



THE BEACON

NEWSLETTER OF THE LUMEN CHRISTI INSTITUTE FOR CATHOLIC THOUGHT

SPRING 2025



KRISTOF OLTVAI | POET AND SPIRITUAL MASTER:

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE LEADER OF THE DANTE GRADUATE STUDENT READING GROUP

How did you get involved with the Lumen Christi Institute?

I first got involved in Lumen Christi almost a decade ago, when I started my Masters at the University of Chicago's Divinity School. The Institute's reputation had preceded it: at a conference, a professor from a Catholic college had advised me to acquaint myself with the Institute's work and especially with its founder, Thomas Levergood. I benefited enormously from Lumen Christi's programs and the friendships I developed through them in those formative years of my scholarly life – most of all, from

Thomas's mentorship, support, and example. May his memory be a blessing.

Why did you choose Dante for your reading group?

In my view, this text is the crowning achievement of the Catholic imagination, perhaps even more so than Augustine's *Confessions*. It is a work of astounding erudition, humanity, faith, and scale. Every time I've read it, there is some passage that moves me to tears. In his *Comedy*, Dante synthesizes and sets to a fever pitch the entire world of medieval European spirituality –

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Thomas Levergood †

Dear friends of the Lumen Christi Institute,

As we remember the life of Pope Francis, I would like to reflect on a passage from *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013). The Pope described the Church as “a mother with an open heart.” He added, “Everyone can share in some way in the life of the Church; everyone can be part of the community.” The Church “is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems.”

It seems to me that these insights of the Holy Father run parallel to the vision of my predecessor, Thomas Levergood, the founder of the Lumen Christi Institute. In a 2020 essay written for *America* magazine, Thomas reflected on the brokenness of American politics:

Well-intended reforms have destroyed the ability of our political parties to function as vehicles of citizen participation in democratic life. We need to stop seeking political victories at all cost and vilifying the people who disagree with us; instead we need to work together to renew our political order. Then, sharing in the common good of a functioning political system, we can get back to the normal democratic life of creative debate, disagreement and compromise (a nearly forgotten concept).

Thomas saw the Catholic intellectual tradition as an antidote to the problems of American politics. In the same essay, he also referred to Pope Francis, who wrote the following in *Laudato si* (2015): “We urgently need a humanism capable of bringing together the different fields of knowledge, including economics, in the service of a more integral and integrating vision.” The pope’s insight affirmed Thomas’s view that Lumen Christi events should transcend ideological divisions and engage the universal Church. Thomas saw the Institute as a place not only for liberal Catholics or conservative Catholics (or even just for Catholics) – but for everyone, “with all their problems,” as Pope Francis said.

For me, this issue of *The Beacon* highlights Thomas’s enduring vision of bringing the different parts of both the Church and the academy into one conversation. Our tenth conference on Economics and Catholic social thought brought together scholars from a range of academic and ideological backgrounds to discuss polarization and social cohesion. Our symposium on gender and holiness in the Middle Ages demonstrated how the Catholic tradition can help us to have a thoughtful and fascinating conversation on the often polarizing issue of gender. Our visiting scholar, Fr. Adam Hincks, S.J. led several sessions in which he showed how the Church’s intellectual tradition complements scientific inquiry. Kristof Oltvai’s reading group brought students of different fields and community members into a conversation on Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.

Thank you for your support of our mission. Please know that you and your loved ones are in our prayers daily here at Gavin House.

Yours in Christ,

Daniel Wasserman-Soler

Danny



continued from page 1

a spirituality that, for me, must play a key role in the handing-down of an authentically Christian culture. It was a desire to do this “traditioning” with my friends and colleagues that inspired me to organize this reading group.

How is the approach that Dante encourages to the faith unique?

Three themes stick out to me. First, *eros*. Dante is convinced that our particular, physical desires, when properly directed, lead us to the love of God. The courtly romance between Dante and Beatrice is the paradigmatic tie that binds the saints of the Church together, even across the gulf of death. Second, patriotism. The sights, sounds, and smells of Italy suffuse Dante’s descriptions of the afterlife, almost as if he is consecrating his earthly homeland by promising to remember it in our heavenly one. Even his violent criticisms of a Florence turned away from Christian virtue must be read in the light of his longing to return there. Third, the mystery of providence. *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* are morality plays, but when Dante enters the Earthly Paradise, everything changes. What he thought he’d earned by his own moral striving, Beatrice reveals to have been wholly the act of grace.

