



THE BEACON

NEWSLETTER OF THE LUMEN CHRISTI INSTITUTE FOR CATHOLIC THOUGHT

FALL 2025



**“Forming students to think is actually forming them
to be who they are.”**

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Dear friends,

St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) has been our cornerstone in this academic year. After his election, Pope Leo XIV described himself as “a son of St. Augustine.” In honor of our holy father, we hosted several events devoted to St. Augustine, the great Church father and African bishop.

This fall, we offered 10 events related to the life and written works of St. Augustine. That’s not counting our biennial summer seminar on his magnum opus, *The City of God*. One might ask if there is an appetite among students, faculty, and our broader audience for so much Augustine. The answer has been a resounding “yes”!

At our Tuesday night course, we typically expect about 15-20 University of Chicago students around the seminar table at Gavin House. This quarter, we consistently received over 30; every seat was taken, and we had to add chairs along the walls. At the Ruth Lake Country Club, west of Chicago, where we have expected 70-80 attendees at a typical lecture, we have had 100+ in each audience this fall.

St. Augustine continues to inspire us more than 1,500 years after his death. May he and all the saints pray for us, as we make the Catholic intellectual tradition a vital part of the secular university and the broader culture. Even today, we yearn for ancient truth: As St. Augustine said, “Lord, You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.”

Yours in Christ,

Daniel Wasserman-Soler

Danny Wasserman-Soler
Executive Director

WE ARE DEEPLY GRATEFUL TO THE JOHN TEMPLETON FOUNDATION FOR THEIR transformative support through a new joint project: ‘In Lumine Tuo: Expanding and Sustaining the Catholic Intellectual Tradition Nationwide’ grant (#63614), which develops and extends opportunities for the thirteen member organizations of the In Lumine Network. The new project will deepen the impact of Catholic thought both within the University of Chicago community and at non-Catholic colleges and universities across North America. For more information, visit: inluminetnetwork.org



Oct 15 - Nov 12: Fundamental Questions seminar “Religion, Politics, and Revolution in The Ancient City,” with Yousef Casewit (University of Chicago) and Eric DeVilliers (Lumen Christi Institute)



May 9: An interview “What Can We Say About God?” with David Novak (University of Toronto)

SPRING & FALL QUARTERS | Seminars, Forums, and Events



Oct 16 - Nov 13: Graduate student reading group “The Silmarillion”



Oct 15: West Suburban Catholic Culture Series event “Our Hearts Are Restless: Augustine’s Confessions and Modern Anxiety,” with Scott Moringiello (DePaul University)



Oct 1: Fall Quarter Student Social



Sept 26: Master class “The Part the Muses Give Us,” with James Matthew Wilson (University of St. Thomas, Houston)



Summer Seminar Spotlight

The Vocation of a Catholic Scholar

This summer the Lumen Christi Institute continued its annual summer seminar program with seven intensive seminars. The seminars covered topics from antiquity to the present, across many disciplines such as patristics, economics, and contemporary philosophy. Among these was a brand-new seminar: “The Vocation of the Catholic Scholar” for newly-minted PhDs.

The seminar was catalyzed by LCI’s Postdoctoral Fellows Program in Catholic Studies, which launched this fall. For the inaugural cohort of fellows, the institute was only able to accept two out of a pool of nearly seventy, highly-qualified candidates. This week-long seminar was born out of the interest of so many talented young Catholic scholars, seeking intellectual community and greater connection with the Church’s rich tradition. The seminar made it possible to bring an additional eleven of

these young scholars for a week of formation, friendship, and discussion about the meaning of the role in the Church to which God has called them.

Each morning, Fr. Stephen Fields, SJ (Georgetown University) led a conversation on the seminar’s primary text: St. John Henry Newman’s *The Idea of a University*. Each afternoon, senior scholars shared their own reflections on research and teaching in the university in the light of their faith. They encouraged seminar participants to consider how the Catholic tradition enriches the scholarly vocation

All LCI seminars aim to help students master content from the Catholic intellectual tradition, while also creating a space for Catholic community and academic engagement. “The Vocation of the Catholic Scholar,” however, took this a step further and marked a new

phase in LCI’s accompaniment of students.

The summer seminar program has long focused on its mission to ‘teach the teachers.’ The formation LCI students receive during graduate school, however, can only go on to impact their future students if they successfully become professors themselves. These new postdoctoral offerings are intended to help make this transition. Both the seminar and the postdoctoral fellowship mark an initial foray into bridging the gap between when a student completes graduate studies and begins a faculty position.

