INTEGRITAS
Wyoming Catholic College
Issue 3.2

Inaugural Address

by Dr. Glenn C. Arbery, President

Nine years ago this fall, when the first classes began at Wyoming Catholic College, the long educational tradition of the Church, grounded in fidelity to the Magisterium, established itself for the first time in this state synonymous with the rugged West—not Dodge City or Tombstone, but the West of the mountain men, those early trappers and explorers, and later the West of the Oregon Trail, Independence Rock, the Sweetwater River, and South Pass. A few miles from Lander rise the Wind River Mountains, whose name draws almost archetypally upon the ancient elements of air, water, and earth; every summer, those mountains see lightning fall, and fire, the fourth element, exerts its own destructive majesty.

When I go out the doors of Holy Rosary and look across to those mountains, I remember the lines from Rainer Maria Rilke's *First Duino Elegy*: "Beauty is just the beginning of terror we are only just able to bear,/and why we adore it so is that it serenely disdains to destroy us." From the beginning of the college our students have begun their education by going up into the Winds or the Tetons, immersing themselves in beauty and difficulty and holy community among landscapes long iconic in the American imagination. They have come down from the mountains in order to ascend in comprehension through the Great Books of the Western tradition and to rise in spirit through the sacraments of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. They are formed by Wyoming and by this College, which more and more deeply seeks to realize both universality and the spirit of place.

Let us take a moment, then, to praise our founders, whose original vision and work helped bring this unique college from idea into act: Bishop David Ricken, Fr. Robert Cook (now Fr. Simeon), and Dr. Robert Carlson, author of the Philosophical Vision Statement at the center of our mission—all of them now engaged elsewhere, in other important work, as is Dr. Kevin Roberts, my distinguished predecessor. Their gift cannot and should not be

repaid, as if it were a mere debt, but rather accepted with gratitude, amplified by our own gifts, and passed on to others, like the faith that began with a few unlikely disciples so long ago.

As we enter our tenth year as a college, we find ourselves in a peculiar and distressing moment of our national history—peculiar because the nature of human beings, not to say natural law itself, has now been indicted as limiting and prejudicial; peculiar because sexual desire, provided that it has no bearing on natural reproduction, is considered the ground of identity and protected with the whole force of the law, whereas desire to obey the will of God is considered arbitrary and coercive. The very government whose original principles enshrined religious liberty as inviolable increasingly threatens its exercise.

Our moment is distressing for these same reasons, but also because the usual redress and corrective for bad policies, our choices as voters, seem less like an opportunity for change than a divine rebuke for having lost our way as a people. No longer can we assume a common understanding, biblically informed and rooted in natural virtue. Radically different assumptions about the nature of reality divide us, I would argue, more than at any time in our previous history. Our politics have become vulgar and cynical; the laws have lost their grounding in divine authority, and the idealism of the young in many universities goes toward the loud suppression of common sense, much less of higher inquiry.

INTEGRITAS
Wyoming Catholic College

Editor-in-Chief:
Dr. Glenn Arbery
Executive Editor:
Jon Tonkowich
Art/Circulation:
Joseph Susanka

That is why, precisely in this situation, our college needs most of all to provide solid hope for the restoration of Christian culture and the renewal of the Church, ends difficult to achieve but possible. For hope to be effective, it needs to be informed by courage, and courage in turn requires hope to sustain it. As Josef Pieper puts it in his book *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, "Without this hope, fortitude is impossible." Ultimately, of course, our hope does not depend upon politics, but upon God. As Pieper goes on to say, "What matters is not the ease or the difficulty, but the 'truth of things.' What matters is the reality of eternal life. And the 'rectitude' of hope lies in the fact that it corresponds to this reality."

In 1404, a professor in Padua named Pier Paulo Vergerio composed a treatise on education for the son of his city's ruler. "We call those studies liberal," he wrote, "which are worthy of a free man; those studies by which we attain and practice virtue and wisdom; that education that calls forth, trains, and develops those highest gifts of body and of mind which ennoble men, and which are rightly judged to rank next in dignity to virtue only." We could put this sentence in our catalog without changing a word. Nothing in Vergerio's description needs to be altered because of our progress in technology and the sciences. In fact, the education in liberal studies is more important now than ever, because it needs to address and combat the debilitating effects of perpetual distraction. In "Burnt Norton," T.S. Eliot describes modern passengers on a subway: "the strained time-ridden faces/Distracted from distraction by distraction/Filled with fancies and empty of meaning." They distract themselves from meaninglessness through constant activity, a situation typical of the modern world and diagnosed by Josef Pieper as acedia.

This sense of meaningless is by no means a modern phenomenon. The first verses of Ecclesiastes articulate it: "Vanity of vanities. All is vanity./What does a man gain by all the toil/at which he toils under the sun?" Achilles in the *Iliad*, insulted by Agamemnon and having withdrawn from the fighting at Troy, realizes that the pursuit of honor, which has governed all his purposes, is far from what he thought. "Fate is the same for the man who holds back, the same if he fights hard," he says. "We are all held in a single honor, the brave with the weakling./A man dies still if he has done nothing, as if he had done much." The fact of death itself, in other words, cancels all achievement. Why pursue any goal if the fate of all men is death?