Do you think the reading group was a success?

I wanted to build intellectual friendships between students and faculty and between ‘town and gown’ by bringing all of these demographics together over a shared “great book.” Considering that professors, grad students, and community members attended regularly, I daresay the reading group achieved this aim.

Some participants shared with me that Dante had proved an invaluable companion to them over the course of a challenging academic year, which drives home one of reading’s greatest gifts. In the midst of life’s difficulties and history’s vicissitudes, the classics give us a reprieve, lifting us up into that contemplative space where we touch divinity for a moment. If this reading group was able to facilitate that experience for even just a few people, it was absolutely worth it.

Do you have a favorite moment from the reading group?

The most awesome part of discussing any text is when you collectively come to a flash of interpretive insight,

facilitating a contemplative moment. Two such moments stand out to me.

The first was when we realized why Dante keeps agonizing over Odysseus’s fate and ties his poem so closely to the *Aeneid*. It’s because he sees the *Commedia* as the imperial epic of a Christendom-to-come – playing, in a biblical key, the same tune Homer and Virgil strummed for their respective civilizations. We thus had to grapple with the fact that Dante’s baptism of antiquity is a political project, inseparable from his apocalyptic criticism of the Church’s temporal power and his utopian dream of a united Europe.

The second ‘a-ha’ moment was when we saw the inverse picture between God’s judgment and human knowledge that the autobiographies of the damned and the blessed paint, respectively. The damned know *why* they are being punished but cannot accept it; the blessed do *not* know why they were saved – that is the mystery of providence – but they freely accept it, “willing all as *He* wills.”





Jan 22 - Feb 19: Fundamental Questions Seminar on “How to Find Yourself on a Deserted Island: Ibn Tufayl’s Philosophical Tale,” with Daniel Wasserman-Soler (Lumen Christi Institute), Anne Henly (University of Chicago), and Dina Rehab (Seldon Institute).



Jan 9: Winter Student Social

WINTER QUARTER | Seminars, Forums, and Events



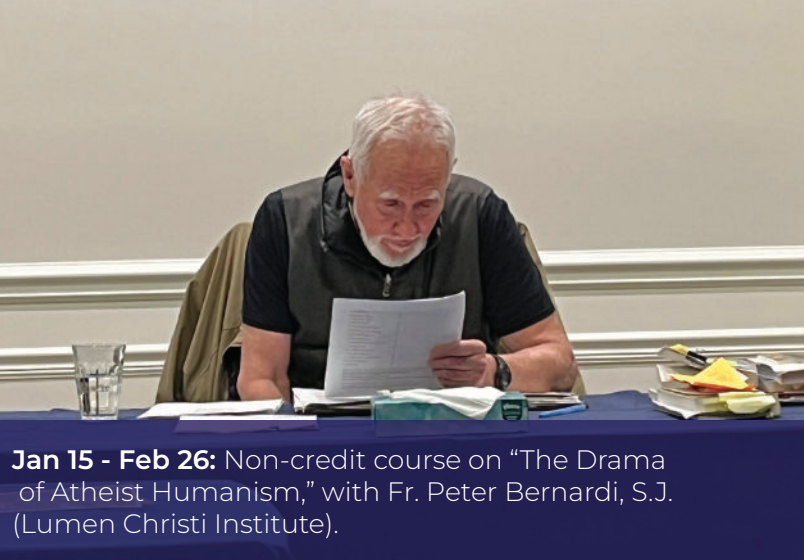
Feb 11: Magis Lecture on “Faith, Belief, and Knowledge,” with Fr. Adam Hincks, S. J. (University of Toronto)



Jan 30: Symposium on “The Human Person and Biotechnology: Artificial Intelligence and its Limitations,” with Stephen Meredith (University of Chicago), Jeffrey P. Bishop (Saint Louis University), and Matthew Elmore (Duke AI Health) (*and above*).



Apr 4: Faculty colloquium on “The Uses of Idolatry,” with William T. Cavanaugh (DePaul University).



