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*In 2022, Fr Frank participated in a panel of CTC faculty for the annual Knox Lecture to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the College within the Melbourne College of Divinity. The topic of the session was “Fifty Years of Theological Education in Context: Then, Now, What Next?” Fr Frank’s reflection on the early years of the College follows.*



In 1968 I was in my second year of theological studies in Rome when I received a brief but life-determining letter from the Australian Provincial of the Salesians of Don Bosco at that time, Fr Terry Jennings. He informed me that the Salesians wished to be part of the process of establishing a post-Conciliar unified seminary, initiated by the then Archbishop Knox. All participants in the planned institution were asked to contribute a qualified person to the academic faculty. Our late-lamented Norman Ford was already actively on the scene, but Fr Jennings asked if I would be prepared to continue my studies after ordination, specializing in any area that interested me – except for Philosophy, which Norm already had covered.

At that time, I was following a subject on the Letter to the Romans, taught by the inspiring Jules Cambier, a gifted Belgian Salesian who was making a major contribution at the Leopoldville campus of the University of Louvain in the Belgian Congo. There was to be no more back to “Rupertswood” where I had laboured prior to going to Rome! I was destined for Biblical Studies. I eventually started teaching at CTC in the second semester of 1976, having defended my dissertation in the previous July, and immediately dispatched to the Salesian University in Rome for a year (1975–76).

In 1976 the CTC students were predominantly young men from Corpus Christi College and various religious, preparing to be ordained to the Catholic priesthood. But from the start the classes always included religious women and men, as well as interested lay people, especially teachers from the Catholic school system. Introduced to my first class by Fr Chris Hope, the Tasmanian who was teaching New Testament at that time, I delivered what I regarded as a first-rate introductory reflection on the Gospel of John. Early in the term (in those days) students “shopped around” for the first week or two, settling on the units of study they thought would be the most useful. At the end of my first two hours, one of the students asked me: “What is the pastoral usefulness of this unit?” Hopefully, that question has shaped all that I have taught and written in the ensuing fifty years.

For many years I was part of the “then” of CTC. Each year we taught the Gospel of that Lectionary Year – A (Matthew), B (Mark), or C (Luke) – and a general introduction to the Pauline Literature, covering some of the shorter letters in detail (especially 1 Thessalonians and Philippians). On alternate years we taught the Gospel of John and the Letter to the Romans, major theological building blocks of the Christian tradition. We taught each unit *twice a week*. We had two sessions for each unit and taught them in the day for seminarians and others who might be able to attend at that time, and then on two evenings.

We ran a three-term year, and each unit was squashed into a term of ten weeks. With three terms, we were able to teach “electives.” For example, I researched and taught units on Johannine Christology (including the Letters of John), the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke, the passion narratives, the resurrection narratives, and the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. Despite their “elective” nature, they were well attended. I recall that, as I closed the unit on the infancy narratives, I promised I would look at the historical issues underlying these different accounts, and their theological importance. The major lecture hall was packed – including the rectors and formation staff of our many associated institutes. Just what was this man teaching?

This scene changed as we adopted a two-semester year and as Roman authorities restructured the *Ratio Studiorum* (the program of studies) required for ordination to the priesthood. On the one hand, we had to cover all the material required by Roman authorities, and on the other, we had to do it in two semesters. This was the situation that led to the current curriculum, but the early years have left their mark: one of the Synoptics each year, depending on the Sunday Cycle of the Lectionary; a general unit on Paul; and the yearly alternation of the Letter to the Romans and the Gospel of John. The loss of the “electives” was necessary, but those units were exciting for all. Every one of those units that I taught across the 1980s has eventually become a major element in my own personal research and publication.

Looking back across the earliest period that has led to the current curriculum, there can be no denying the fact that CTC has had an abundance of post-Vatican II trained specialists who made a massive contribution to the theological education of several generations. I am amazed as I chat with people from those days, both lay and clerical, how well they recall what we shared, and how much it has impacted on their lives and ministry. One of the unplanned benefits of those years together has been the development of an *unprecedented awareness* of the mutuality and richness shared across the diversity of diocesan clergy, religious women and men, Catholic and non-Catholic lay people. One of the many high points in my memories of those years was teaching Paul’s Letter to the Romans to an enthusiastic and intelligent Lutheran pastor. I suspect that I learnt more than he did that semester.

