

## Major Themes | What is the Future of the CTSA?

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for the Critical Issues Subcommittee of the CTSA Centennial Committee  
28 June 2023

*Note: the whole of the Centennial Committee voted on August 25, 2023, to release this report to the CTSA membership as a whole. We also expressed our great gratitude to Craig for writing it so carefully and lucidly. (Frank Clooney, CC Chair)*

Our June 9th Friday evening panel at the 2023 annual meeting, “What is the Future of the CTSA?” brought out a large number of attendees, with estimates of at least 80 people (and with one notetaker remarking that there were perhaps close to 90 people). On behalf of the Centennial Committee, the Critical Issues team took up the task of drawing out major themes that emerged from the small group discussions that took place that evening.

This summary document reflects the reports received from eleven different groups, which I’ve further subdivided into two headings, “What is drawing us to the CTSA,” (page 1) and “Opportunities and Future Possibilities.” (pages 2-4)

Following this summary is an appendix (pages 4-14) with the comments from each group, lightly edited for clarity. Should the reader consult them, they will certainly find elements that are not mentioned in my summary below. I apologize in advance for not giving greater visibility to these elements beyond their inclusion in the appendix.

### What is drawing us to the CTSA?

**By far, the most frequently mentioned reason explaining why we come to the CTSA is the community of colleagues gathered here as well as the exciting work of seeing theology happen in real time.** To this effect, one will frequently come across specific reasons like “collegiality,” “networking,” and “exchange of ideas.” Some groups noted that reasons for attendance vary by career stage, where younger members come for professional networking and mentorship; mid-career members come for “intermodal collaboration” as well as for the desire to encounter junior scholars; and retired members come to continue to stay relevant with what is new in the guild. Other members noted their engagement with CTSA in deeply sentimental terms. One member, for example, regarded the CTSA as “a community of people I love.”

Importantly, younger scholars note that attendance at the CTSA is also compelled by practical concerns. As one member noted, “I come to CTSA because I have to. It is a *sine qua non* point of access to the career ... this is about access and money for grad students.”

Of note also is the fact that, for some of our grad student members, CTSA can be an intimidating space, mostly because they have lacked mentoring that would readily facilitate access into the CTSA. “I felt invisible here as not a grad student at one of the

big three schools,” writes one member. “We do not talk about how the CTSA is overly run by the big three.”

### **Opportunities and Future Possibilities**

As we orient our Society towards the future, one axis of concern attends to **how the CTSA positions itself within an ecology of US professional theological societies, with Universities, and with other professionals more broadly.** Some members, for example, experience the CTSA as “transactional,” as compared, for example, to the College Theology Society (CTS), which is perceived as more “relational” by contrast. Other members are hoping that, in the future, we engage more deeply with organizations such as the Academy of Catholic Theology, the Sacra Doctrina Project, and the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars. “How can CTSA reach out to those who are not here?” asks one member. “How can we be synodal? Can we sit in a room with non-CTSA members (like Academy of Catholic Theology, ACT). Can we sit in a room and build on similarities like pray together?” This proposal, however, is not without challenges. Other members note that the CTSA is important to them specifically because of its identity as a progressive space, and some members worry about the safety of subsets of our members (e.g., our LGBTQ+ members) if engagement with other societies is not handled with proper care.

Attention was also paid to the changing institutional contexts in which we do our work as theologians. Speaking in reference to the number of academic job opportunities awaiting students after completing doctoral programs, one comment asks, “Is it ethical to churn out so many Ph.D’s?” As a possible solution, they ask how the CTSA can become more “forceful vis-à-vis the surplus of doctoral programs and thus doctoral graduates in an economy that cannot support them.” Another member asks where theologians belong, especially since universities are “throwing us out.” Recognizing the gravity of the situation, one member asks how the CTSA can help us think more creatively about what our work will look like as theology departments become more scarce: “Yes, 10-30% of Catholic universities may be gone over the next 20 years. However, as one member of our group noted – ‘my school will still have a nursing program.’ [...] What does it mean to be a theologian-educator in those contexts? How will theology change?”

