Begun on the feast of St. Dominic, completed on the feast of the Holy Rosary, 2024

Dear brothers of the Central and Southern Provinces,

For decades, I have wanted to write this letter to explain to you why I left the Order back in the 70’s of the last century and why, despite leaving with a full disposition, I continue to feel close to you as a spiritual and intellectual brother. Most of you, of course, are too young in the Order to remember me or even to have heard of me, and, should you have heard of me, you probably never heard the real story behind my departure. Thus, for anyone who might still be interested, I would like to tell it in this farewell letter.

I grew up in a working-class parish on Chicago’s Northwest Side, where I was shaped by the Springfield Dominican Sisters who manned our grammar school; an aunt of mind belonged to the same congregation, and Dominican sisters were thus regular visitors to our home. Together, these sisters did their best to awaken in me a Dominican vocation. On the other hand, with few exceptions, the secular priests that I knew then did not impress me; even as a schoolboy I recognized that too many of them had serious psychological problems and I was put off by the allure of clericalism that many of them showed. At the same time, I grew up with deep-seated fears of having to face the material and psycho-social challenges of life as a layman: in short, I desperately feared dealing with money, sexuality, and self-responsibility, and a religious vocation promised a way of escape them..

My anxieties increased dramatically as I entered puberty. Chubby, bookish, and a total loser in sports, I increasingly saw myself as a misfit within the prevailing American paradigm of masculinity. Although, prior to entering puberty I had enjoyed fully uncomplicated relationships with my younger female schoolmates, and I had no problem relating to older women, whose life-stories I enjoyed listening to, in the presence of teenage girls as they began turning into attractive young women, I felt increasingly ill-at-ease, awkward and inadequate. Not knowing that this was a typical pubertary conflict that most young men go through, even when they cashier it with a facade of masculine braggadocio, I sought to escape them by going to the then male-only Fenwick high school and hiding behind the role of an aspirant to the priesthood. I found support with a few older male friends in the scouting movement and among my Fenwick schoolmates, who had no trouble with my bookish, non-athletic demeanor. As a result, my contact with girls was reduced to occasional inter-school debating matches and the rehearsals for our senior-year play. Occasionally, I would walked one of the girls I met in this way to the next bus-stop, but our conversations centered on neutral topics, but I never thought to take a girl out on a date. I felt ashamed, because I had no appreciation of pop music, and I had never learned to dance. Catholic education, in those days, gave little or no help to adolescents learning to cope with their budding sexuality, leaving teenagers to learn it on the street and complicating the learning process by plastering it with taboos of every shade and color. Thank God, that atmosphere which had fostered social immaturity has now changed radically: sexuality is no longer socially tabooed, and even Fenwick has recently gone coed, allowing pubescent boys and girls to learn to relate in an uncomplicated manner. Now candidates for the priesthood and religious life are expected to have developed social and sexual maturity before choosing a life of celibacy.

My overall inclination, in my high-school years, was toward a contemplative, monastic life, but I was also impressed by the Dominican ideal of combining contemplation with pastoral activity. Thus, in 1953 I chose to go to Fenwick in prospect of entering the Order. There, under the aegis of Father James Reagan, my class was the first to work through all four volumes of the *Primer of Theology* series, an overly simplified version of Aquinas’s *Summa theologiae*. It was Strict-Observance Thomism pure, in the tradition of Garrigou-Lagrange. So as a 14 year-old freshman without philosophical preparation, I was introduced to the full panoply of Thomistic metaphysics – the God’s essence and existence, the divine attributes and operations, the divine persons, creation, etc.. Needless to say, I was deeply impressed by the seemingly clarity of abstract notions and logical deductions, but when I pressed my teachers to explain to me, how one came to know the foundational concepts and principles, the only answer I got was, that they had been discovered long ago – thought out by St. Thomas and other great scholastic minds – , and that now, we can accept them on authority: this, I was told, was the essence of the virtue of docility. For myself, I was quite prepared to accept such a fideistic solution, but I soon learned that it made no impression at all on my older friends who were in the process of escaping the enclosed Catholic milieu by studying at secular schools. My perplexity increased, when my Fenwick teachers warned me against heterodox tendencies among contemporary French Dominican theologians and in the Liturgical Movement, both of which, as a frequent patron of the famous Sheed and Ward bookstore in downtown Chicago, I was then in the process of discovering.

I must confess that I was, back then, morbidly attracted to the darker, counter-cultural side of American Catholicism. With adolescent ardor, I was strongly inclined to spiritual rigorism and scrupulosity. and I was fascinated by the sadomasochistic notion of making a *sacrificium intellectus* as the ultimate act of faith – a concept which had never been taught by St. Thomas, but which was widespread in Catholic spirituality of the time. Thus, with youthful enthusiasm, I embraced and aggressively asserted the anti-Modernist arguments against historical criticism, modern philosophy, and empirical natural science, wherever they appeared opposed to traditional Catholic teaching. Indeed, I even went so far as to question the fundamental American values of religious toleration and civil liberty in the name of Catholic Integrism. It was only much later, in the wake of the Council, that I learned that this kind of anti-intellectualism represented only one side of pre-Vatican II American Catholicism; back then, there were, indeed, other, more liberal and positive currents of thinking, though to my knowledge hardly among Dominicans except for the few French Dominicans who had been censured. Granted, the kind of radical right-wing positions to which I was then committed, found little or no positive echo among rank-and-file Catholics, who were preoccupied by more practical concerns, but I found this more a reason for scandal than for raising questions.