Drawing on Newman allowed them to think about what is distinctive about being a Catholic scholar, rather than simply a scholar who is Catholic. “What makes someone a Catholic scholar is the recognition that the person of the teacher matters,” said Michael LeChevallier, the director of LCI’s National Catholic Scholars program. “Their life and their mode of engaging with students is how they communicate what they believe about truth. Forming students to think is actually forming them to be who they are.”

It matters also what kind of community teachers create for their students. Building and fostering community is essential, not accidental, to true Catholic academic engagement. Participant and LCI postdoctoral fellow Cassandra Sever agreed: “My favorite part about the Lumen Christi Institute is the people. As a scholar, the community is as important as the literature.”

Participants were challenged to think about the state of

academia today. The consensus in their discussions was that the relationship between students and their studies is breaking down. Only when students understand the purpose of learning and how it relates to who they are, will they approach it with commitment and hope. It is the educator’s responsibility to teach students how to truly think, and so form them into who God created them to be.

This seminar, like the other summer seminars, created community through formal excursions, as well as informal lunches and free time for the participants to become friends. On the second morning participants began to speak with vulnerability about the academic market and the reality of rejection. “They brought their full selves to the discussion,” LeChevallier said. “And that is something that you cannot force.”

Many of these participants began teaching at colleges and universities across the country this fall. Going forward, LCI will seek to support these young scholars in their vocations to research and teaching by creating a community of practice. They will meet monthly in a virtual format to support one another and foster their own growing understanding of the important work they are doing for the Church and the world. Teachers, just as much as their students, need community and friendship. Particularly as they transition from students to teachers, LCI desires to provide these young scholars with a place where they are known and valued as whole persons, and where friendships grow from a shared devotion to truth in Christ.



2025 Summer Seminars



Catholic Social Thought
in Business Education
University of Notre Dame



The Thought of René Girard
University of Southern California



Self Knowledge as First Philosophy:
Introducing Bernard Lonergan
Boston College



Dionysius the Areopagite:
The Corpus and Its Legacy
University of St. Michael’s College



Truth and Authority in
Augustine’s *City of God*
University of California, Berkeley



Economics and Catholic
Social Thought — A Primer
Catholic University of Chile



THE ENDURING LEGACY OF ST. AUGUSTINE

THE FALL NON-CREDIT COURSE &
POSTDOCTORAL FELLOW CASSANDRA SEVER

For sixteen centuries, St. Augustine of Hippo has shaped Christian tradition. Augustine is known for his keen theological insight and lyrical prose, as manifested particularly in his much-loved *Confessions*. Augustine is considered the father of Western theology, but his impact extends beyond Christian thought. He has also formed the daily living of the faith and the structure of the Church: *The Rule of St. Augustine* is one of the earliest documents outlining the shape of what we now call religious life.

St. Augustine's legacy took on a renewed meaning with the election of Pope Leo XIV in May. In his first address as pope, Leo declared himself "a son of St. Augustine." With these words, Leo announced a direction for his papacy which would take its inspiration from this fifth century theologian, who wrote to his people, "I am a bishop for you, and a Christian with you."

Following the Holy Father's lead, the Lumen Christi Institute is dedicating the fall non-credit course to an intensive study of the thought of St. Augustine. LCI holds a non-credit course each quarter to provide an opportunity for students from the University of Chicago to pursue intellectual questions freed from the constraints imposed by ordinary course requirements. One of the most important freedoms

gained in this format is that students are able to integrate their academic interests with the questions that most weigh on all of us: questions of ultimate meaning, human destiny, and the purpose of existence.

It was precisely this question of meaning and the secular academy's inability to provide satisfying answers which led Cassandra Sever to study St. Augustine. Sever is a sociologist and one of the first two Postdoctoral Fellows in Catholic Studies with the Lumen Christi Institute. She credits her return to the faith during her graduate studies to the North African doctor of the Church.

Sociology aims to explain the human person and human action in society from a purely material vantage point. Sever was drawn to the study of sociology by a desire to understand the self, but the more she studied the more frustrated she became. The discipline is committed to a view of the human person that is morally neutral and views human beings as fundamentally self-creating and self-determining. It asserts that there is no immovable gravitational center for human identity.

This answer was not satisfying for Sever: "Nothing I read seemed to understand the most significant parts





of life.” She went in search of a better explanation and it was then she found Augustine. “His theology is what my anthropology is founded in. His work showed me that the human person is grounded in a search for goodness. He is the hinge to how I see everything.”