Shakespeare analyzes a similar state of soul in his most famous character. After his father's death and his mother's hasty remarriage, Hamlet describes this dead zone of spirit in his first soliloquy: "How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable/Seem to me all the uses of this world." He can find nothing that gives him direction or meaning; his situation is so dire he complains that the Almighty has "fixd/His canon 'gainst self-slaughter." What afflicted Hamlet now seems to afflict the culture as a whole, as Eliot saw. A century ago, even before Eliot, W.B. Yeats saw in his poem "The Second Coming" that something of cosmic importance would have to change because of modern man's endemic acedia: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity."

Obviously, we want the *best* to be full of passionate intensity, as they have been at the highest moments of human history, but they cannot simply be told to be so. They need to *find* conviction, purpose, and meaning; they need hope that the greatest exercise of the mind and heart is worthwhile. The former president of the University of Dallas, Donald Cowan, a physicist, used to say that God does not want our lies. We need to approach the truth with confidence, wherever we find it, in the spirit of Fr. Robert Spitzer, who begins a recent book on contemporary physics by writing that he will be exploring "the strongest rational foundation for faith that has come to light in human history."

As Catholic believers, we are not afraid of the truth, only of the premature closure of the inquiry by dogmatic materialism or what Robert George calls modern neo-Gnosticism. In a remarkable passage in his book *The Virtues*, the theologian Romano Guardini writes that "[T]he courage that accepts life and meets it bravely in each instance implies a conviction that within us there is something that cannot be destroyed." This courage comes from an experience that might sound at first disconcerting: "If *in a favorable hour* I penetrate quietly and recollectedly into the inmost depths of my being, ever more deeply until I, as it were, reach the interior boundary of nothingness—there I find God's power which maintains me in existence."

What does he mean by this "interior boundary of nothingness"? It sounds like the edge of an abyss, a precipice where the path suddenly drops away, where self ends and one's very existence appears against non-being, nothingness, meaninglessness. But for Guardini, this interior boundary is where he most encounters God. I'm reminded of a story I heard when I went to Skellig Michael off the western coast of Ireland some years ago. I overheard a guide saying that the monks sometimes went down from their beehive huts and across the middle of the island, "Christ's saddle," as it was called, to the higher peak where a small platform of rock projected out above the Atlantic Ocean hundreds of feet below. There they stood and prayed. This was for them an outer image of the interior boundary that Guardini means.

As Gerard Manley Hopkins writes, "O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall/Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap/May who ne'er hung there." But precisely there, in a favorable hour, says Guardini, one finds God's power. "This preserving power is indestructible," Guardini writes, "even though I pass through danger and through death. The reason for all present-day talk of anxiety and dissolution and nothingness … is

that the consciousness of interior support, at the edge of nothingness, is no longer alive in men." He means God's goodness, which he calls "an abyss of kindness."

Restoring this consciousness should be the true work of a Catholic college—not to indoctrinate students, but truly to convince them that the truth can be known, that truth is not ugly and undermining. They can put their confidence in the hand of God in the depths. What is true does not destroy the moral life, foster cynicism, and humiliate hope. Far otherwise, the hallmark of truth is its beauty, which radiates goodness. Beauty, for its part, does not tempt and mislead. And the good, rightly seen and understood, is not whatever I decide for myself, not merely what is useful, nor what someone with greater power imposes upon me, but an inner gravity of conviction and moral beauty. This is what Wyoming Catholic College teaches and what the Philosophical Vision Statement calls the "perennial philosophy," which informs all the tracks in the curriculum, each in its own way: God and not nothingness, hope and not acedia.

WCC FAQ

What is the value of a general degree?

Before you are a carpenter, a doctor, or a teacher, you are a human being, and a degree in the liberal arts serves to educate your human powers, the powers of analysis, communication, critical thinking, problem solving, and creativity. These powers need rigorous and systematic formation. Job training is essential, of course, but don't put the cart before the horse.

The curriculum at Wyoming Catholic College teaches through experience of the wilderness; through grammar, logic, and rhetoric; through poetry, history, and the Platonic dialogues; through careful examination of the Scriptures and the theological questions that have arisen throughout the history of the church, especially as they are addressed by St. Thomas Aquinas; through the perennial philosophy of Aristotle, through science, visual art, and music. Our students speak Latin and memorize poems. The essential creative tension in the curriculum as a whole stems from the ancient quarrel of poetry and philosophy, which was reiterated and taken up in a new key in the quarrel between Christian humanism and scholasticism in the Renaissance. Our founding brought together strains and emphases of this old and fertile quarrel by drawing upon the Integrated Humanities Program at the University of Kansas, whose principles were most famously articulated by Dr. John Senior, and the practice of Thomas Aquinas College, centering on Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas.