Jan 15 - Feb 26: Non-credit course on “The Drama of Atheist Humanism,” with Fr. Peter Bernardi, S.J. (Lumen Christi Institute).



Emily Barnum, PhD candidate and leader of the Latin Vulgate reading group, with Aidan Stenson, UChicago alumnus and Jesuit brother



Jan 31: Master class on “Technology, Culture, and Virtue,” with Jeffrey P. Bishop (Saint Louis University)



Feb 27: Symposium on “Gender, the Body, and Holiness in the Middle Ages,” with Rachel Smith (Villanova University), Bernard McGinn (University of Chicago emeritus), Willemien Otten (University of Chicago), and Barbara Newman (Northwestern University).



INSIDE THE CLASSROOM *with Fr. Adam Hincks*

In the winter quarter, the Lumen Christi Institute was honored to welcome Rev. Dr. Adam Hincks, S.J., as scholar-in-residence. Fr. Hincks is a Jesuit priest from Canada, as well as an accomplished cosmologist. He is an assistant professor at the University of Toronto, with appointments in the Department of Astronomy and Astrophysics and at St. Michael's College, the latter of which is the home at the University of Toronto to many studies within the broad tradition of the Catholic Church, including programs in Christianity and Culture and in Medieval Studies, a Faculty of Theology, and the Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky Institute of Eastern Christian Studies, where the Institute's Senior Fellow Fr. Andrew Summerson is an assistant professor of Greek Patristics. The Sheptytsky Institute hosts one of the Institute's graduate summer seminars, which in the summer of 2025 will be on the work of Dionysius the Areopagite. Fr. Hincks is also an adjunct scholar at the Vatican Observatory.

During his residency at the University of Chicago, Fr. Hincks led a non-credit course titled "The Bible and the Big Bang" as well as a Magis Lecture exploring the connections between faith, belief, and knowledge.

"The Bible and the Big Bang" offered a rare intellectual space where cosmology met theology. Fr. Hincks began by exploring the foundations of physical cosmology — our scientific understanding of the universe's origins and structure — before turning to biblical texts like Genesis, Isaiah, and John. A key focus was the Hebrew word *bara'* (to create), used exclusively for divine acts in the Hebrew Bible: only God is said to create. All other forms of making or becoming are described differently by the biblical authors.

This important distinction underscores that the biblical concept of creation is theological, not scientific. It invites the question that Fr. Hincks posed to the students: what does it mean to "create"? How can we move between intellectual disciplines and understand what are, in fact, distinct concepts but whose differences can be muddled by our habit of using the same words to articulate them?

Rather than rush to reconcile science and faith, Fr. Hincks insisted on the importance of understanding each on its own terms first. Only then could students begin to see how biblical theology and the Big Bang theory might relate — not in contradiction, but as complements of one another. Discussions ranged from the physics of general relativity to the theological insight that creation is an ongoing covenantal act, culminating in a nuanced vision where the cosmos is not just matter and motion but also meaning and mystery. Throughout, Fr. Hincks stressed that the challenge to faith in God's creation and even His existence leveled by superficial readers of the insights of modern science falls flat. By weaving cosmology with scripture, Fr. Hincks invited students to explore a universe that is both intelligible and sacred.

What does it mean to create?
How can we move between
intellectual disciplines and
understand ... distinct concepts
[whose] differences can be muddled?

MEET OUR NEW POST DOCS:

Cass Sever and Eric DeVilliers



Cassandra Sever

Sever is a cultural sociologist and social theorist. In response to secular sociological research, Sever argues that human persons are meaning-centered beings. Drawing on Catholic philosophy and theology — especially Augustine and Charles Taylor — her work offers secular social science new ways of interpreting the crises of the self that face the contemporary world. In addition to serving as managing editor for the *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, she serves as a volunteer Great Books Tutor for the Catherine Project. She has received multiple recognitions as a teacher, both at Mount Holyoke College and in her previous career in the New York public schools. She will complete the PhD in May at the State University of New York, Albany.

