I am grateful for this opportunity to share with you some reflections on Catholic Theological Union and how it is called to fulfill its mission of preparing men and women for service to the Church and to the world. To consider the present and the future of this mission, though, it is important to review a bit of CTU’s history.

It could be said that Catholic Theological Union came into being because of a speech. Almost fifty years ago, in May of 1964, during the heady days of the Second Vatican Council, Jerald Brauer, Dean of the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, invited the Archbishop of Brussels Belgium, Cardinal Leon Suenens who was one of the most influential figures at the Council, to deliver a series of conferences at the University. In these talks the Cardinal presented the vision of the Church that was being developed by Vatican II. This vision emphasized the need for collaboration among the Christian churches and an engagement with the world that was described by the Council as “reading the signs of the times.”

One of the Cardinal Suenen’s talks in particular set in motion the chain of events that has brought us all here this afternoon: it was entitled “The Future of Seminary Education in the Post-Conciliar Era.” In this talk he called for a reappraisal of Catholic Seminary education. Since the establishment of seminaries by mandate of the Council of Trent in the 16th century, Catholic theological education for ministry tended to be located in the country, far away from what was regarded as the temptation of the city. It was thought appropriate and desirable that seminarians—both religious and diocesan—live a disciplined and contained life of study, work, and prayer in order to be prepared for the priesthood, separated from the distractions of the secular world. This separation from the world mirrored the Church’s stance toward the surrounding secular culture. In Europe, especially since the French Revolution, the Church developed a kind of siege mentality since it often felt threatened by those who sought to limit its role in the public square.

As we know, Vatican II called upon the Catholic Church to re-engage with human societies after centuries of isolation from and suspicion of the world. The wonderful first lines of the last
of the Council’s documents, *Gaudium et Spes*, or the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World, ring out as a call for this re-engagement when it proclaims that, “The joy and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well.” Quite simply the Council re-situated the Church’s relationship with the world. By acknowledging that the Church’s place is in the world, not above it, or below it, Vatican II encouraged Catholics to dialogue with human society and culture in a meaningful way—a dialogue that the Church had not had for centuries. The Council promoted this engagement with the world in order for Christians to assume their share of responsibility for its well-being of the world, not simply denounce what they find wrong.¹

In light of this call for re-engagement, Cardinal Suenens challenged the Church to rethink theological and ministerial education by emphasizing three characteristics which were to enable future priests to take more seriously their responsibility for the well being of humanity: the seminary should be located in a city, it should be ecumenical in spirit, and it should be situated near a great university.

This talk inspired Dean Brauer and several Catholic seminary faculty members from religious orders to hold conversations about the possibility of setting up a seminary in Hyde Park near the University of Chicago and the several Protestant Seminaries that had already located in this neighborhood: McCormick Presbyterian Seminary, the Lutheran School of Theology, Chicago Theological Seminary, and Meadville Lombard Unitarian Seminary. This new seminary would be a Catholic voice in this ecumenical mix that would reflect the renewed vision of theological and ministerial formation outlined by the Cardinal. The result of these conversations was the development of a new model for the preparation of religious order candidates for the priesthood: a union of three separate seminaries: those of the Passionists, the Servites, and the Franciscans. This combined seminary opened its doors in the Fall of 1968. While retaining their distinctive traditions—their charisms—these religious communities came together to share

resources and faculty in an urban and ecumenical setting in order to prepare candidates for a priesthood that would engage the modern world more effectively.

It could be rightly said, then, that CTU has Vatican II in its very DNA. The vision of church and its relationship with the world proclaimed by the Second Vatican Council inspired its founding and continues to inspire its mission. The identity that flows from this vision, though, has never been static. It is inherently dynamic. As CTU has grown, so has the scope and direction of its mission. To the initial blend of charisms of the Passionists, Servites, and Franciscans each subsequent religious community that has joined the union, now numbering twenty-four religious communities, has enlivened the mission of the school in significant ways. With the coming of missionary sending societies such as the Society of the Divine Word, the Spiritans, and Maryknoll, CTU was greatly enriched with a new sensitivity to the needs of the world outside of the United States. The international dimension of theological education, with attention to intercultural dialogue, and the inculturation of the message of the Gospel in diverse settings entered into the heart of CTU’s approach to ministry. Because each religious community is encouraged to deepen and share its particular charism with the other members of the Union, a valuable exchange of perspectives inspired by these various charisms has long been a hallmark of the experience of theological education at CTU.

