experience of transformation, are themselves transformative of his life, his society and our world.

Professor Scarry maintains that the experience of beauty holds these transformative elements, even in the absence of any higher reality, any transcendent dimension, any sacred realm. In this way, the experience of beauty unites believer and non-believer, believers of various traditions, in a moment of timeless appreciation and awe. As I read her essays, I could not help but think of your educational tradition and model, noting how Scarry holds out to us today (without knowing it) the call for a more Franciscan-ized culture, informed by beauty, transformed by beauty and creative of beauty.

In my reflections with you today, I would like to flesh out the three points Scarry makes. We will consider first the centrality of the experience of beauty as a moment of transformation, and how this might express itself in all aspects of a university setting. We could consider the place of creativity, of risk and experimentation in our classes, in our offices, in the residence halls, the grounds and buildings, even the way food is served in the dining hall. Next, we will consider the affirmation of life and dignity that flows from the experience of the beautiful. Finally, we will reflect upon the actions for justice that flow from the first two points. In all this, I will hold as our point of contact Franciscan philosopher-theologian John Duns Scotus.

\textit{Our moment in history}

Now you might be wondering right now, what good is a 14\textsuperscript{th} century thinker for us today? Well, anyone who knows history is aware of the enormous transitions that were
going on at the time of Francis: the scientific revolution of Aristotelian philosophy, the rise of the middle class, the crusades and religious animosity among Christians, Jews and Moslems at the political and international level, the scandals of Church leadership, the increasing gap between rich and poor. In addition, there were serious questions about how the human mind knows reality and how education relates to our heavenly destiny. It was a time of crisis in science, economics, politics, religion, interculturalism and education. Sound familiar? To this “time”, Francis and the important thinkers who belonged to the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition (men like Alexander of Hales and Bonaventure, as well as Scotus) brought a new vision of what it means to be human, what it means to be rational, what it means to be a follower of Jesus. This vision contained what Philotheus Boehner has called the essential elements of the Franciscan tradition: it was inclusive, grounded upon the recognition of divine goodness and the beauty of the created order. It was also critical of the injustices of the day and of the way in which current practice did not promote the Reign of God. Finally, it was prophetic in the way it went beyond the contemporary certainty of “what everybody knows.” The vision was also practical, insofar as it looked first to ways of acting differently in order to promote different ways of thinking.

In our own time, we find ourselves at similar historical crossroads. We too have seen the scientific revolution of the 20th century: quantum mechanics and chaos theory. We too have seen the spread of market driven capitalism in former iron curtain societies and nations of the third world, the “globalization” of a pax americana. We too see the Middle East as the place of conflict among the members of three major western world religions – and we have seen the tragedy of September 11. We too are scandalized by the
actions of ordained clergy and Church leaders. We too witness the increasing gap between rich and poor due to the unbelievable misuse of the goods of the earth by only a fraction of its inhabitants.

The question that faces all people today, all religious and spiritual traditions, men and women of good will, but most especially those of us who follow Jesus and work in Christian institutions, is the question for us today: what resources do we have in our own spiritual traditions to address the contemporary crisis? How can we be prophetic and counter-cultural in the face of a secularized, technologically advanced world, that progresses at the expense of the littlest and most vulnerable? How can we work to change, not just the structures of injustice, but the structures of thinking that support and justify the injustice? What precisely can a Franciscan university be and do in such a moment? One voice that may be of help to us is that of John Duns Scotus. In his intellectual and spiritual vision of reality, Scotus may offer us the resources of the Franciscan tradition that can address in a coherent way, the needs of all. His thought may be another support for the rebuilding, not just of the Church, but of an entire society, indeed, of the entire world.