Only a few years later, however, I would see the underpinnings of that American Catholic milieu collapse like a house of cards, as the winds unleashed by Vatican II began to buffet it. To understand how the seemingly indestructible construct of pre-conciliar American Catholicism could so easily be shaken up in the wake of Vatican II, one needs to appreciate the atmosphere of fear, suspicion, and hypocrisy that had prevailed in the pre-conciliar Church, and to understand how narrow were the perimeters of orthodoxy. Regrettably, the lessons taught by this experience have been lost on the many neo-traditional Catholics, who now look back nostalgically to the purportedly unshakeable robustness of traditional Thomism and to the alleged awe-inspiring sublimity of traditional forms of thinking, worship and piety, many of which were no older than the 19th century.

To appreciate the atmosphere that prevailed back then and to understand how it could change so quickly and so radically, there is no better way than to immerse oneself in the fiction of Andrew Greeley (1928-2013). Despite his bad repute as an author of cheap, sexually explicit potboilers and as a testy left-leaning journalist, Greeley was, to his dying day. a profoundly Catholic philosopher and theologian, a man of deep spirituality, and a zealous priest of the Chicago archdiocese. And he was also a gifted storyteller and an inspiring poet. From his perch as a so­ciologist at the University of Chicago, he was uniquely able to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of mid-century American Catholicism and to give vivid expression to his diagnosis in a long series of fascinating novels that paint a brilliantly colorful, many-faceted portrait of 20th century Catholicism focused on real and imagined events set in the Archdiocese of Chicago. Thus, when I began reading his fiction in the 1980’s and 90’s, he opened my eyes to the positive, flip-side to the dour, fear-ridden Catholic milieu in which I grew up. I thank him especially for showing me the brighter sides of the Irish-American Catholicism that, in my youth, I had found so oppressive. If I had anything to say, I would put his major novels, beginning with *The cardinal sins* (1981), on the required reading list of every American priest, deacon, seminarian, sister, or lay theologian. Over the years, I corresponded with him, though I never met him in person, and I took measures to make his work better known in Europe. The university library here now holds copies of all of his fictional and poetic works as well as his academic ones, and it makes them available via inter-library loan throughout Europe. I myself published an article about his work in a German Catholic journal similar to *America*.

But to on with this *apologia pro vita mea ...*

From 6th grade on, I began to pray the psalms according to the order of the Roman breviary. A few years later I discovered that the supplementary hymns, lessons, and prayers of the divine office had been collected in a simplified breviary for lay persons published by the Benedictines of Collegeville MN. (There was no English translation of the full breviary at that time, or if there was, it was inaccessible to me.) Meanwhile, I had also found a new spiritual home in the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic church of St Nicholas on Chicago’s Near-West side. I found the beautiful Old-Slavonic liturgy celebrated there on Sundays much more inspiring than the perfunctory Latin Masses that were cele­brated with little or no popular participation in my home parish. The more I read about the spirituality of the Eastern Church, especially the Russian, I found it much richer and less sentimental than what I was used to in the Irish, German, Polish, and Italian Catholicism that I was growing up in.

In the course of my high-school years, I did give consideration to alternative careers. Among the religious orders, I was romantically attracted to a stricter monastic life as a Cistercian, or even a Carthusian. I also considered switching rites to join the Byzantine Rite Basilians, but none of these orders offered what I was really looking for, namely the possibility of becoming a simple monk engaged in study without being ordained a priest. On the other hand, however, I also seriously considered a worldly career, e.g. as a lawyer-politician or as a history teacher. And, in consequence of my leadership role in the scouting movement, I even had a concrete offer to become a professional scouting executive. However, in early December 1952, a profound “mystical” experience during a closed retreat at the Dominican House of Studies at Dubuque IA put an end to my wavering. Standing before my window, seeing on the one side the illuminated chapel where brothers were practicing the chant for the next day’s Mass and directly facing me the student wing, where brothers were studying, practicing their sermons or recreating, I saw therein a visual symbol of all the aspects of Dominican life. I was overwhelmed by a sense of God’s presence and the feeling that here was where I belonged. Immediately after this experience, which lasted only a few minutes and involved neither extraordinary visions or auditions, I reported it to my retreat director, Fr. Jacobs, telling him that I was now ready to go to Smyth Hall at Loras College to prepare to become a Dominican, and I asked him to be my spiritual director. I likewise requested to be received into the Third Order; this involved no small sacrifice, because it meant replacing the daily recital of the rich texts of the abbreviated Divine Office, which I had come to love, by the monotonous recitation of the unvarying Little Office of the BVM.

My two years at Loras were heaven on earth. Gifted teachers taught me Latin, Greek, History, Literature and Biology. In self-study, I improved my command of French, learned elementary Russian, and studied the history of the literature and the fine arts of the Western world. I greatly enjoyed our life in community, with its regular times for prayer, study, and recreation. On the other hand, summer jobs gave me a glimpse of working class life – the first summer I helped the janitor of my parish church in cleaning the extensive parish plant and in other tasks; the next summer I worked as a freight-handler in a warehouse of the Milwaukee Railroad. My experience in these jobs gave me some assurance that I could get on with ordinary people, not just with intellectuals – something about which I had previously had my doubts. It was thus with some regret for a kind of donish life that I would never again enjoy, I went to Winona MN to began novitiate on the feast of St. Rose, 1959. My first reaction was positive. Our life together was not unlike what I had enjoyed at Smyth Hall, and I loved the liturgy. Particularly impressive was the liturgy we celebrated on the feast of Christ the King, the red-gold vestments matching the autumn colors of the October landscape. Then over night it snowed, and, when I looked out my window, I saw the brilliant colors of fall had been covered by a black and white shroud that seemed to presage the sense of depression about to overwhelm me, as our novice-master began lecturing us on the harder aspects of Dominican life, reflecting the strict observance ideal represented by Lacordaire’s counterpart, A. V. Jandel. whom Pius XI had appointed as master general of the restored Order. Alarmed by the prospect of having to make just the kind of *sacrificium intellectus* that I so morbidly feared, I went to our novice-master, who did his best to reassure me, but my doubts about my qualifications to be a good Dominican remained, and I was actually surprised that I was admitted to profession.