Members also wonder if the future for the CTSA includes cultivating new relationships with persons who are not professional theologians. One member calls forward the need for encounters between CTSA members and practitioners in fields related to our own. For example, some members wonder if the CTSA should consider running a conference concurrently with a conference that is more pastorally oriented.

Another axis of discernment involves **the CTSA’s relationship to the larger mission of the Catholic Church in the United States, both at a local level as well as at a national level.** One member noted an important moment at a session in the 2023 meeting which included the participation of a local pastor.

“There was a session today and a parish priest made an intervention that was very important and helpful (e.g.: ‘this is how the daily life of a parish priest goes – fix the roof, stock the toilet paper – and if you’ve asked for a meeting to discuss starting a program and you don’t get a response, you need to just phone again and then again’).”

Also thinking of interactions between the CTSA and the local church come recommendations from members for the CTSA to think about hosting workshops that could be of use to professionals working in contexts relevant to our work – an opportunity that, if pursued, could generate additional revenue for the Society.

Looking towards the national context are calls for greater engagement with and beyond the members of the US Bishops Conference. As one comment notes, “In the year 2045, we hope to find the church of the USA more influenced by the CTSA and by serious Catholic theology than by EWTN and *First Things*. We hope to see God presented in a way that captures the imagination of young people, because the CTSA will have ‘caught up’ with them.” At the same time, contrasting views come from different directions. From one direction, some members perceive the CTSA to be “too ecclesial,” while, coming from another direction, other members judge that the CTSA must continue to challenge itself to think critically beyond the institutional-ecclesial space. “We’re not here just to help the bishops’ think; we’re here to think [for] ourselves as well.”

Articulating in more detail this call for greater influence as the CTSA approaches its centennial are suggestions that the Society facilitate opportunities for members to become better trained in doing public theology; for them to learn to make theology more accessible by bridging gaps between academic theology and the wider world; and for them to demonstrate “how our theology transforms suffering in the world, how...our research changing the world in ways that actually matter/make a real difference.” Other members also suggested maximizing our impact by thinking more intentionally about partnerships with non-Catholics.

A final axis to emerge in the small group conversations concerned **the relationship between the CTSA and regional as well as global realities**. From one group, a strident call was made for the CTSA to decolonize, beginning with taking steps to authentically realize what it would mean to become the Catholic Theological Society *of the Americas*. Conversion towards this reality would include a reckoning with how forces that operate worldwide, such as racism and white supremacy, affect our own body – as evidenced, for example, in the “meltaway of the Latinx community” that we have witnessed within the CTSA itself. One member dreams of a future where “women and people of color take leadership.” In this person’s view, “The organization is dying.”

Also constitutive of such a conversion would be an attentiveness to letting questions that are of signal importance to the world drive our own deliberations as a society, like climate change and polarization within the Church.

Lastly, how might the Society challenge itself to think more globally? One comment, for example, asks how we might shift our focus toward the Global Majority beyond the

Global North, where the Church happens to be growing. Other comments point the society towards adopting different structures – those that may be more synodal than ones that we currently have now – in addition to comments that call for how we might align our own work more directly with the priorities of Pope Francis, priorities that have us look beyond the culture war and that have us placing “evangelization higher than the CDF.”

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## **Appendix | Feedback from the eleven groups (on the basis of which the summary above was based).**

### **Group 1**

CTSA – motivations to come this year and previous years?

Used to it, collegiality, good way to switch into academic mode, get new ideas, interact with people’s whose work I admire, meeting people whose names I know, a chance to be with other Catholic theologians, getting acquainted into the field, mentoring in professional life. Collegiality repeated most. Several came as grad school road trip in the beginning. Taking a grad student out to lunch every year is a good habit. Mentoring from grad program, habit – used to it

Why not? Lack of mentoring from your grad program. Then it feels intimidating.

How can CTSA reach out to those who are not here? How can we be synodal? Can we sit in a room with non-CTSA members (like Academy catholic theology, ACT), can we sit in a room and build on similarities like pray together.