As Sever explains, “I would ask my students, ‘Do you really think people behave the way they do because of materialism? Is that truly how you have encountered others?’ The answer was always no. Augustine’s anthropology helped me understand that there is a satisfying explanation: people crave meaning.

“It’s because human beings are oriented toward meaning that I can study despair,” Sever continues. “I can’t study ultimate meaning itself, which lies beyond our full grasp as human persons, but I can study despair –the condition that arises when our search for meaning becomes disordered.”

Sever began incorporating Augustine into her research by investigating social problems from an Augustinian perspective. Ironically, this perspective led her to study despair.

“I looked at examples of nostalgia for totalitarian regimes and political extremism. I found in each case that the people shared a collective despair.” Sever believes this is the beginning of a breakthrough for sociology, which still premises its explanation on shared materialism. Though scholars realize this explanation is not sufficient, a better explanation has not yet been articulated. It is in this space that Sever aims to make her contribution.

The coincidence of Leo XIV’s core themes for his papacy and Sever’s research made her selection for the postdoctoral fellowship earlier in the spring fortuitous. Her research at LCI will further the institute’s commitment to following Leo’s lead in rediscovering what St. Augustine has to offer the twenty-first century Church.

Sever will teach one of the sessions for the non-credit course in November, focusing on Augustine and the sociology of the self. Modeling how Augustine’s thought can be applied beyond an intramural, theological appreciation is one of her priorities.

“I want to show how Augustine’s thought can be integrated into sociology and ask questions about what Augustine would say about today’s social crises. If sociology has the right metaphysical foundation, it has an immense capacity to show us truths about ourselves.”

This integration of the secular academy and Catholic faith is what drew Sever to the Lumen Christi Institute.

“I found out about Lumen Christi’s postdoc positions just two days before they were due. I was teaching at a secular university and felt starved for community as a Catholic scholar. When I read the description, I thought, ‘joining secular disciplines to the Catholic Tradition, that’s me!’ I wanted to work and live in a place where the Catholic intellectual tradition was active.”

In the few short months that Sever has been with the institute thus far, she says confidently that she found what she was looking for.

“I love being part of a genuine Catholic intellectual community. I have spent most of my career with my moral and metaphysical questions needing to remain implicit when I talk to my colleagues. Here I have found colleagues who understand and share these questions. They know that the search for objective truth is the ultimate goal. That has been very lifegiving for me as a scholar.”

COURSE SESSIONS

The City of God
Willemien Otten
University of Chicago

Confessions
Ryan Coyne
University of Chicago

On The Trinity
Bernard McGinn
University of Chicago

On Christian Teaching
Scott Moringiello
DePaul University

Augustine and the Sociology of the Self
Cassandra Sever
LCI Postdoctoral Fellow

The History of the Augustinian Order
Fr. Peter Funk, O.S.B.
Monastery of the Holy Cross





AGAINST THE MACHINE: AN EVENING WITH PAUL KINGSNORTH

On September 25th, at the University Club of Chicago, the Lumen Christi Institute was pleased to host renowned poet, novelist, and environmentalist Paul Kingsnorth. Over drinks and hors d'oeuvres, Kingsnorth discussed his new book *Against the Machine*, in a Q&A with James Matthew Wilson, poet and professor at the University of St. Thomas, Houston. *Against the Machine* addresses not only the practical problems we humans face due to the rise of technology, but also the spiritual and psychological ones, particularly since the Industrial Revolution.

Kingsnorth shared that our culture currently possesses what he calls a “machine-like” mentality. This mentality encourages us to view the earth as a resource to be controlled, and our humanity as a problem to be transcended. To Kingsnorth, “The Machine” that governs our culture uproots