My introduction to River Forest Thomism at the House of Studies began the process of my intellectual liberation. Initially, from Fr. Ashley and Fr. Weisheipl, and later from Frs. Kane, Schillaci and Powell, I learned that, what I now prefer to call “Albertine-Thomistic Empiricism” to distinguish it from other positions now laying claim to the names “River Forest Thomism” or “Aristotelian Thomism”[[1]](#footnote-2), is in fact just that: a way of thinking that does not suppose dogmatic fideism or begin with “metaphysical” intuitions, but instead begins in, and always returns to our perceptions of concrete reality as presented in the phantasms we acquire on the basis of increasing experience. Abstract concepts alone do not constitute truth, but remain only empty words; to be true in the full sense, they must be reflected back onto perceived reality in judgments (*reductio ad phantasmata*), for it is only in perception that reality presents itself to us. In a way that I set out to describe in my Dubuque MA thesis, this also holds true in Sacred Theology; as I learned from Weisheipl. who taught us that Aquinas saw the culmination of his work, not in his two systematic summas, but rather in the application of the ideas propounded therein to the interpretation of biblical texts in his commentaries and sermons. Guided by the words of the biblical revelation, we conjure up the phantasms we need to contemplate God’s being and operations. Thus, Weisheipl’s vision of Sacred Theology became the lodestar for all my theological work down to the present day.

In two respect, however, I must confess that Weisheipl had a deleterious influence on me. First of all, his high standards of scholarship caused me to spend hours on end in libraries doing painstaking bibliographical research in order to gain, as completely as possible, an overview of the discussions about a topic. My ability and willingness to do this impressed my professors here and later enabled me to find work here as a historian and still later as a documentalist in the university library. But when dealing with the very broad topics which became my lifework, – the nature and method of theology and the psychology of cognition --, I found myself confronted with far more literature than any one person could digest in a lifetime: alone on the topic of the nature and method of theology, I assembled a bibliography going back to the beginning of the 20th century, which comprised several thousand titles of books and articles in all the major European languages. This is one of the main reasons why I have published so little and why I never completed the books I had originally intended to write on these topics so dear to my heart. The second and ultimately more prejudicial effect of Weisheipl’s high ideal of scholarship was that it left me suspicious of theologians who did not seem to engage in such meticulous research but rather appeared to start with a catchy slogan and then cherry-pick the literature to support it. This was one of the reasons why I failed to appreciate the various liberation theologies which began making their appearance in the 2nd half of the 20th century.

Intellectually invigorating as I found the philosophical and theological studies at River Forest and later at Dubuque, that alone did little to dispel my doubts about whether I really had the dispositions needed to be a good Dominican. Time and again I confessed these doubts to my superiors and my confessors, and I was repeatedly re-assured to have no scruples about going on. My doubts only really disappeared when I was ordained to the diaconate in 1965 and was sent to St. Pius to work with Fr. Joerger in his apostolate to the Spanish-speakers moving into the parish. In this most satisfying work, I finally found the answer to most of my doubts.

Meanwhile, however, I had learned only a few weeks before going to St. Pius, that the provincial authorities had academic plans for me: I had been chosen to get a doctorate and come back to teach ecclesiology at Dubuque. On the advice of Fr. O’Meara then in Munich, I was sent here to Tuebingen to do my doctorate with Hans Kueng. At that time, I knew Kueng only from his famous lecture on freedom in the Church, delivered in Chicago some five years earlier. But, in contrast to most of the people who attended that lecture, I heard, not only the clarion call for this or that need for emancipation, but also the immediately following warning about misconstruing or abusing the freedom called for – a caution that for most people in the auditorium was drowned out by the thunderous applause following the initial call for liberation. (Even Fr. Ashley missed this side of Kueng, when he describes the Chicago event in his autobiography.) My own impression assured me that Kueng was no rabble-rouser, but a serious theologian, in fact more of a courageous moderate than the rebel most people took him to be. Thus I knew that in going to Tuebingen, I would be going as a convinced River Forest Thomist, but that, from Kueng and the other Tuebingen professors, I would learn to do theology on the basis of Holy Scripture and Church history – exactly what Weischeipl’s vision of theology called for. And I was not disappointed. As I soon discovered, Kueng himself had a firm formation in Jesuit Neothomism as it was taught at the Gregorianum, and so he respected my abiding commitment to Dominican Thomism, especially after I explained to him how our River Forest brand of empirical Thomism differed from classical Neothomism.