But the dynamism of CTU didn’t stop with the addition of new men’s communities to the Union. Again, inspired by the Council’s declaration about the laity’s important role in the Church, as early as 1969—a year after CTU opened—the faculty expressed a hope “that CTU will soon actively recruit both lay and religious members who are not candidates for priesthood.”² And so it came to be that within six years of its founding CTU began to actively recruit women religious and laypersons for degree programs designed to prepare them for service in the church. In a real sense, the CTU classroom became and continues to be a kind of microcosm of those who minister in the larger church—with religious seminarians, women religious and laymen and women studying together—and learning from each other. Today more than half of CTU’s students are women religious or laymen and women. This vision articulated

early in the school’s life of providing a place of serious preparation for what we call today “lay ecclesial ministry” has borne much fruit at CTU.

As the years have gone by, CTU has expanded its mission because it has continued to read the signs of the times in order to engage the world. Since CTU’s founding in 1968 the world and specifically the United States have undergone important changes. It is no longer possible, as it was years ago, to prepare for lay or ordained ministry without knowledge of the broader religious landscape in which we live and move. CTU’s original connection with the Divinity School of the University of Chicago and its continuing close relationship with the Association of Chicago Theological Schools forms its identity as a Catholic school committed to ecumenical dialogue. An important part of this identity was also shaped by CTU’s early commitment to interreligious dialogue, especially with Judaism. Our presence here today in this magnificent house of worship attests to CTU’s warm friendship with the Jewish community and K.A.M. Isaiah Israel Congregation in particular. The fact that there has been a rabbi on the CTU faculty since its first year of existence witnesses to the seriousness with which we hold our conviction that, as Christians, we cannot adequately know our own faith without a knowledge of and profound respect for Judaism.

Since 1968, however, the demographics of our city and country have changed. Immigration continues to shape our national and religious identity as it has throughout US history. Today the Catholic Church in this country cannot be adequately understood without a familiarity with the culture and faith traditions of our sisters and brothers from Latin America. More than 40% of Catholics in the Archdiocese of Chicago are Latino. Any adequate preparation for ministry here or in the majority of other US dioceses must take their presence and culture into account. Our partnership with the Archdiocese of Chicago with the Oscar Romero Scholarship Program that provides scholarships to Hispanic lay ecclesial ministers has enabled CTU to contribute to this crucial ministry within the Archdiocese. The presence of these scholars, already with practical experience of working in the community, has also enriched our student body. The same must also be said for the Augustus Tolton Scholarship Program for our African-American scholars.
Both of these programs add voices that have to be heard in any school that would adequately prepare its graduates for ministry in the U.S. or abroad.

But another change in the traditional US religious landscape has also influenced theological and ministerial education today. The growing number of our Muslim sisters and brothers in this city and across the nation has invited us to take another look at how we prepare our students for ministry. Unlike years ago when priests would be trained to return to homogenous and largely self-contained parishes, most of us today live and work in settings that are multicultural and multi-religious. To use a descriptive image drawn from a city map, we no longer educate ministers to return to cul-de-sacs—closed ethnic enclaves where everyone is largely the same. Instead of cul-de-sacs we are challenged to prepare ministers to engage at the crossroads of our cities and our world; to go forth from CTU able to minister in our modern society where they will come into contact with many religions and cultures. The courses and activities of CTU’s Bernardin Center supporting Jewish-Catholic and Muslim-Catholic dialogue and understanding are crucial for preparing our graduates to deal with the reality that awaits them once they leave CTU. They also set in place a base for future constructive and peaceful collaboration in building a society of mutual understanding and respect. In addition to interreligious dialogue CTU is also the home of one of the great projects of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin. His Common Ground Initiative regularly brings together Catholics of different viewpoints in order to dialogue together and discover that what divides us can be overcome by what unites us.