I think that it can be justifiably claimed that those years founded a “teaching and research tradition” at CTC that is contemporary, critical, and loyal to the Catholic Church’s Magisterium. I have been unquestioningly supported by CTC and a queue of Masters from Austin Cooper to Kevin Lenehan across a lifetime of research and publication. We must also salute the skilful leadership of the library managers and their staff, Estelle Robinson, Kay Cole, Tony McCumstie, and Kerrie Burn. Four library managers in fifty years says something about their quality, as does the quality of the research produced by the students and staff of CTC over those fifty years.

Some students and alumni would have liked us to be more radical, more politically oriented, more a part of a challenged Australian society and culture. Maybe we had too many answers and not enough questions. On the other hand, some had problems with any critical innovation. I recall a period across several years when I was regularly questioned by students who cited *Dei Verbum* to me (or rather “at me”) as I insisted that the four Evangelists be allowed their own “voice” in the way they shaped traditions.

They would solemnly cite from *Dei Verbum* 19: “These four Gospels, whose historicity [Holy Mother Church] unhesitatingly affirms, faithfully hand on what Jesus, the Son of God, while he lived among men and women, really did and taught for their eternal salvation, until the day when he was taken up (see Acts 1:1–2).” To which I could only ask them to continue to read in *Dei Verbum* 19: “After the ascension of the Lord, the apostles handed on to their hearers what he had said and done, but with that fuller understanding which they, instructed by the glorious

events of Christ and enlightened by the Spirit of truth, now enjoyed. ... The sacred authors ... selected certain of the many elements that had been handed on ... they synthesized or explained with an eye to the situation of the churches. They retained the preaching style, but always in such a fashion that they have told us the authentic truth about Jesus.” Vatican II, they had to learn, insisted that the Gospels were narratives, inspired literary creations that communicated authentic and salvific truths about Jesus. They are theology, not history books.

I look back upon the serious, creative, and critically loyal Catholic contribution of CTC to theological education with pride. Those years that we can now call the *then* have been maintained and substantially improved in the *now* of CTC as its leadership, staff, and students have responded to both internal and external challenges. I have been fortunate to belong to both eras. The communication of the Catholic faith tradition has never been easy. Paul articulated the challenge as early as 52 CE: “For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Cor 1:22–23). Or, as Luke has Paul proclaim in his trial before the governor Felix at Caesarea: “It is about the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today” (Acts 24:21). Christian theological education will always bring its challenges.

What next? Allow me to close with the experience of several CTC so-called “experts” at the Plenary Council of the Church in Australia. Never called upon, all of us were in an underground classroom, where we followed the proceedings via video. A ray of hope emerged as the Council drew to closure. We were asked to write a summary statement that might serve as a word from the Plenary to Australian society at large. A small subcommittee was formed to write this document, and the whole team of “experts” discussed and edited it further. Strangely, it was never used. It is much better than the issued final statement.

The future of CTC is ours to shape. We might listen to the non-published summary of the outstanding initiative of the Plenary Council of the Australian Catholic Church and take it on as an agenda for what lies ahead.

We believe that the Catholic community at its best has enhanced life in Australia through its witness to gospel values, which inspire its care for the sick and marginalised, its commitment to education, and its advocacy for social justice, especially in the context of the current needs of refugees and asylum-seekers. We commit ourselves to seek and serve the human flourishing of all Australians.

It closes with this hope, surely essential to the future agenda of CTC:

*The Plenary Council, as followers of Jesus Christ, recognises the generational, cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity of contemporary Australia and desires that the Catholic community participate constructively with all traditions of faith and all worldviews that open our minds to spiritual and religious values, and with all people of goodwill who contribute to the common good of all Australians.*