As a young dad, I enjoyed helping out in the parishes and convents around Dubuque, but my fourth year of theology was cut short, so that I could enroll in the spring term in Tuebingen. Despite, or better because I had been working on the topic I had chosen for my lectorate dissertation topic so long and so intensely – it was Aquinas’s psychology of natural and supernatural cognition – I almost failed to put everything together in time, and when I finally did so at the very last moment, I asked my superiors, if they really wanted to risk sending me abroad and seeing me fail to complete the degree. Again I was re-assured, and so I went off to Tuebingen. To my own surprise, I managed to pass the language exam only three weeks after arriving, even though I had never formally studied German to speak it. I had the good fortune, however, to find housing in the Catholic student center, where I easily made contacts, and soon I was virtually adopted by a local family, who tutored me in German and culture. Again I helped out in local parishes, preaching and hearing confessions regularly as soon as I gained some proficiency in German; nevertheless, it took almost three years until I became really fluent in the language and thus able to appreciate it’s great advantages over English in facilitating highly complex thinking, without getting lost in abstractions: German, unlike English, is an image-evoking language that keeps one in continuous contact with the phantasms, in which, as Aquinas teaches, reality alone discloses itself to us.

To improve my German and to get the largest possible impression of the teaching here, I took as many lecture courses as I could, concentrating on biblical exegesis and church history, and I wrote papers for seminars with the leading Catholic and Protestant professors here, among them Joseph Ratzinger / Pope Benedict XVI, who in contrast to Kueng, paid little attention to the opinions of biblical scholars and historians, but relied mainly on his own speculative interpretations of texts.

In taking me on as a doctoral candidate, Kueng suggested that I investigate American Protestant ecclesiology. Resources for this topic were rare in Tuebingen, but they proved abundant in the library of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland. There, in the archives, I found the working papers and final reports of a series of inter-Protestant commissions that had met and published reports between 1937 and 1967, the year in which the *COCU Plan of Union* was published and sent to the participating denominations for approval. These materials became the basis of my dissertation, and so I spent most of the weeks between the Tuebingen winter and summer terms living with the French-speaking Swiss Dominicans in Geneva and working in the library and archives of the World Council of Churches on the other side of the city.

When I arrived in Tuebingen, Kueng had just published his monographic study of the Church, which was generally well received by conservative as well as by liberal theologians. A year later, however, he published a critical study of dishonesty in church teaching and practice that prepared the way for the book that appeared in 1970 under the title *Infallibility? An Inquiry.* This inquiry was intended as an honest. open-end study of the problematical history and the dubious theological foundations of the dogma proclaimed in 1870 and a challenge to develop a clearer, more flexible understanding that would take account of the undeniable deficits of earlier definitions without compromising the fundamental truth that, despite them, the Church has always been and ever shall be preserved by the Holy Spirit in the divine truth, and that, with time and deepening insight, the Church can, if need be, replace older misleading formulations by better ones. Kueng was not the first to recognize the problems entailed by some prevailing dogmatic formulations, but those who did so, for the most part. followed Karl Rahner’s method of giving a speculative re-interpretation to the dogmatized formulae, an interpretation that side-stepped the difficulties without calling for verbal corrections. The problem with this approach, however, was that, as long as the canonized formulae remained uncorrected, it invited conservative theologians to insist on strict obedience to the letter rather than following the implications of the proposed new interpretation. Sensing the threat to his life-work, Rahner launched a bitter attack on Kueng, going so far as to accuse him of denying the very possibility of formulating true propositions. In fact, Kueng did nothing of the sort; he only called attention to the fundamental dependence of every propositional formulation upon the historical context under which it was originally formulated and the newer context in which it must now be viewed, something that a Thomist – respecting the rule of *quidquid recipitur, ad modum recipientis recipitur* – can hardly deny. Following an exchange of articles between Rahner and Kueng in the Jesuit theological journal *Stimmen der Zeit*, Rahner assembled a phalanx of mainly German systematic theologians in an anthology supporting his position; Kueng replied with his own anthology, in which biblical and historical scholars joined systematic theologians. To close what has become famous as the “Infallibility Debate”, Kueng, in the spring semester of 1971, invited his German-speaking opponents to individually dialog with him and his students in the venue of a weekly “Oberseminar”. Some, like Ratzinger, excused themselves, but Rahner, among others, did come and was given the honor of presenting his views at the final session. Hard pressed by counter-arguments, he ended the discussion with a confession: “This is the faith that I received on my mother’s lap, I cannot depart from it”. This admission profoundly impressed me, not only for its honesty, but also for its implications for the immediate future: it effectively confirmed what I myself had so often experienced in my conversations with conservatives, for whom, on the basis of my own development, I tended spontaneously to feel more empathy than for the many “do-your-own-thing” liberals and radicals, who seemed to pay little or no attention to questions of principles. In dialog with both sides, I found their mindsets impervious to my attempts to mediate using historically and sociologically based arguments and explanations grounded in my understanding of Aquinas’s cognitive psychology. For most, as for Rahner, this was obviously more a matter of the heart rather than of the intellect. Applying Thomas Kuhn’s theory of paradigm-shift in the sciences, it appeared to me that it would take generations to change such mind-sets. This realization pushed me into an existential dilemma: could I publicly teach received church doctrines about which I had personal reservations, or dare I set forth, without reservations or qualms, my own dissident opinions, as many liberal theologians were doing at the time? Either way, I would be putting my students in a quandary like my own, and that I was reluctant to do. One can, of course, blame me for lacking the courage of my own convictions, but in the back of my mind there was a gnawing uncertainty: What if the conservatives were right after all? What if the critical theology unleashed by the Council in reality a diabolical plot that was threatening the Church and the Faith?