1. Beauty and the sacramental vision of meaning

Beauty belongs to the foundational insight of Franciscan reflection, spirituality and education. In Francis’s “Canticle of the Sun”, in Bonaventure’s “The Mind’s Road to God”, in Clare’s letters to Agnes of Prague, the transformative journey begins with an attraction to beauty and leads to an inner conversion in love toward all that exists. Beauty has the power of relativizing all our petty worries and placing them at the background. It disorients us; it moves us out of the center of things; it promotes heightened discernment.
It results in gratitude and the desire to be part of the nurturing of beauty around us. It calls us to broaden our horizon of interest and to see the small as beautiful and uplifting. It can, as Professor Scarry illustrates, call forth an inclusive “lateral extension” to see the beautiful everywhere and in every being.

Within the Franciscan tradition, beauty also expresses itself through sacramental intuitions. These intuitions relate not simply to the theological category of sacraments (signs of divine love), but to an awareness of all of reality as SIGN: manifestation of meaning, a work of art from the hand of the loving Artist, a mirror that reflects a transcendent dimension. In this way, Franciscan education can enhance Scarry’s analysis to include a vibrant and personal transcendent dimension, opening to greater inclusivity and to more profound experiences of a beauty “ever ancient, ever new.”

Scotus’s sacramental vision of meaning is an artistic vision of relationship: the relationship between the divine artist and creation as the work of art. It is also a vision of the relationship of the lover to the beauty around him. According to Scotus’s vision of the human journey toward God, all that has been created by God has been created out of love. It is divine love that sustains and guides all beings toward the ultimate experience of communion: that union with God that was the divine intention behind the Incarnation. Scotus’s discussion of beauty and creativity reveals both the centrality of freedom as a perfection of divine action and the value of multiple perspectives as the only way fully to appreciate and understand the nature of reality and its relationship to the Creator.

In its sacramental dimension, the natural world presents itself, not as something to be grasped by the human mind or dominated by human control, but as a work of intricate beauty to be admired and reflected upon. The dignity of this world and of each being
manifests divine rational, loving and free creativity. Reality is shot through with creativity and freedom, from the first moment of divine choice to create this particular world to the smallest activity of human free willing. Scotus’s discussion of freedom throughout his texts (often interpreted as arbitrary or dangerous) actually follows from his sacramental/artistic vision of love and exalts the generous liberality of divine and human goodness. He regularly returns to examples taken from art and from artistic creativity: the artist, the artisan, the musician, the lute-player. God is presented as the artist whose creative activity is radically free in the way an artist is radically free in the creation of the work of art. In this radical freedom of artistic creativity, we can still count on artistic integrity: that dimension of divine life (love) that will remain constant and steadfast, whatever the response.

This is not all. But God is also understood as the delighted listener of the music performed by the created order and, indeed, by the human heart. When we love in an ordered way, not guided by our own personal needs and desires alone, but guided by our understanding of what the situation or person needs, then God is pleased. In addition, when we do this out of love for God, God’s response is delight. Scotus likens God to the listener of music, delighted by the harmony of the performance and particularly delighted by the intention of the performer, who is bringing all his best gifts to bear on this singular moment in time, and doing it out of love.

Following upon this, for Scotus, love and mercy are more rational than justice, because these perfections belong to God. Human freedom, in its fullest expression, imitates and reveals divine freedom as rational, creative love. The moral agent, like the artist, both experiences deep satisfaction in the work of art and promotes beauty in the
world around her. The fullest moral action does not juxtapose self and others; rather it integrates them.

The beauty of reality, understood sacramentally, challenges our modern sensibilities. The Franciscan vision brings together love, rationality and freedom in a vision of the whole. This vision points to the value of multiple ways of approaching a reality that far exceeds any single cultural or intellectual vantage point. It is Beauty, as rich and manifold, that attracts and finalizes the human experience of rationality. It is divine beauty that continues to inspire and inform the human journey of love. Scotus, like many Franciscan thinkers, affirms the centrality of beauty as the best vantage point from which to reflect upon the God who has brought us into being and to imitate this God in our daily actions.

We are, I think, fortunate today that educational theorists are emphasizing the variety of learning styles and modes of approach to content in the classroom. This fits nicely into the Franciscan vision of a world whose beauty far exceeds any one discipline and which requires multiple approaches, multiple methodologies, multiple experiences in order to promote the whole human person, whose fullest development testifies to the glory of God.