Eric DeVilliers

DeVilliers is a Catholic theologian engaged in the comparative study of early Christianity and Islam. Working in Arabic, Coptic, Greek, Latin, and Turkish, DeVilliers draws on Christian patristic theology, classical Islamic theology, and medieval scholastic thought. His research demonstrates that the Qur'an accepts and reworks several Christian interpretive themes. DeVilliers is a Fulbright Scholar and has served as a member of the steering committee for the Study of Middle Eastern Christianity at the American Academy of Religion. He earned his PhD in 2024 from the University of Notre Dame, where he also received the theology department's Excellence in Teaching award.



Sever and DeVilliers begin their tenure with the Institute in the summer of 2025 as the first-ever Lumen Christi Institute Postdoctoral Fellows in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. They will spend two years with the Institute, dividing their time between research in their respective fields, participating in Institute programming, and engaging the academic community in Chicagoland.



THE BODY AND HOLINESS:

A Scholarly Look at Gender in Medieval Hagiography

How does the gendering of images in medieval hagiography render holy women vivid, compelling, and desirable? On February 27, five scholars set out to answer this question. Rachel Smith (Villanova University) opened the conversation with insights from her monograph *Excessive Saints: Gender,*

serves as an externalization of Lutgarde's holiness, that "the dramatization of the flesh seeks to capture the hiddenness of the heart." From here, it becomes the male hagiographer's role to chronicle the ecstasy of witnessing this transformation of Lutgarde's body and the holiness it presents, an ecstasy which the hagiographer "sees himself as otherwise unable to access." The mistake here, according to Smith, is one of literalization, where the lock of hair is deemed the sole mode of connection to God, ignoring the interplay between the inner and the outer of the person seen in the hair's return to normal.

Smith then turned to Christina the Astonishing. In Thomas' account, Christina died as a young woman, but when she approached the gates of heaven, she was given the option to return to her earthly life in order to do penance for the souls in Purgatory and to warn the living of the punishment that awaited them if they did not repent. Christina's story is macabre and often gruesome, describing her body losing all proportion, limbs extending and bending, "rolling into balls of wax." Her body goes through horrific tortures at the hands of the townspeople, despite her heavenly mandate to witness to them for their salvation. Based on this story, Smith commented on the dangers of using the body as an externalization of the holiness of the individual. Christina's body is misinterpreted, her form deemed a literalization of her soul, like Lutgarde's, but this time a demonic literalization. Smith concluded by saying that



Narrative, and Theological Invention in Thomas of Cantimpré's Mystical Hagiographies.

Smith first discussed Thomas' treatment of Lutgarde of Aywieres. One day, while in rapture, Lutgarde appeared to be drenched in blood. A priest, who was spying on Lutgarde, approached and cut her bloodied hair without her knowledge to keep as "evidence of her devotion." The lock, however, reverted to its normal, unbloodied state after Lutgarde came to her senses. Smith argued that this bloodied hair

“Thomas’s recognition of such difficulty is registered in his acknowledgment that the wondrous horror that is the force of the text’s believability is also the cause of its unbelievability.” The use of externalization opens the witness to a false literalization, resulting in even the holy being called demonic.

After Smith, three distinguished medieval scholars responded: Willemien Otten (University of Chicago), Barbara Newman (Northwestern University), and Bernard McGinn (University of Chicago, *emeritus*). Otten voiced a newfound concern, which she acknowledged called into question even a great deal of her own prior career: namely, the dangers of grouping women in a category simply because they are women. For Otten, we may lose the unique characteristics of each woman by viewing them as the same simply due to their sex and be unable to see them how they want to be seen.

Professor Newman explicated Thomas’ differing narrative perspectives on the lives of each of these women. In the case of Lutgarde, Thomas was likely one of her confessors and, as such, was privy to many of her most private moments, ensuring a high degree of reliability in his account. Christina’s vita,

on the other hand, was written using testimonies of the community years after her passing. Given Thomas’ outsider perspective, Newman pointed out how unlikely it was that Thomas would know about the intimate moments of Christina’s life. Because of Thomas’ lack of a source for these scenes, Newman calls into question their veracity.