In the summer trimester of 1971, still under the deep impression made by Rahner’s confession, I was back in Dubuque to teach a lecture course on church office and ministry. In America, I was appalled by the polarization that was then tearing apart the society, the Church, and even the Order, and I was sorely depressed by the failure of my attempts to mediate between the opposing camps. Returning to Europe in fall of that year, I immediately threw myself into the task of preparing my thesis on Aquinas’s cognitive psychology for publication as a two-part article in *The Thomist*. Stressed by jetlag and overwork, I soon began to have a series of mystical experiences that extended over a period of three nights and three days, the portent of which seemed to be that, on the one hand, I need no longer fear that the critical theology practiced by Kueng and others was a diabolical plot. At the same time, however, God now seemed to be calling me to give public witness to my convictions and to do penance for the baser motives which had led me and (as I had come to see) so many others like me, to seek security instead of responsibility in choosing religious life. I also felt called to do penance for the many priests and religious, who, anticipating immanent changes in clerical discipline, were ceasing to observe their vows of chastity and poverty. To do this, it seemed that God was now calling, me to leave the Order despite my ongoing love and esteem for it, and to remain in Germany and Tuebingen to continue the process of maturation that had begun there. Should I be able to find employment there, the German social security system rather than the Order would then pay for the mental health services that I obviously needed. An additional motive was that by staying on in Tuebingen, I would enable me to continue to serve Kueng as an interpreter and advisor in what I now firmly believed was his own prophetic mission in the Church. When these mystical experiences were over, I forthwith entered the university’s psychiatric clinic to get competent evaluation and medical treatment. There, I was assured by the doctors who handled me that, from their point of view, this episode was not a psychosis, but rather a basically healthy, if rather dramatic resolution of a situation of extreme cognitive dissonance. With this assurance, I returned to Chicago in December and told the provincial, Fr. Collins – my former history teacher at Fenwick – what had happened. At his advice, I consulted with a Chicago psychologist accustomed to handling clerical mental problems, but, in the end, we all concluded that I must return to Tuebingen to test whether the proposed reorientation of my calling was really from the Holy Spirit or at least whether it would be a practicable solution to the mental and emotional quandary in which I found myself. As benchmarks for ultimately making a decision, I proposed three steps in the following order: first, completing my doctorate with Kueng, then finding a job that would end my financial dependence on the province and get me into the German social security system to assure ongoing psychiatric and psycho-therapeutic care, and ultimately, if God will, finding a wife, with whom I could finally face the challenges of marrying and raising a family that I had previously so feared.

Thus, with the provincial’s blessing, I returned to Tuebingen in late January 1972 to begin the process of testing the Spirit. First of all, I had to give up the project of revising my thesis on Aquinas’ cognitive psychology for publication; it would only be decades later, at the end of my career in the Tuebingen university library in 2004, that I did eventually publish an interim version of my work on the university library’s Internet platform: this publication reproduces the original text, un-revised but updated by three more recent papers; I still hope, before my death, to publish a final version on the more accessible *Academia.edu* platform,incorporating in it additional materials and corrections.

Then having put aside that project so dear to me for an indefinite future, I concentrated on my thesis on American Protestant ecclesiology; In early1974, I completed it and submitted it to the Catholic Faculty. In it, I focused on the distinctive methodology developed and practiced by the Americans:

1. to take account of diverging traditions in an inclusive manner
2. to identify equivalent functions buried under diverging terminologies, and
3. to make every effort to maintain contact with the denominational grassroots while working toward church union.

In the final chapter, I proposed a positive evaluation of the 1967 *COCU Plan of Union* as a model for a future, more fully “Catholic” Church.

To Kueng’ surprise, the second reader of the dissertation, despite recommending it for acceptance as a work of scholarship, raised grave doubts about its conformity with Catholic doctrine. Kueng easily rebutted the objections in a devastating repost that caused the second reader to step down and so a third reader was appointed, who then recommended acceptance without reservation. Thus, after passing my orals in late 1974, I was awarded the *Doctor theol. magna cum laude*. Despite the rebuttal, however, the second reader’s objections seemed to confirm my own fears that what I had hoped would be seen as a moderately critical stance would still give offense and evoke misunderstanding, and this judgment was confirmed shortly thereafter, when Fr. Weisheipl, my beloved teacher and theological mentor, reached a similar judgment after reading the thesis on a visit to me. These two verdicts reinforced my own impression that I had no future as a Roman Catholic theologian able to mediate between the opposing camps of liberals and conservatives. Thus, rather shamefully, I published the dissertation in what was then an obscure dissertation publishing house , the Peter Lang Verlag, and I made no effort to solicit recommendations or revues, not even from Kueng – with the result that, as I secretly hoped, the publication went completely unnoticed in the scholarly world. Now, however, fifty years later, I see no reason to disavow it, and so I intendt to upload it to *Academia.edu*, with a short preface putting it into context.

Meanwhile, I passed my second benchmark: I found a job in Tuebingen, not as a theologian, but as a historian, working within the university’s new TAVO project (*Tuebingen Atlas of the Middle East*): there I was commissioned to draft a series of maps illustrating the history – from the 6th to the 15th centuries – of the Byzantine Empire and its satellite Christian states in the region extending from the Aegean to Mesopotamia. It was a fascinating task that took my mind off theological controversies, though I continued to attend Kueng’s doctoral colloquium. No longer dependent on the province financially, I immediately began what would prove to be decades of psychotherapy, with a psychologist recommended by the diocese here and paid for by the German state health insurance program.