And we can reflect on the following questions: How is education at Neumann College aesthetic and sacramental? How central is the daily experience of beauty and creativity for faculty, students and staff? How do we personally develop and nurture a sense of beauty in our own lives? What models for creative and innovative coursework exist? How creative and inclusive is our pedagogy? How does the Franciscan commitment to beauty influence everyday decisions made on campus? How does the care
and cleaning of buildings reflect beauty? How do students, families, visitors encounter beauty when they enter an office, the book store, the cafeteria, the residence halls? How does the physical beauty of the campus inspire the response of gratitude, to which you have committed yourselves this year?

2. Creative and life giving

The experience of beauty also inspires creativity and the affirmation of life. Indeed, Scarry, claims that the encounter with beauty, particularly in another person, is truly “life-saving”. Here, as we make the connection to the Franciscan tradition, we might reflect on the value of each individual and the giftedness of each person. Duns Scotus’s theory of “thisness” or haecceitas captures the dignity of the individual and affirms its value for all eternity.

Anyone familiar with the poetry of Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins knows Scotus’s attention to the particular and to the “thisness” of each being. Not many know that he was profoundly inspired by Scotus and the Franciscan tradition on this point. It is a point that is also especially attractive to postmodern thinkers. For Scotus, haecceity, the thisness of each individual, is both sacred and unrepeatable. My haec can never be cloned, even when everything else about me is. Several postmodern thinkers interpret Scotus’s position on this irreplaceable singularity as an ultimate affirmation of the subject and the ultimate exaltation of the individual. But this is to take a particular aspect out of an overall vision and misrepresent it. For Scotus, my haecceity is my personal gift from a loving God, and does not exist as the ultimate of the universe. I am a member of reality that, as an ordered whole, is dependent upon the creative act of a loving, personal God.
For Thomas Merton, another great 20th century thinker, this central insight of personal dignity and value was also transformative, as he affirms in his *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. One cannot simply note the dignity of each person and each being. Such an insight is transformative and demands an active response. Each person, Merton claims, shines forth like the sun. Our response in the presence of another must be an acknowledgment of the sacred: of the divine presence within.

When Scotus speaks of the human person, he does not hesitate to identify rationality with the power of love. He grounds this rational love in the nature of God. The human person is not simply a mind, not merely an intellect. Each person is an *acting person*, capable of self-mastery and self-control. The development of freedom has its source in our rational ability to act with mature self-mastery. Education promotes a continual self-discovery and self-appropriation. The result is that creative and generative freedom that belongs to the artist. As a result, according to Scotus, it is not the intellect that defines rationality, but rather the will. And here he means the human will, the seat of love, in its natural affections for justice and for self-protection that alone is able to perform an act of self-restraint and self-control.

Scotus’s optimistic vision of reality and his aesthetic sacramental vision are both grounded on the deepest conviction of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition: that the intellectual journey is a profoundly spiritual journey. This is ultimately a spiritual conviction that the natural human desire to understand reality and to love the highest good for itself alone is perfected in love for the highest and most perfect good, understood by religious traditions as God, and by Christianity as a Trinity of Persons. Scotus follows the insight traced out by Augustine’s *Confessions*, where the exercise of
human loving, even when misdirected, is part of the deeper exercise of understanding, itself the rational road to the discovery of the divine and, ultimately, to complete human happiness.

How might the Franciscan affirmation of human dignity and the value of each life play a more central role, both critical and prophetic, in student education here? How might Scotus’s affirmation of human goodness and uniqueness inform coursework in ethics, in education, in psychology, in business? How do broader and more inclusive styles of teaching and learning enrich the curriculum? How does the day to day interaction among all persons on this campus reveal the daily encounter with the sacred? How do the everyday dealings among students, faculty and staff give witness to the value of each person, regardless of status? How does the educational project here promote the development of “artists of goodness”? Of men and women who do not reduce their value to their IQ or their GPA, their SAT or ACT scores, but who truly see themselves as people on a journey toward greater and greater self-knowledge, self-appropriation and self-mastery? How might the Franciscan commitment to all persons, including and most especially the vulnerable, offer a critical vantage point from which to analyze economic, social and political situations?