Professor McGinn focused on how the historical context affected Thomas’ writing. McGinn observed

how, given the great deeds of the women Thomas writes about, their experiences are overshadowed by “wonder at the astounding miracles of God publicly shown in his chosen Saints.” McGinn contextualized this with the knowledge that, at the time, female saints were often described as excessive. The spread of these “visionary excessive female mystics” in the 13th century challenged traditional notions of women, and because of that, McGinn suggested the possibility that Thomas recognized these issues



but did not know how to reconcile them beyond his faith in the divine nature of these women’s stories.

This symposium was made possible by the co-sponsorship of the University of Chicago’s Divinity School, Medieval Studies Workshop, and Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality.



POLARIZATION, SOCIAL COHESION, AND THE ECONOMY: CELEBRATING 10 CONFERENCES ON ECONOMICS AND SOCIAL THOUGHT

On March 27, the Lumen Christi Institute hosted “Polarization, Social Cohesion, and the Economy,” its 10th Conference on Economics and Catholic Social Thought. This continues an initiative running since 2008 that interrogates economic thought and the contemporary market with the principles of Catholic teaching concerning justice on the human, political, and societal levels. Originally envisioned by Thomas Levergood, Cardinal Francis George, and Joseph Kaboski, for nearly two decades the project has carved out a distinctive space where economic inquiry meets moral and theological reflection. This year’s conference coincided with the fifth anniversary of *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis’s encyclical on fraternity and social friendship, which encouraged revisiting the document’s call for solidarity and reconciliation.

While polarization often feels like a uniquely American issue, this conference — organized with scholars from Germany — deliberated on the global nature of today’s social and economic divisions. In contrast to the parochialism that can dominate domestic discourse, speakers highlighted how

Fratelli Tutti provides a framework for healing fractured societies — emphasizing the importance of social cohesion, trust, and the common good. The conversations made clear that these are not merely moral imperatives but economic ones, essential for well-functioning markets and sustainable growth. It is the good not just of the actors’ souls but even the mechanical functioning of the society, to treat human beings as persons with dignity.

During the full-day conference, University of Chicago economist Luigi Zingales captured this intersection powerfully in his presentation on trust, corporate governance, and the need for values in business. The other mainstage discussions echoed this theme, where even traditionally market-oriented scholars advocated for deeper integration of higher values into corporate and economic life. The conference stood as a testament to the Institute’s ongoing mission: fostering a dialogue wherein the Church sets an example for how faith and reason, economics and ethics, can come together to chart a path toward a more just and unified global community.





WHAT *REALLY* HAPPENS WHEN ... YOU ATTEND THE HIGH SCHOOL NEWMAN FORUM?

What *really* happens when you baptize a baby? When you protest nonviolently? When you remember? On March 1, over 250 high school students from Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin gathered on the serene campus of the University of St. Mary of the Lake in Mundelein, IL, to explore these questions and more as part of the annual Winter Newman Forum Conference for high school students. Professors and graduate students from local universities gave short talks on a variety of topics, introducing students to new and challenging ideas from within the Catholic intellectual tradition on topics ranging from the image of God in gender to the science of gravity. A number of the presenters were PhD students who participate in LCI's graduate student formation programs, such as the summer seminars on the thought of St. Augustine and Catholic Social Teaching and master classes during the academic year.

In the morning, students chose from seven simultaneous sessions, with the opportunity to listen and ask questions at three different lectures in total. The hallways were bursting with energy — and bodies — as students debriefed what they just heard, exchanged notes with friends who chose a different session, and tried to snag a seat in their next preferred lecture before the room reached capacity.



The students had lunch in the university dining hall, mingling with friends and speakers. Students from public, private, and Catholic schools were all represented, as well as their homeschooling counterparts. A sizeable minority were alumni of the Newman Forum Summer Seminar and had come in part to reunite with friends. Many students were brand new to Lumen Christi and were excited — and maybe a bit overawed — by what they were hearing: their faith talked about in a way they had never heard before. The runaway favorite lecture examined miraculous sacred images, like paintings and statues that have been seen to weep or bleed. After lunch, students were able to meet with the speakers during “office hours,” strolling between the different tables where the scholars were seated and asking more questions. The students had so many questions that LCI staff had to cut them off at the end of the allotted time over the loudspeaker.

The day concluded with time before the Blessed Sacrament for the students to reflect on what they learned and encounter the Eucharistic Lord in silence. At the end, speakers and students alike reported that they were excited to come back next year.





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