Then, in December 1973, I reached my third and final benchmark. Under circumstances that had all the appearance of being providential, I met a Swabian woman of my own age, Erika nee Glueck, who had initially trained and gained experience as a kindergarten teacher in Germany, Switzerland, and England, before going on to study social pedagogy. After that,, she went to Paris, to serve as a governess in a wealthy banker’s family, who treated her like a member of the family and made it possible for her, in her free-time, to study French language, literature, and culture, first at the Institute Français and the École du Louvre, and then at the Sorbonne. Two years before we met, however, she had to return from her beloved Paris to care for her dying mother and to look after her father, already in his eighties. To be near the village where her father lived, she had taken a job in Tuebingen as the principal teacher at a newly established state school for kindergarten teachers. Our meeting and falling in love appeared to be the last confirmation I needed for my altered vocation. Thus, in 1976, I applied for and obtained a full dispensation from Rome, enabling us to marry in the same year. A year later, our son Emanuel was born, and, two years later our daughter Johanna followed.

Meanwhile, having completed my work for the TAVO Project in 1978, I found what promised to be a permanent job as a documentalist for theology and religious sciences in the university library, again in a special project funded by the federal government through the German Research Foundation. This project was called THEODOK and was intended to provide, first in print and then as a cumulative searchable database, comprehensive information on the latest publications in the fields of Theology and General Religious Studies. To everyone's shock and disappointment, a financial crisis caused the government to terminate the project abruptly and prematurely after only a year and a half, and so, in January 1980, I suddenly had to face the threat of unemployment. With few prospects of finding satisfying work outside of a library and lacking the internship required for an academic librarian, I took the only job the Tuebingen library could offer me at the time; a low-level position in the department of subject cataloging, at only half of my former salary. My tasks in the new job, however, were more than satisfying, for I was charged with maintaining the biographical and geographical catalogs, and the philosophy section of the systematic catalog. In addition, with a quarter of my time, I could work in Kueng’s Institute of Ecumenical Research to maintain the theological documentation project which Kueng had begun there years before and which would have been superseded by the THEODOK project. The most personally rewarding part of my new library job, however, was that I had to distribute all of the new books acquired by the library to the specialist librarians responsible for the various disciplines of the systematic catalog, and this gave me an unparalleled overview of the latest publications in all the arts and sciences included therein, thus vastly broadening my all-around education and deepening my understanding of the natural sciences so important to River Forest Thomism and so relevant to my preoccupation with cognitive psychology. Over the years, I repeatedly undertook initiatives to revive the THEODOK project and to refine and extend the documentary method we had developed to implement it. But when, some twenty years later, the project was in fact revived (though still without adequate staffing, I no longer had the stamina for the overwork needed to compensate for the missing personnel, and so I had to pass the task and the promised promotion to younger hands. Thus I remained in my poorly paid position until my retirement in 2004, and as a result, I have an even morer meager pension.. Meanwhile, with more adequate personnel and material support, the project is now flourishing under the name *IxTheo* and I can at least be proud of what I contributed to its establishment.

Over the years, Kueng became more and more a fatherly friend to me, and he increasingly relied on my advice as well as on my translation skills. The Vatican intervention in December 1979 withdrew his ecclesiastical license to teach as a member of the Catholic Theological Faculty, but did not restrict the continuing exercise of his priestly office. Since the university could not expel him as a tenured professor, he and his Institute for Ecumenical Research, together with its academic and secretarial staff, became an independent entity directly under the university president’s office, and the Catholic Faculty agreed to allow him to continue to present candidates for doctoral promotion and habilitation. Freed now of the curricular duties of a normal faculty professor, he focused, in public lectures and special seminars, on addressing particular topics especially dear to him, notably the dialog with modern literature and culture, the dialog with modern science, and especially the dialog with the major religions of the world, something that he long cultivated in the course of his prolonged visits to their major centers around the world. During this period, he also published his monographic studies of belief in the existence of God, on everlasting life, and on the special relationship connecting the three Abrahamite religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Whatever topic he took up, Kueng always felt the need to supplement intensive scholarly preoccupation with documents by direct face-to-face conversation with leading figures in the field. Thus, when he frequently cites such conversations in his publications, especially in the more autobiographic ones, it is not a matter of vain namedropping, but rather an explicit expression of gratitude for what he had learned from such conversations.

Independently of each other, both he and I discovered the value of Thomas Kuehn’s theory of paradigm shifts in the development of science, when Kuehn’s seminal book on that topic appeared in German translation in 1976: for me, it explained the current impasse in Catholic theology in the wake of Vatican II and the futility of my efforts to mediate between the opposing camps; Kueng went further, seeing it in a broader sociological perspective and thus expanded it into a comprehensive hermeneutical instrument to explain the historical development of religious cultures generally, in particular, the tendency of former paradigms to live on and to rejuvenate themselves as separate religious cultures and organizations after being challenged by reform ideas and movements.

Out of Kueng’s experience in inter-religious dialog and his paradigm theory of their development, grew his conviction that conversations about beliefs and organizations, necessary as they be, were not enough: some way must be found to mobilize the religions of the world, on the basis of shared ethical standards, for the practical task of promoting peace and justice in the world. Kueng launched this idea in 1989/90 with his book, *The Global Ethic Project*, and he concretized it the draft of a *Global Ethic Declaration* that he proposed for adoption by the Parliament of World Religions which met in Chicago in 1992. In 1995, thanks to a very generous grant by a wealthy retired German businessman, who was motivated by reading the book and the declaration, Kueng founded the Global Ethics Foundation in Tuebingen, which, with increased funding from other foundations and even the government, went on to develop a wide-ranging program to promote the idea, especially in educational institutions and in the media, and to foster ethical thinking and behavior in politics and in the economy. In its early years, I also worked for this project.