Can we bring in practitioners?

Are we a conference or are we a society?

How would this society take some steps to directly serve the needs of the church? How can we get the bishops to care, for example?

### **Group 2**

Historical questions about the CTS and the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars

Comments on why we come/came: (bolded comments are from our members who do not have

higher education jobs)

- **Non-higher education**

- e.g. **Catholic healthcare ethicists - some of whom do not have a theological education**

- **The exchange of ideas, collegiality, congregation with people with similar interests (e.g. a member who works in Catholic healthcare but is interested in Rahner as well)**
- retired member: collegiality, trying to stay in the loop, still trying to write, attempt to stay relevant
- on the younger end, for professional networking and mentorship
- midcareer: intermethod collaboration, meet junior scholars that aren't at my institution
- **I haven't been able to acquire an academic job, so this is how I keep my academic learning going; I teach high school; this is a place where I can keep my hand in**
- **I also belong to the American Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality, and they have begun to do more online; there is room to wade into the digital world, so it doesn't have to be either/or**
- Moving to college campuses doesn't seem like it would impact the culture - you come for the papers, to see your friends, and go out to eat, and talk about issues, not to experience a hotel
- Geographical proximity in the midwest

### **Group 3**

1. What has motivated you to attend/be involved in the CTSA this year, and in previous years?

Professional Development

- Get an idea of where the field is
- Get to hear the people we're reading
- Get this from a generally progressive perspective

Friends

CTSA (and AAR) is much more transactional than other societies which are far more relational

- Extrinsically motivated to participate by advisors who said you need high status society

CTSA became one group member's home and did find relationships here at the CTSA

- o One's experience at CTSA depends on one's subfield
- o Women's Consultation was very important for one member
- o Got to meet and hear from the people one is reading
- o CTSA is a place where theology came to life

2. What do you hope/desire the CTSA will be doing for its members and for the field of theology

in North America, when we celebrate our 100 th anniversary in 2045?

Do we come to CTSA because we believe that this is where the church does its thinking?

The CTSA is a very ecclesial society.

- o But there is a strong critical dimension

We're not here just to help the bishops' think; we're here to think ourselves as well

Should pastoral associates, DREs, parish priests, the dicastery for people on the margins,

etc be at the CTSA? There was a session today and a parish priest made an intervention that was very important and helpful (e.g.: 'this is how the daily life of a parish priest goes – fix the roof, stock the toilet paper – and if you've asked for a meeting to discuss starting a program and you don't get a response, you need to just phone again and then again')

CTSA needs to think about more partnerships

- o For instance, could CTSA meet concurrently with a pastoral conference?

The bishops don't want us by and large, and now the universities are throwing us out, so

where do we theologians belong?

#### **Group 4**

What motivated us to attend the CTSA convention?

Theology at the CTSA is relevant to our lives. For some of us, the CTSA is relevant because we entered the academy and want to stay current. For others, it is relevant because the CTSA treats the matters of faith that are most important to us: God in the human condition of joys and suffering, God in the issues of theology, feminism, liberation, and contemporary life.

What do we hope for in 2045?

In the year 2045, we hope to find the church of the USA more influenced by the CTSA and by serious Catholic theology than by EWTN and First Things. We hope to see God presented in a way that captures the imagination of young people, because the CTSA will have "caught up" with them. We hope to find that the welcoming prelate not only greets us, but invites his priests, theology students, and permanent deacons to attend our sessions. We hope to encounter a vision of the Catholic Church as it exists throughout the world.

## **Group 5**

Yes, 10-30% of Catholic universities may be gone over the next 20 years. However, as one member of our group noted – “my school will still have a nursing program.” This is true for many Catholic colleges and universities whose professional programs (nursing, PT, OT, speech and language pathology, early childhood to secondary ed programs, social work, and so on) may likely remain intact. What does it mean to be a theologian-educator in those contexts? How will theology change? Departments of theology may diminish, but at a minimum one or two courses in theology and/or religious studies will still be there, even if taught by lecturers or contingent faculty.