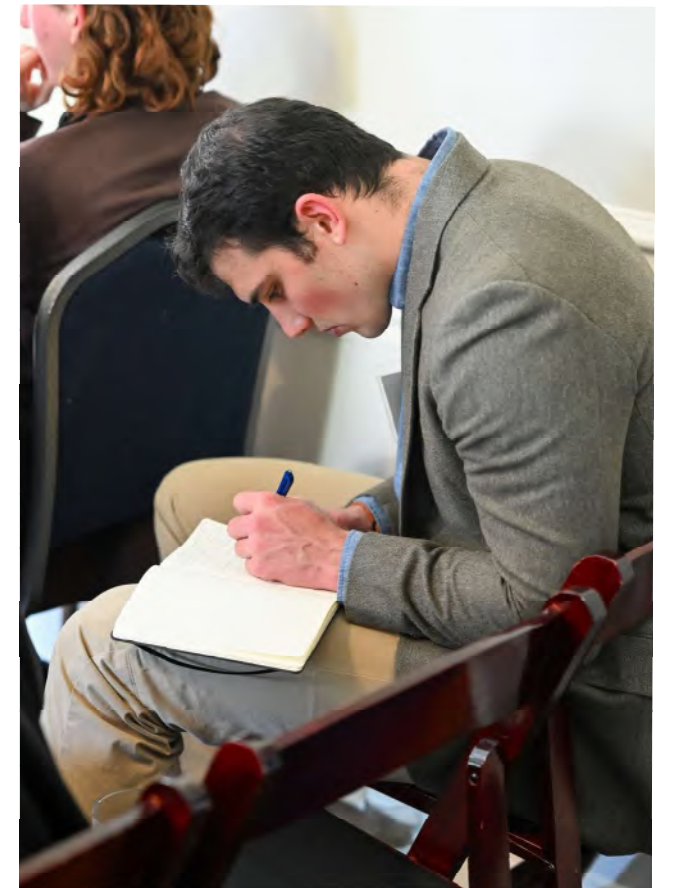
us from home, commitments, objective truth, and God. He argued that humanity is currently trying to liberate itself from everything that causes suffering—particularly those physical and spiritual commitments that are most essential to us.

Throughout the conversation, themes of Kingsnorth’s own conversion to Christianity arose. He shared that when he began thinking through this project many years ago, he was not yet a believer. As a devoted environmentalist, Kingsnorth was able to identify the concerning results of “The Machine” and what a machine-like mindset was doing to people’s relationships with one another and the earth. However, it was only through his conversion that the author fully recognized the flawed desire at the core of this mindset.

Now a member of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Kingsnorth shared that his understanding of our modern times was clarified in the light of Biblical history. “The Machine” is our Tower of Babel. It represents humanity’s consistently false belief that we can gain total control over ourselves and the earth. We need only look to the book of Genesis to see this temptation at the root of human history—A hope for false liberation, a desire to be gods ourselves.

Kingsnorth warned that without faith, there is no reason to halt the progress of “The Machine.” If one has no spiritual perspective, then it is easy to become convinced that there is an obligation to become god-like, to eliminate suffering, even at the cost of that which makes us most human. Without God, we lose sight of who we are and what we are meant for. It is only when we come to terms with the spiritual side of our humanity that we can recognize that there is no real or satisfying transcendence that we can gain on our own.

Yet, despite this warning, Kingsnorth encouraged his audience to take heart. Though technology’s effects are alarming, he believes “The Machine” will fail as it always does. Fortunately, humans have never successfully discarded their humanity. Moreover, deep down, he believes we do not want to.