When, in 1992/93, Kueng asked me to read and, where need be, correct the draft of his forthcoming book on the history of the successive Christian paradigms, I was prompted to write a long article on the relations between Catholics and Orthodox in Ukraine and Belarus from the beginnings of Christianity there in the 10th century until the loss of orthodox autonomy in those regions to the Moscow Patriarchate in the late 17th century. I had the pleasure of seeing my paper published by an Orthodox theological journal in Munich, and Kueng took account of it in his description of the Eastern Orthodox paradigm in his book on Christianity.

My last service to him was to edit, together with the chief reader of the Collins publisher in London, the English translation of his final work *Ist die Kirche noch zu retten?* Given free hand, we not only improved the poor English translation that had been prepared by a German commercial translating service unfamiliar with theological topics. I also substantially rewrote passages that contained factual errors or addressed matters specific to the German ecclesiastical scene, and I revised those passages that seemed too pessimistic or acerbic in tone. Together, we replaced the rather sarcastic title of the German original by the more irenic and optimistic English title ***Can we*** *save the Church****?*** *|* ***We can*** *save the Church****!*** This book appeared in 2013.

Over the decades, I have continued my efforts to develop a comprehensive Thomistic under­standing of cognition, taking account of contemporary scientific developments in the fields of current linguistic theory, evolutionary psychology, and neurobiology, with special attention to comparative studies of animal cognition and communication. Until their deaths, I continued to exchange ideas with my former professors Weisheipl, Ashley, and Powell, as well as with John Deeley, whom I knew from our years together in the studium. I also continue to share my views with a former German Dominican philosophy stu­dent and Albertus Magnus specialist, Georg Wieland, who held the chair of philosophy in the Tuebingen Catholic Faculty from 1988 to 2002. More recently I have concentrated my attention on Kant’s understanding of cognition which was much broader and deeper than his criticism of pure reason to which it is often reduced; it has its roots in a tradition going back through Christian Wolff and German Protestant scholasticism to the Paduan Aristotelian­ism inspired by Albertus Magnus and studied intensely by Fr. Wallace of the Eastern province. Over the years, I have set forth my developing thinking in numerous papers, most of them in German, my preferred language for thought, though I have recently concentrated on writing for an English-speaking audience. With the exception of the already mentioned, expanded version of my 1966 dissertation published on the Internet in 2004, however, most of this material remains unpublished. Now, approaching eighty-six years of age, I can no longer write the comprehensive monograph on a Thomistic theory of cognition that I so long dreamed of putting together, but I still hope to upload an updated and expanded version of the 2004 publication with further supplementary materials to the *Academia.edu* platform. I also hope to publish there, a paper I wrote for Weisheipl back in 1964, in which I sought to articulate the vision of theology that he gave me then and that has inspired my thinking ever since – at that time, in a written note that he at­tached to my draft when returning it to me with only minor textual corrections, he warned me that it would be imprudent to circulate it then, given the contrary views prevailing in the province. Lastly, I have an all but finished history of River Forest Thomism, written from the particular point of view of my own impressions as it was taught to us in the years 1961 to 1964. This book I hope to publish soon in the New Priory Press. In it, I emphasize the emancipatory thrust of the original River Forest School, contrary to what some advocates of its revival are now making of it when they use it as an ideological support for their reactionary return to pre-Vatican II notions and practices. To my knowledge, with the exception of Fr. Tabaczyk, a Polish Dominican who stuudied in California and was strongly influenced by Fr. Wallace (he is now a professor at the Angelicum), there is now, among American Dominicans, little knowledge of, or interest in the original version of River Forest Thomism that we learned in the early Sixties. Thus with my publications ( this letter included ), I would like to re-enkindle such interest and to call atttention its emancipatory implications for the present situation. Already in my studium days, I felt that the lack of an enriched cognitive psychology was one of the main reasons why River Forest Thomism had found so little echo back then. This, in addition to my personal interest, was why I took it upon myself to devote my life to filling this lacuna. With the fruits of my contemplation over all these years, I would like to recompense, at least immaterially, the Order as a whole and our provinces in particular, for all that they have given me.