Might the CTSA act more like a guild and consider being a bit more, how do we say, forceful vis-à-vis the surplus of doctoral programs and thus doctoral graduates in an economy that cannot support them. Is it ethical to continue to churn out so many PhDs?

While the religiously disaffiliated is on the rise in Europe and North America, the number of people who identify as religious is actually on the rise in the Global Majority. The center of Catholicism is shifting to Latin America, South America, Africa, and Asia. (As a scholar of Islam, the same is the case with Muslims, viz., Muslims are increasing at a rate faster than the religious disaffiliated).

Migration: Christians and Muslims, though currently 55 percent of the world's population, represent over 75 percent of all migrants

Christians + Muslims will soon makeup 2/3rds of the world's population (similar to Global Majority/South)

What does all this mean for the CTSA?

Perhaps we can start decolonizing the CTSA and rename it: Catholic Theological Society of the Americas

CTSA convention should be synodal, contextual, and local: this one is fascinating and most important because there is an opportunity for increase revenue

CTSA should reach out to dioceses ahead of time and invite local parish communities to interact with CTSA

Parish communities should come and tell us about their experience, what they want, listen to them

They can then learn that there is a group of people called theologians do this work, and learn from them

We can imagine accessible workshops for those who want to attend – members could volunteer to lead a workshop for parishioners on various topics

They can attend the convention, too, and so on

the last two bullet points is a great opportunity for revenue, too, because they could pay a nominal fee for registration

Of all the suggestions, this one is the best, we think, because it both makes the CTSA synodal, contextual, and local and also gives an opportunity for increased revenue

Can the CTS and CTSA both exist? For how long?

ACT was also mentioned, but there is concern about the safety of our LGBTQ members in particular regarding that group (at the risk of generalizing and stereotyping)

## **Group 6**

Question 1: why do you come to CTSA?

- All our questions seem to be about us (CTSA internal) and not about the world. What about the issues that drive our time, climate change, and the polarization in the church. Why are we not talking about these in terms of our commitment to the church.
- We come here to meet, to meet new people, we come to hear what the next generation is saying, there is something generative about what the next generation has to say.
- I come now because of my students, who recently saw a different mode of doing theology as we (observed/participated in a location where we) sat in a circle around the people and listened to what the people had to say. This is a different model. But this was a real conference, one that had a visible visceral participatory approach to doing theology.
- I come to hear what the younger people are up to.
- The decolonial turn is the big thing I'm exposed to now.

CTS is more relational, there is a sense of moving as a group through the conference, it is not so marked by specific meeting times, we all participate.

Here we have a very staid model of 90 minute sessions, people on stage – BUT what does it mean to be academic, to be involved in the world church?

I think we have a lot to learn about how others do theology, I'm open to other ways of doing theology.

BUT I DO come for those 3 people panels. We use this structure, we need to present papers, and to hear from our colleagues about our work. This way our colleagues give us questions and push us. New scholars come to see your work and to present themselves, I do not want to lose this. To present your work this has always drawn me to this conference.

I come to CTSA because I have to, it is a sine qua non point of access to the career. I do not think the question of format or culture is an issue/problem for younger scholars, their issue is that they need someone to bankroll their access to precisely this structure. We shouldn't get too lost on the culture questions, this is about access and money for grad students.

How would you see doing the meetings, in person? Would hybrid be good for students? CTS is considering doing a every fourth year as virtual. There are rationales there. But as an early career scholar I need to be in the room.

In SCE, we have midterm meetings, that are all virtual. These are still being worked out. We have many new members that are not in academic institutions, more and more are finding jobs outside the academy and are coming to these meetings.

I do think we need to look at the creative ways that members are trying to come. People have different career paths, if you look at the booksellers, many of these began on the scholarly theologian track.

Question 2. what do you hope the CTSA will be doing at 2045?

Networking is a key thing.

We need to pass on something.