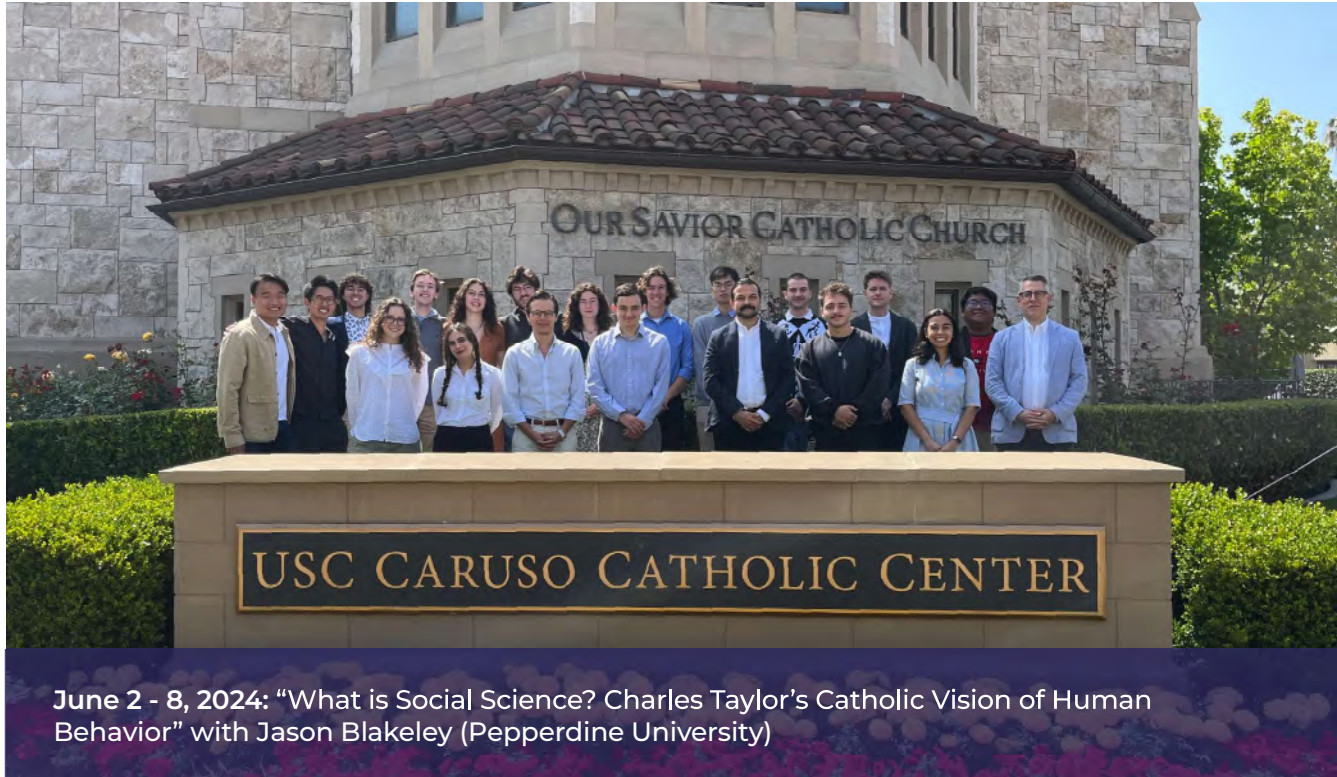


He reminded his listeners that Christ tells us to “Be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world.”—John 16:33. He also suggested anecdotes that will be familiar to anyone who knows the Lumen Christi Institute’s mission: Community and faith formation. To combat the individualism which plagues and consumes our modern era, we must endeavor to regain our sense of community. This aim begins not as a global movement, but in our own individual lives. We must resist the urge to dominate, and instead live with a renewed awareness of the sacred within, and around us that God has provided. We must recall our commitments to the earth that we have been given, the people with whom we live, and the One who has given us everything.



ALUMNI CORNER

WITH DAVID ALBERTSON



June 2 - 8, 2024: "What is Social Science? Charles Taylor's Catholic Vision of Human Behavior" with Jason Blakeley (Pepperdine University)

When did you get involved with LCI as a student?

I first heard of Lumen Christi through friends at the Divinity School, or perhaps it was through Professor Bernard McGinn, who was an important mentor for me at the time. The first event I participated in was a small reading group organized by Thomas Levergood in the basement of Calvert House, on Gregory of Nyssa, I think. I found it a valuable intellectual community of faithful Christians who wanted to learn from the tradition outside of course requirements. I remember being impressed by how smart the other students were! And of course by Thomas himself personally, and his evident love for the Church.

What is your favorite memory of LCI as a student?

I enrolled in classes with Professor Jean-Yves Lacoste and read Kierkegaard and Balthasar with him in university courses as part of my graduate studies

at Chicago. Lumen Christi had brought in Lacoste from Paris as a visiting professor of Catholic Studies. Both of those courses were transformational for me as a thinker and continue to stimulate my work today, 20 years later. It offered a whole dimension of encounter with the Catholic tradition that otherwise would not have been on my map as a PhD student studying Christianity. In fact I am working on a paper on Balthasar right now that stems from that encounter.

How did LCI impact you as a student and in your subsequent career?

Lumen Christi impressed me with its high standards for intellectual inquiry. Its lectures and guest scholars were always world-class. At the time I was still Protestant, but it demonstrated without a doubt that Catholic intellectuals were serious about thinking with excellence and open to pursuing truth wherever it led. I think this was the beginning of an intellectual

conversion for me — much as Augustine first gained respect for Catholic Christianity philosophically, before he fully embraced the Church and converted. Lumen Christi made that first step possible for me by incarnating the voice of the Catholic intellectual tradition, so that it could be an ineluctable part of my own intellectual formation as a scholar and a person.

Tell us about the Nova Forum.