Last week in a conversation with a retired priest in Sheridan, I discovered that these two major influences on our founding had a kind of pre-existence in Wyoming. Fr. Carl Beavers mentioned that his first assignment as a priest in 1968 was at the Newman Center of the University of Wyoming in Laramie, where he worked with Fr. Charles Taylor, a native of Kemmerer. In 1961, Fr. Taylor had started a yearly program called the Newman School of Catholic Thought, which offered a week of intensive study in Dogma, Sacred Scriptures, History, Literature, Philosophy, and Liturgy, with classes of fifty minutes, morning and evening prayers, public recitation of the Rosary, daily Mass and a homily by one of the priestly faculty.

In the very first of these, a recent Catholic convert, a parishioner named John Senior, taught literature, which he continued to do throughout the 1960s; 1964 marked the first appearance at the Newman School of Dr. Ronald McArthur, who taught philosophy in the program every summer for the next five years. In 1970, Dr. Senior left to help start the Integrated Humanities Program at the University of Kansas, and in the same year, Dr. McArthur was named the first president of Thomas Aquinas College. According to Fr. Beavers, Dr. McArthur tried to attract his friend Dr. Senior to TAC, but Dr. Senior's own vision took him in a different direction.

The creative tension that has always informed Wyoming Catholic began in this state even before the founding of the programs that would later most influence it. Here the visions of these men are brought back together. I was interested to learn that Fr. Taylor, who started the Newman School of Catholic Thought, served as pastor in this very church from 1982 to 1986. The Newman School later reemerged as the Wyoming School of Catholic Thought, whose yearly meetings on Casper Mountain in the 1990s and early 2000s led directly to the founding of this College. These intimations of providence move me deeply. They bring conviction of our purpose and our providential call in this diocese, in this state, in this time.

Since the founding years of the college, others of us have also brought to Wyoming Catholic College the wisdom of Donald and Louise Cowan, who designed the curricula at the University of Dallas and Thomas More College of Liberal Arts. All these brilliant founders were moved by the same impulse to revive Catholic culture. Here at Wyoming Catholic College we uniquely combine their insights with the outdoor program, whose purpose is to shape the imagination through experience, to form virtue through the practice of leadership, to ground students in the reality of nature and open them

to wonder. As Hopkins wrote, "The world is charged with the grandeur of God," and one of our seniors said the other day that those lines are simply true when you are canoeing on the Green River in Utah at sunrise in Flaming Gorge. Our students have the opportunity to experience God's grandeur in the outdoors, in the sublimity of the Great Books, and in the depths of the liturgy.

Our calling, our charge as a college, is to ennoble our students, to prepare them for the heroism and humility they will need in order to bear witness to the truth. Our task is to make the essential freshness of the tradition appear. Those in the culture who now drift into excesses and errors because of prevailing opinion need to be able to see the greatness of the alternative embodied in this education.

No happiness can come from the loss of the good of the intellect, from constant distraction, from the pursuit of self-gratification, but happiness can and does come from a life directed toward God and informed by the great tradition of human thought. The world needs young people who are firm in moral conviction, deeply sane, imaginative, articulate, compassionate, and touched by divine fire. Students, those of you returning and those joining us for the first time, we pray that your example to the world will continue to "flame out, like shining from shook foil." Each of us knows his weakness, but at the edge of our nothingness is the abyss of God's kindness, that terrible beauty which sustains us.

May it sustain us now and fill us with hope in this moment, this favorable hour on the Feast of St. Augustine, this new beginning.

Dr. Glenn Arbery came to Wyoming Catholic College in 2013 primarily to teach in the Humanities track, but he was drawn to the whole curriculum, the excellent faculty, and the strong Catholic character of the College, all of which he hopes to further in his tenure as President. Born in South Carolina, Dr. Arbery grew up as a Protestant in Middle Georgia. His reading of Flannery O'Connor as a freshman at the University of Georgia began his journey toward the Roman Catholic Church. A convert at 25, he entered the Church at the University of Dallas, where he later took his Ph.D. He has taught literature at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Thomas More College of Liberal Arts in Merrimack, New Hampshire, the University of Dallas, and Assumption College in Worcester, Massachusetts, where he held the d'Alzon Chair of Liberal Education. He also served as Director of the Teachers Academy at the Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture and as an editor at People Newspapers in Dallas, where he won a number of regional and national awards for his writing. He has published two volumes with ISI Books, *Why Literature Matters* (2001) and *The Southern Critics* (2010), editor. He is also the editor of *The Tragic Abyss* (2003) for the Dallas Institute Press and *Augustine's Confessions and Its Influence*, which will appear from St. Augustine Press in 2016. Dr. Arbery and his wife Virginia, who teaches Humanities, Trivium, and Philosophy at Wyoming Catholic, have eight children and fourteen grandchildren, all of whom love to visit Wyoming at every opportunity.