Preparing ministers for crossroads rather than cul-de-sacs has also motivated CTU’s outreach to other centers of learning and ministry that share our ideals of inclusivity and dialogue inspired by the Second Vatican Council. Our educational alliance with DePaul University of Chicago is a mutually beneficial relationship, strengthening our common commitment to Catholic witness and ministry and enhancing CTU’s ability to offer both technical services and programs that offer innovative approaches to theological and ministerial training, beginning on the undergraduate level. Our recent alliance with the Lay Centre in Rome—a place where a rich mix of students who are international, ecumenical and interreligious live together in community while attending the Pontifical Universities—is providing us with exciting new opportunities for
our students to enter into real international ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. Finally, our
new relationship with All Hallows College in Dublin Ireland, including access to online
courses, library collaboration and opportunities for study programs in Ireland helps to round out
a panorama of new possibilities for both our students and faculty to gain a greater perspective
on ministry as it practiced in other parts of the world.

Much more could be said about the many ways that Catholic Theological Union is continuing to
respond to contemporary needs in training ordained and lay people for ministry in today’s
church. If I were asked, though, to sum up CTU’s approach to its mission of theological
education, I would have to say that it is based on a collective “contemplative engagement” with
our world.

What do I mean by contemplative engagement? We have already spoken of the way that CTU is
engaged with the world, inspired by the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, in sharing the
charisms of its 24 men’s religious communities, in opening its doors to religious women and
laymen and women, in cultivating a sensitivity to the richness of human cultures in proclaiming
the Gospel, in persevering on the path of unity with Christians of other churches, and by
insisting on humble and respectful dialogue and friendship with our Jewish and Muslim sisters
and brothers.

But this engagement has not been helter-skelter, in simple reaction to changed circumstances.
Instead, throughout its history, CTU has sought to provide a place where this engagement
would result from what could be termed “contemplation.” The word contemplation may bring
to mind solitary hermits in prayer, but I prefer the deceptively simple definition of
contemplation suggested by Fr. Walter Burkhardt, SJ. He defined contemplation as “a long
loving look at the real.” He understood contemplation as a deep reflection on “what is out there”
in order to better respond to God’s grace that is also “in the world.” In its courses and programs,
CTU has sought to create a place where our faculty and students could take a long loving look
at this world that God has given us and decide how best to engage with others in light of our
profound conviction that Jesus Christ is capable of making a difference in us and in our world.
That the way we live, and move and have our being is shaped and formed by Christ’s suffering, death and resurrection.

While the intellectual content of our faith is vitally important, and plumbing the profound richness of our Catholic scholarly and mystical tradition is essential, the faith we are called to share with others begins not as a set of propositions or ideas, but as a relationship, an experience of the Word of God, Jesus Christ, who reveals his life-giving presence through the people and events of our lives. Joined to this faith, contemplation ultimately results in witness and service. As our reading today from the first letter of John attests, the Word of life was made visible in Jesus Christ, that it was from the beginning, it is what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes and touched with our hands and that what we have seen and heard we proclaim now in order to have communion with others through communion with our loving and merciful God.

We know that educating for ministry cannot truly be done in the abstract. It must be rooted in the world around us—in the lives of the flesh and blood people with whom we come into contact, taking into account their humanity and our own—with its burden of sin and its gift of grace. In preparing ministers for the Church as we move into the twenty-first century, CTU is called to embrace the challenge voiced by Pope Francis.

Instead of being just a church that welcomes and receives by keeping the doors open, let us try also to be a church that finds new roads, that is able to step outside itself and go to those who do not attend Mass, to those who have quit or are indifferent…. But that takes audacity and courage.³

It is only by taking a long, loving look at the real—in contemplation—that as ministers we can have that audacity and courage to engage the world in confidence and joy, seeking to witness to Christ’s good news of justice, love, and peace. This is CTU’s exciting mission—discovering the new roads God is directing us to in order to be ever more effective in our service to the Church in our changing world. As CTU’s new President, I, pledge my dedication this day to accompany our Trustees, faculty, students, and staff—as well as all friends of CTU—in discovering and walking down these new roads.

³ “A Big Heart Open to God. The Exclusive Interview with Pope Francis,” America (September 30, 2013).