We will be more global, we already have several jobs. We will be more multifaceted. What do we hope for our members in 2045?

THERE is so much untapped potential to speak to the world, note that our resolution today was about ourselves. We need to be able to speak to the world -- we can't just be concerned about ourselves, that's navel gazing.

In 45 I want us much more speaking to the world and dialoging with the world than we are now.

This is a navel gazing exercise? BUT the world is a mess, says one. The issue is can we be prophetic.

We are watching that our bishops don't even have synodality. Can we take over their voice? How don we bring that to the church, when the ordained leadership is so inept? How do we do this? Social media?

We do need to recognize the steps we have been taking.

We have 90 people here, there is a lot of interest in this question.

When we say “the CTSA should speak to the US church” – are we saying that theologians could propose “a competing magisterium” to the bishops? Mannion used to say that theologians are part of the magisterium....those earlier letters from the USCCB are the gold standard for this kind of collaboration with theologians. How do we regain for the society from the bishops the attention of the church.

How are we the keepers and promoters of the tradition? Those earlier successful bishop’s letters were “proto-synodal.” Can we do that dynamic right now.

The academy has something to offer to the world, are we offering this. What does the CTSA say about this issue.

**I also took notes as people made comments from the floor...**

Increasingly, I wonder why more people from my latinx community are not here, we seem not to be here to feed each other as a global catholic church.

Do we include the community where the CTSA is held? Do we turn to the church, are we the church that goes out, seeing new stakeholders in what the CTSA is becoming...listening to the communities in which we meet.

The thing that we repeated most in our group was about collegiality and habit, we are used to coming here, but how did we start coming in the first place – usually grad student mentoring. And then we asked – are we a conference or a society? Can we be more societal?

Can we bring in practitioners? At the AAR we would bring in diverse practitioners.

We had people in our group who were contingent faculty, I as a retired person, a high school teacher, most of us do not have expense accounts. We were puzzled by the assumption that the culture of the CTSA requires pricey hotels. If you want to extend beyond the traditional membership, ask this question.

One theme in our group was about more traditionalist theologians who feel they don’t belong and go elsewhere, to other conferences. These groups are growing, and in fact if we move to parish-goers, we would see more traditional folks. We may want to address this pragmatic concern of membership.

What motivated us? As a group we find theology at the CTSA to be relevant to our lives – it connects us to the wider academy so that our work remains current. We also appreciate its concern for feminist and social issues.

What do we hope for? We hope in 2045 that the US church/society will be more influenced by serious theology and less by EWTN and First Things. We hope that by 2045 we will catch up with the youth. We imagine a time when the bishop of the diocese in which we meet would bring his clergy with him to attend the CTSA.

I have been to the CTSA for 35 years, but this meeting is speaking to how we should be carrying the church forward, I feel like there’s some life here that we haven’t had for

while. I want to applaud the committee for their work. Look at this group, this is impressive, such a big group at 8:30.

We need to think about how many theological societies the US needs. We should think about the differing cultures of the CTS and the CTSA. I felt invisible here as not a grad student at one of the big three schools. We do not talk about how the ctsa is overly run by the big three?

### **Group 7**

1) Why do people come to CTSA? see friends, talk to publishers, give presentations. This is a nice size group.

2) Hopes for future CTSA: We wished that the proceedings of the conference would be published so that we could gain a publication from our presentations. Additionally, why are there multiple US societies of Catholic theologians? A hope for reunification.

### **Group 8**

What motivated you to attend/be involved?

Collegiality/hope

Connection to Catholic academic life - learn about different institutions

People invited into roles - 3-year commitment

Find out what's going on - collegiality/connection

Come to talk to people at Catholic institutions

Invited to be student worker

Continued theological education - met people who studied at different places

Broke out of bubble - conversations/friendships

Former relationship of ACHTUS/CTSA - concern for meltaway of Latinx community

After 2 years in a row - found intellectual home/faith community

What do you hope/desire for the CTSA in the next 22 years?

