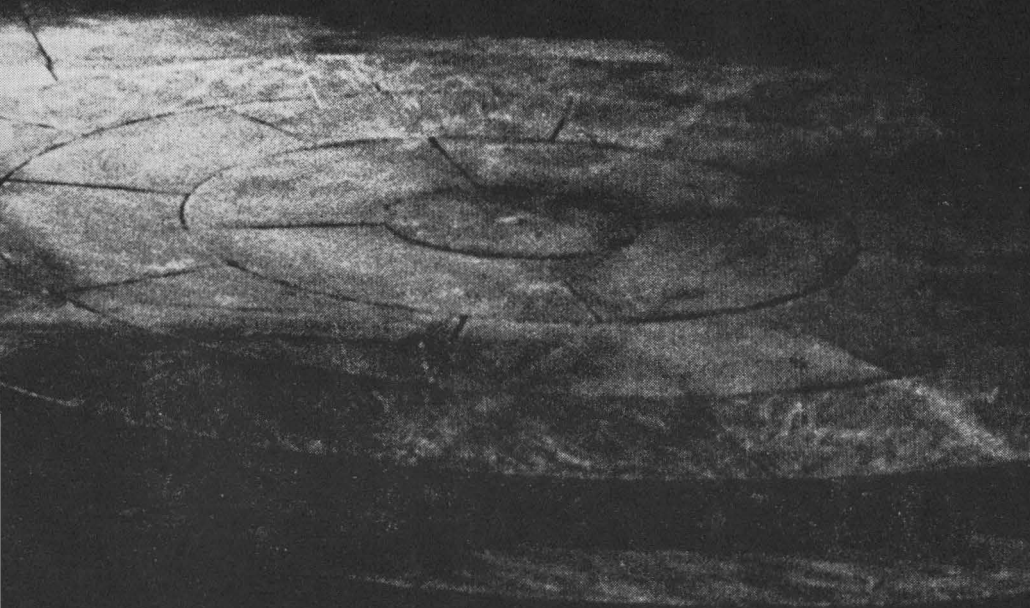


**Unity Through Ecstasy:  
A Tribute to  
John Courtney Murray**

*by Walter J. Burghardt, S.J.*



Through almost three decades I have been haunted by two short sentences that lay at the heart of John Courtney Murray's theology and life. I first heard them in class, when he was schematizing his vision of theology. He took the sentences from St. Thomas, who had borrowed them from Pseudo Dionysius. The first sentence: "Amor est vis unitiva et concretiva" (*Sum. theol.* 1, q. 20, a. 1; cf. Ps. Dion., *De div. nom.* 4, 12). Love makes for oneness; the lover produces another self. In Father Murray's striking translation, "Love is a centripetal force." The correlative sentence: "Amor facit extasim" (*Sum. theol.* 1/2, q. 28, a. 3; cf. Ps. Dion., *De div. nom.* 4, 13). Love carries the lover outside himself; the lover becomes self-less. In the Murray version, "Love is a centrifugal force."

The pertinence of these two sentences for a systematic theology built, as Father Murray's was, on Thomistic lines is clear enough. They sum up the heady synthesis of his beloved Aquinas: (1) God in His secret life, (2) man as he comes forth from God, and (3) man as he returns to God through Christ.

What is perhaps less obvious is that the same twin insight—love as a force paradoxically "ec-static" and unifying—formed the core and motif of John Murray's relationship with God and his activity for man. His relationship with God was too personal to permit even a friend much more than reverent conjecture. Like the man himself, it was serene yet warm, confident but unpresuming, at once profound and simple. His was a muted *extasis* summed up in an early affirmation: the Christian comes to Mass not to get satisfaction but to give satisfaction. To give. . . .

Father Murray's activity for man is better documented. It lay in the area of research and rational discourse directed at two imperatives of the human condition: truth and freedom. In each his nuanced approach, which helped mightily to change the climate of contemporary Catholicism, reflected his concern for love, because his approach consistently highlighted the centrality of the human person.

Passionately in love with truth, John Murray was even more enchanted by man's understanding of truth. He never claimed that man could change the truth; he did claim that man's grasp on truth changes. He held stoutly to objective truth, but he saw no substance in disembodied propositions, in truth "somewhere out there," independent of a mind, isolated from history, lifeless syllables not incarnate in a person. He was among those Vatican *periti* primarily responsible

for the shift in Catholicism from the so-called classical mentality, where truth floats serenely in space, unaffected by men and events, to historical consciousness, where truth is ever writhing in the anguished, quicksilver grasp of a living person.

Two by-products of Murray's historical consciousness merit mention here, because they suggest his constant concern for the person, for the other. There was, first, his insistence that the search for certainty is less significant than the quest for intelligibility. He was persuaded that an all but compulsive concentration on certitude had too long afflicted the Catholic conscience and straightened the Catholic intelligence. The experience of the postconciliar Church, he predicted, would parallel the experience of the bishops in council: we will begin with a good deal of uncertainty and confusion, must therefore pass through a period of crisis and tension, but can expect to end with a certain measure of light and of joy.

A second by-product of Murray's historical consciousness was his ability to avoid what he called "the intellectual and moral vice that is known as the selective perception of reality." He had an uncommon genius for perceiving the several facets of any problem, for putting the partial visions and their advocates into fruitful confrontation: the prophet and the politician on selective conscientious objection, the theologian and the historian on the issue of state religion. Explicit in his approach was Clement of Alexandria's insight: "There is only one river of truth, but many streams fall into it on this side and on that."

Correlative with his nuanced approach to truth was Father Murray's profound affirmation of freedom. He had a prophetic conviction, rare among Catholics of his generation, that the essential definition of man as "rational animal" is not enough to define him existentially in our time. In this new era, he insisted, at this point in the evolution of man and society, you cannot define a human being adequately unless you bring in the dimension of freedom. And so he fought, with ultimate success, to have the Church declare unequivocally that religious freedom is a human right, that this right has its foundation not in state or religion or even in objective truth, but in the very dignity of the human person. And so he sought, without success, to have the Congress acknowledge the right of discretionary armed service, recognize the legitimacy of selective conscientious objection. His was an unusual understanding of freedom, for his was an unusual understanding of man.

John Murray's approach to truth and freedom made for suspicion, misunderstanding, condemnation. These never sat lightly on his shoulders. Not simply because he was so wonderfully human and sensitive; more importantly because he was so agonizingly aware how much the Church and humanity had suffered from an overemphasis on "truth out there" and its imperious claims on the free person.

Have I gotten away from the love, centripetal and centrifugal, with which I began? I do not think so. The scholarship of John Courtney Murray was never an abstract, sterile thing. It consistently enfolded the intuition of Aquinas: the profoundly Christian way of desiring knowledge is to desire it not as a personal perfection," but because through this knowledge the one we love becomes present to us." Unity through ecstasy. It really was, and it eternally is, a life of love.

*Walter J. Burghardt, S.J., is currently editor-in-chief of Theological Studies; he is the successor to his long time friend the late Fr. John Courtney Murray. Fr. Burghardt is professor of Patrology and Patristic Theology at Woodstock College. He is president of the Catholic Theological Society of America and was the recipient of the 1962 Cardinal Spellman Award for outstanding achievements in theological scholarship. DOMINICANA gratefully acknowledges his contribution on the late Fr. Murray.*