Among the gifts I took with me when I left the Order was a strong liturgical spirituality shaped especially by the Divine Office, which I have continued to pray, as best I can, in solidarity with an imagined presence of a Dominican community. I do this, not out of a sense of obligation, but simply because I enjoy doing it. For the same reason, I collect and use liturgical prayers of other traditions, especially the Eastern churches and Judaism. As to the Rosary, I have developed my own expanded and more biblical and ecumenical version: it comprises seven decades, one for each day of the week, beginning with three decades for Old Testament themes and inserting a decade for the major themes of Jesus’s public life between the Joyful and the Sorrrowful Mysteries. Many years ago, the Irish Dominican journal *Spirituality* published early versions of it. My inner life is an ongoing (one-sided) conversation with God, which is shaped in large part by the conclusion of the Jesus Prayer, which I often recite in Russian: “… have mercy on me, a sinner”: my faults and sins are always before me. I do not pretend to “know” God; for his essence and his existence infinitely exceed our finite minds: at best, as Paul says, we see him in this life “darkly”, as in an ancient bronze mirror., or, as an ancient rabbinic prayer puts it, “he shows himself more in what he does than in what he is.” Praying the Jewish liturgies of shabbat and their holy days has sensitized me to the Oneness of God in which the mystery of the Trinity is enclosed. Using an image that Kueng used to explain Christian trinitarian belief to non-Christians, I see the Father as God encompassing me and the whole universe with creative and sustaining love; I see the Son and Word as God who stands before and speaks to us in the historical person of Jesus Christ revealed in Scripture; and I see the Holy Spirit as God who works and guides us from within. This, of course, is only an image, not a theological concept like the dogmatic formulae worked out in the councils of the patristic era, but it is a powerful image to foster a trinitarian spirituality. I feel myself upheld in the hands of God, and I continue to have occasional intense experiences of God’s goodness and guidance, When they come, I praise and thank God, but I remain ever cautious – it is so easy to be deceived. All my life, I have tried to follow what appeared to be promptings off the Spirit, wherever they seemed to lead me, whatever the cost, but here too I remain cautious, ever aware of the possibilities of self-deception. Now, as the end of my life approaches, I believe that I have reasonable grounds to believe that, despite the zick-zack course my life has taken, it was, after all, the one God intended for me. For a long time, I was reticent about using the term “mystical” to describe my life and experiences. We were taught that this was a privilege reserved only for those who achieve the highest degrees of heroic virtue, and I am all too aware of my faults and shortcomings, and also of the degree to which my life and experiences have been influenced by the pathological elements of my personality. But over the years I have come to agree with Matt Fox, whom I have known from our days together in the studium, that mysticism and mystical experiences are something much more common and ordinary, and nothing to stand in awe of, and so I have lost my reservations about using the term, though I continue to respect the role often played by pathological factors in giving shape to concrete manifestations of religious experiences

All in all, God has been good to me and my family. Despite the drastic pay-cut back in 1980, we have been able to get on reasonably well financially, because timely inheritances enabled us to pay off the mortgage on our house and I was able, now and then, to supplement my meager salary (and even more meager pension) with subsidies for my work in Kueng’s institute and by fees charged for translation contracts. Friends, especially Erika’s Parisian ones, enabled us to vacation so frequently in France that Paris, the Provence, and the French Atlantic coast extending to outer Brittany virtually became second homes for us. We were spared the troubles many families go through when their children become adolescents, and we were relieved to see both our son and our daughter setting off on successful careers, he as an IT specialist with the Stuttgart transportation system and she as an independent designer of high fashion women's clothing, both green and fair – even maintaining her own firm in Paris until she returned home in 2021. In general, we had a good and happy marriage, though sometimes it proved rocky, because both of us had our mental health problems: I suffer from seasonal mood swings of the bipolar type, that on several occasions have required my hospitalization, and Erika now and then would fall into unexplainable fits of rage that left me, at times, praying for my deliverance through a merciful death. Twice, in fact, I did face death, once eight years ago when an undiscovered colon tumor ruptured requiring emergency major surgery and follow-up chemotherapy and then again early this year, when a SARS infection led to double pneumonia. Throughout our life together, Erika suffered repeatedly from pains in her back and her abdomen. In early 2022, she fell ill and in March she had to be hospitalized; she died on May 1st 2022, and her ashes now lie buried in our village cemetery with its beautiful view of the rolling foothills and the sharp north face of the Swabian Alb plateau. Our home I now share with my unmarried daughter Johanna, who, for professional reasons, had providentially returned home from Paris at the end of 2021 – just in time to enable her to care for Erika, when she fell fatally ill in the spring of the following year. At Erika’s death, almost fifty years had passed since God first brought us together, and almost forty-six years had passed since we were married. Now we have to face a new trial: my daughter Johanna herself is now herself struggling with a potentially deadly cancer.

I am now eighty-five going on eighty-six; the chemotherapy following my cancer operation and the bout with pneumonia have weakened my heart and lungs, and left me with painful neuropathy, especially in my feet. I now have trouble walking, needing a cane or rollator to keep my balance; luckily, however, I am still able to drive, at least in familiar surroundings. When my wife died, I immediately offered my services to the Church, but, here in our vicinity, the Catholic Church is adequately served by its pastoral teams composed of priests, deacons, and diverse lay ministers. Thus I remain, what I have been since my laization, a friar in spirit, still tied to the Order in affection, gratitude, and, above all, prayer. Of my ordination class, only Justin Kauchak in the Southern province remains alive, and, now and then, I telephone with him, as I used to do much more frequently with Ben Viviano until his death. On occasion, I have contacted other members of the provinces by phone or email, and I indeed have several *Facebook* connections, though I have generally failed to cultivated them; I also have a few connections on *LinkedIn*. I would be grateful for reactions to this farewell letter, you can reach me by email ([thomas.riplinger@gmx.de](mailto:thomas.riplinger@gmx.de)) or by phone ( 0049 177 6446 901, useful especially for free services like *WhatsApp*, *Messenger*, etc.). You can also use my *Facebook* oe *LinkedIn*. I would gladly welcome new or renewed contacts, and I will do my best to reply, though I no longer have the energy for composing long emails.

I conclude by asking for your continuing prayers, as I continue to include all of you in mine.

Fraternally, Thomas Riplinger (Bro. Augustine)

1. In a note appended to this letter, I will explain briefly the reasons for my choice of this name. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)