Inclusiveness/outreach to diverse ideas/people

Try to invite more people from non-Catholic institutions/secular standpoint

Interdisciplinary connections? Invite people from other disciplines

Feel like a more open community

Cultural disconnect reflective of broader global church - trying to hold on to what we know; means by which we communicate theological insights could be more dialogical

Need to experiment with different structures

## Group 9

Motivated you to attend/be involved?

-Shawn Copeland a mentor, her presidency attracted attendance, showed up for her

-help people think differently re what we need to be teaching

-participating w/in a cmy and finding inspiration hope creativity

-encouraged to attend by other members, to meet people and put faces behind books I've read, 1:1 conversations

-networks it affords, source recommendations/vetting, expand horizons (LGBTQ, Latino, Asian, feminist, disability) and sources for teaching

-contributions qua Bk Catholic can make e.g James Cone interest group

-help newcomers to learn the structure, get involved

-belonging & networking

-be provoked by new ideas and possibilities for collaboration

-find new energy

-bring qq of our communities of accountability to forefront of academic inquiry so

-need to be at the table and poking for their visibility

-foster international connections

-learned guts of the structure qua grad assistant for convention; qua non-Catholic gain support for research as a doctoral student, find enthusiasm for own work

What hope/desire CTSA doing for members/field in 2045?

-sometimes only encounter theology in this particular world (vs in pews, at home parish), but way of creative work at CTSA penetrating pulpit and pews, bridge disparity between what hear at conferences and from local bishops (not water our ideas down but let complexity make its way to other parts of church)

-get more of a public theology face; train people to work w journalists, write Op Eds, to get to the people past the gatekeepers; more advocacy, involvement

-break the blockage (like no one in parishes working w Laudato Si')

-help make scholarly theology more broadly accessible, increase theological literacy

-bridge practical/pastoral and academic theology-impact family life more, help even children and nonspecialists to understand (eg relationship w God for young children, parishes assist married couples); bridge the divide

- include nonCatholics more, people who dont have a typical relationship to Catholicism so they don't feel like a square peg in a round hole (lapsed, exiters, etc.)
- more connectivity to rites of the church, e.g. initiation, evangelization to bring people into the church, present the faith and theology at a practical level where ordinary people can see themselves in it, social justice components, develop conscience/moral reasoning skills (Weaver plenary)
- look at how our theology transforms suffering in the world, how is our research changing the world in ways that actually matter/make a real difference
- Francis' agenda: evangelization higher than CDF, go beyond culture war questions, addressing suffering of people on the margins
- seed theologians into organizations in the grassroots (e.g. Ignatian Solidarity Network), ctsa as a conduit to connect people in this way (boards, advisors), break the divide
- representing more of the population, be more reflective of US demographics
- theologians being in between cmys, students, other disciplines, complex realities, helping further realize God's kingdom (facilitators, prophets, helping to advance social issues, while learning)

## Group 10

1.

- I like to be with theologians
- I'm part of an admin position
- I wanted to go to CTS; I teach undergrads
- I'm tempted to go to CTS
- Friendship as a motivator
- I do this for continuing education
- I'm a pastor and want to make friends and meet others
- I get fed here
- CTSA is a bit more intellectual than CTS
- Network
- To see what people are interested in in various fields
- Several go to AAR too

## Group 11

1.

- I'm here because I like it and have conversations with people I like
- The sharing of ideas broadly
- I'm usually in an interfaith space; love the Catholic space
- I appreciate the intergenerational aspect
- Built a CV as grad student; on tenure track to advance career
- A community of people I love
- I belong to other societies but the breadth of CTSA (w/o being Walmart aka AAR)
- Common language and conviction

2. Dreams

- From North America to Global society
- As an outsider please continue meeting
- The signal that women and people of color take leadership. The organization is dying.
- I dream of a place where we get on the other side of racism/sexism
- Become a model of a professional and prayerful society
- Hard to answer because of the people who can't be here. Make sure to ask them to dream with us.
- Make room for theologians not at universities.
- Openness to consult others, to labor organizing (live out CST).