I founded Nova Forum in 2020 after several long conversations with Thomas Levergood. Since 2018 or 2019 I had wanted to contribute something to our Catholic students at USC and greater Los Angeles. After discernment and discussions with Thomas and others, I decided to affiliate Nova Forum from day one with the emerging In Lumine Network. With their support, we have grown more quickly and broadly than I would ever have guessed was possible. Now I have the privilege of working collaboratively with six faculty fellows to serve our large community of students at our Catholic campus ministry but also in public events on USC campus. Because of our size (40,000), USC likely has as many Catholic students as Notre Dame or Georgetown.

We try to sustain the Lumen Christi model of being the voice of the Catholic intellectual tradition on our secular university campus, maintaining the highest academic standards while working to ameliorate the polarizations of the American church. Our programs seek to bridge the life of faith and the life of the mind, but also to introduce Catholic traditions to students who may be entirely unaware of them. Our programs try to fulfill these criteria: they are holistic learning experiences that draw from the riches of the Catholic tradition, address topics the university does not pursue on its own, and land fully in our century with relevance, urgency, and complexity. We want students to get a taste of thinking with the Church

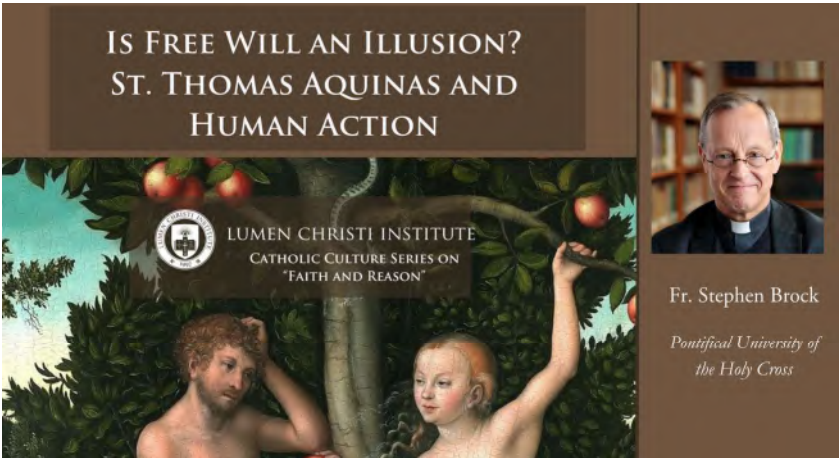
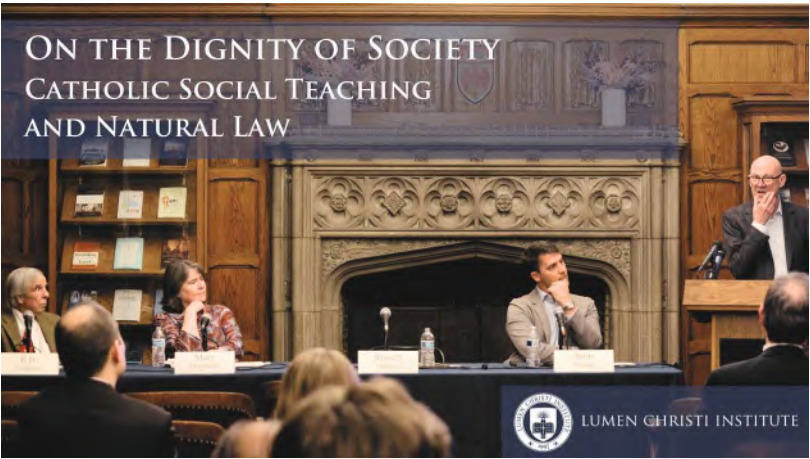
David Albertson is an Associate Professor of Religion and Philosophy at the University of Southern California and director of The Nova Forum. He graduated from the University of Chicago Divinity School with an MDiv in 2003 and a PhD in 2008.

(sentire cum ecclesia) and experiencing how it can add to their understanding of the world, their lives, and our common good.

Can you tell us a bit about the summer seminar on Charles Taylor you co-hosted with LCI?

Nova Forum was delighted to host the Charles Taylor seminar in summer 2024. It was conceived, designed, and taught by my good friend and colleague Professor Jason Blakely from Pepperdine University nearby in Los Angeles. Taylor is indubitably one of the most prominent Catholic philosophers of our era, with very few peers. We thought it would be a perfect introduction to a Catholic intellectual style that is open to modernity and yet understands the meaning of that modernity from within the vantage point of Catholic tradition. To me, the idea of reading Taylor in Los Angeles, at the crossroads of so many cultures, such religious diversity, and such technology, seemed a perfect match.





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773.955.5887

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