3. Beauty and Action for Justice

Finally, Professor Scarry affirms and the tradition agrees that the experience of beauty results naturally in concern for justice. Beauty reveals order and equality, proportion and generativity, distribution and harmony. Beauty creates a relationship of lover to the person or object loved. These values are not just internal, subjective
experiences, but genuine attributes of the common good, of a just society that is informed by “right relationships” of mutuality, equality and peace.

The sacramental, artistic vision and the affirmation of dignity we spoke of earlier have moral implications. First and foremost, the identification of beauty is not a subjective experience of personal preference. Beauty is not, you’ll be happy to hear, in the eye of the beholder. It is a transcendent attribute of being, that unifying truth and goodness. Like Augustine and Bonaventure before him, Scotus draws upon the Platonic tradition where beauty is an objective and transcendent reality, whose rational analysis never loses the dynamic of attraction and love. Divine beauty draws and fulfills human longing at multiple levels and integrates human desire and rational choice. To recognize God as ultimate Beauty and as ultimate Artist and Creator of beauty is to grasp our human vocation to be artists and creators of beauty. In our moral lives, we are called to bring forth beauty in imitation of divine creativity within the temporal order, where conditions and materials are not always perfect.

Beauty is also creative of relationship. It is, and here Elaine Scarry can help us, a contract, between the lover and the object loved. Beautiful objects give rise to the “lateral distribution”, to reciprocity, to fairness. As it de-centers us, beauty prompts a feeling of “un-self-interestedness”. It inspires us to make our surroundings and our world more beautiful.

The sacramental, artistic vision affirms the foundational moral insight: the possibility of conversion. The ability of an individual to turn his life around, to move in another, better direction, to stop harmful behavior depends upon a moment of self-control, where the person is (as it were) immobile in the presence of external
circumstances. Like the dancer balanced on toe-tip, the person is poised to act. Here is the still point, the center of rational action, that exquisitely brief moment of self-awareness and self-possession. In my opinion, this is what Scotus means by rational freedom.

For Duns Scotus, the key to right relationships belongs to the natural and rational constitution of the human person. Each of us possesses a natural affection for ourself: this is neither selfish nor egotistical, but a healthy regard for our own good. In addition, we also possess a natural affection for justice: this is my desire for integrity, for right and ordered living, for a healthy and sane way of life. The goal of moral education, says Scotus, is the harmonic balance between these two desires: a balance of my good and the good of others. This balance requires that, at times, I give way to another. But it also requires that I know when and where to stand up for myself, and defend my appropriate right to have what I need. Sometimes I think our students, in their desire for peaceful coexistence, lack this basic sense of integrity. How can we help them know when not to walk away? How do we help them become authentic agents of peace? Not the peace that is the absence of conflict, but the peace that is the harmony of healthy and right relationships.

For Scotus, growing in justice means growing into the fullness of life: the perfection of divine justice is the perfection of mercy and generosity. In our teaching about justice, and in our disciplinary protocol, do we move beyond strict justice toward restorative modes, inclusive modes, generative modes in order to build right relationships? In ethics or political science, do we contrast justice with mercy or do we, with Scotus, identify justice with personal integrity and see how, in some cases, the most
just action involves mercy and generosity? Do the biblical and Franciscan traditions on justice inform the education, the discussions and institutional procedures here?

Social justice is a popular topic on college campuses today. How much of the talk of justice here at Neumann is informed by the biblical sense of “right relationships”, “ordered loving”, “service out of love for the other”? Do students see justice as something to be done “out there” and not “in here”? How do student projects reflect the deeper sense of justice that flows from a spiritual as well as a political tradition? How does justice in the Franciscan voice inform theology classes? Political science classes? Campus service activities? How has your small faculty-student ratio enabled you to personalize your curriculum, so that the students both learn and are transformed by the interpersonal relationships on campus, within the classroom but also beyond it?

