

Thomas Levergood, founder of the Lumen Christi Institute (and a repeat contributor to *America Magazine*), passed away on Friday, August 6, 2021 after a three-month battle with advanced stage colon cancer. I met Thomas in 1996, when we were both graduate students and regulars at Calvert House, the Catholic chaplaincy at the University of Chicago. Thomas was a striking sight: a tall and properly dressed humanities scholar with a big beard. When I later learned he was a convert to Catholicism, his trusty pipe – itself from another century – was the only thing that kept me from imagining that he had been born Amish. Over 13 years of organizing conferences, I learned that the austere and imposing man I'd met as a graduate student was nothing like the warm and jocular Thomas whom I was privileged to get to know, sharing travels, dinners, and deep conversations.

Back then, we both heard the same message from U. of Chicago chaplain, Fr. Willard Jabusch: "Do something important with your lives!" It was understood that he didn't mean something *self*-important. Rather, we Catholics were called to the serious business of making our lives themselves a gift back to God.

Thomas' work with the Lumen Christi Institute (LCI) was exactly this. In 1997, while still a graduate student, Thomas felt called to bring the Catholic intellectual tradition back to the secular academy, most acutely to the alma mater that he loved. Founding LCI, was an extraordinary undertaking, especially for a graduate student. He later described his approach in the early years, only partially joking, as "Fake it till you make it." Over the next nearly 25 years, Thomas faked it well, and LCI became a model for high level intellectual discussion involving the Catholic faith and tradition. The best Catholic minds from around the world have come through LCI's programs, and the students have benefitted tremendously. Indeed, even at the risk of offending quite a few of my colleagues at Notre Dame and many others in the Vatican, I would venture to describe LCI as the premier place for high level intellectual discussion engaging the secular disciplines with the Catholic intellectual tradition.

Starting LCI involved considerable personal sacrifice. Thomas had considered religious life and was a born academic. Sacrificing academic aspirations and even his Ph.D., he found his true calling in his dedication to the Lumen Christi Institute.

Religious or not, Thomas lived a contemplative life – regularly spending hours in prayer. He loved the Angelus, and we prayed it regularly at LCI events. Prayer was special to him, and he died after friends with him completed the Divine Mercy chaplet.

Ph.D. or not, Thomas remained a deep thinker, always interested in the bigger picture and, by extension, the bigger vision of the Institute's academic programming. Through his institution building and relationship building, he made profound contributions to academia and to the Church. Thomas was always very interested in the political order, and although was a faithful Catholic, he remained an independent thinker. This independence was instrumental in making LCI a place for all serious Catholic minds, even during a time of increased polarization. Thomas was convinced that much of the increased polarization in society was the result of the dysfunction of our political institutions, and his writings and ideas from decades ago seem in

many ways prophetic now. He was also convinced that the Catholic intellectual tradition, Catholic social thought in particular, could be a unifying force in society.

Thomas' life's work was closely interwoven with Francis Cardinal George, whose support of LCI made it a little easier to "fake it". They were both similar: thoughtful academics by nature, for whom God had other plans, and the mission of the Institute was dear to both. Thomas assisted Cardinal George with his own books, and Cardinal George was a mentor to Thomas, perhaps even a second father figure in his life. The Cardinal's passing grieved him deeply.

Thomas was not without his quirks, weaknesses, or even faults. (One is not always allowed to say this about the dead, but one can always say this about friends). His spiritual journey had its own twists and turns. He was awkward, and I was always somewhat surprised that he successfully fundraised. He could also be blunt, moody, even difficult, but people appreciated his sincerity: his boldness was for God and helped him accomplish a great deal. He had big visions but always needed plenty of help with the details from his dedicated staff. Thomas struggled tremendously with his illness at the end. Though thankfully brief, it was a shock and a cross, physically and emotionally. Ultimately though, despite his own limitations, with a leap of faith and with God's grace, Thomas made his life a remarkable gift to God and others --- a lasting lesson for all of us.