Conclusions: a Franciscan response

Duns Scotus’s commitment to beauty, rational freedom and the dignity of the created, contingent order is both informed by and (for its part) helps to inform the Franciscan spiritual and intellectual traditions. This tradition is inclusive and open to all persons, to all religious traditions and every culture. This tradition inspires and encourages all persons of good will to look around at the beauty of a natural world loved by God, to enter into respectful and loving relationship with one another, and to work together to bring about a world of true peace and justice, where resources are shared by all.

The Franciscan tradition as a whole supports reflection upon the human person as both imago Dei but, more importantly, imago Christi. It sustains Scotus’s moral aesthetic viewed as a spiritual participation in the rational order of love that creates and conserves
all that exists. These dimensions of Scotist thought: his aesthetic and sacramental theory, the affirmation of human dignity and the spiritual vision upon which both are founded provide fruitful ways to reconsider contemporary assumptions about what it means to be human, what it means to be rational, and what it means to participate in divine life. The human journey, in the Franciscan tradition, is an intellectual-spiritual journey founded upon the recognition and experience of beauty everywhere: in every culture and every person. This recognition leads to the discovery of divine artistic freedom and love as the source of all that is. This discovery gives birth to the human desire to respond freely with a love that is both gratitude and charity. This desire bears fruit in acts of justice that are themselves transformative of each person and the world.

Such an approach may challenge and invite further reflection upon the question of education today. If rational understanding involves multiple modes and perspectives, then how might the transcendent dimension offer itself for our rational, cognitive and religious experience? Does the aesthetic domain offer a fuller and richer context within which rationality might be understood? If so, how might contemporary reflection better integrate aesthetic experience (not understood as subjective preference) into the realm of rational discourse? How might this institution be a center of beauty and artistic formation within an intellectual frame? How might it be more inclusive? How might it be more critical? How might it be prophetic to other institutions?

Scotus affirms and defends the dignity of the human person. His teaching on *haecceitas* points to the unique character of the individual and of each being. His position on the Incarnation reveals the fundamental insight regarding the value of human nature and of each human person. His optimistic vision brings together love, rationality and
freedom to frame a Franciscan reflection upon the human condition and journey from this world to God. Scotus never hesitates to attribute perfection to human nature, so long as Scripture and right reasoning are not in opposition. Among these attributes are the power of the human mind, the superiority of the rational will and the exercise of human love.

Scotus’s own reflections were guided by two Franciscan concerns. Both involve transcendent assumptions. First, he grounds his reflection upon the human nature embraced by Christ; all the perfections of that nature belong to us as rational agents. Second, he views the human capacity for goodness from the perspective of the conditions required for the fullest human experience: face to face encounter with God in the beatific vision. Both reveal the enormous Franciscan optimism and commitment to both human dignity and divine generosity.

As we stand at the dawn of the new millennium, are there ways to enhance the spiritual/intellectual Franciscan vision of the human person and the deepest human aspirations toward life, creativity and generativity? It is precisely where the great Franciscan voices understood all intellectual endeavors as spiritual, transforming, transcending and creative, centered and framed on love, inclusivity and beauty, that the intellectual legacy of this institution can be transformative of our society and our world. These elements point toward a campus wide reflection and discussion, not simply about the content of coursework in an established curriculum, or even about strengthening current ties among disciplines and across the campus. All these, while important, are not enough. Indeed, it is a discussion about the possibility of an integrative educational experience informed by a teleological or goal-based perspective of beauty and creativity. It is framed by self-transcending and self-transforming activities, in the classroom and
beyond. It is an open and an ever-widening circle, inviting all to come into the
conversation, and through mutual respect, listening and working together, help to
transform the students, the campus, the city and the world.

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Neumann College