A few years ago I was teaching a course on the sacraments to a class of seminarians. When examination time came around I would always give oral exams. Some of the students welcomed this approach; others did not. Among the latter group was a young man, who, when he came in for his first exam, was very nervous. Thinking I might calm him down a bit, I said, "Listen just relax. Think of this as a chat." He looked at me and said, "Right. Father, it might seem like a chat to you, but for me it is a chat with a mark."

That has stayed with me because the seminarian was right in a way that perhaps he did not at that time intend. Of course, he knew that not only what he had to say but also how he said it would bring with it an evaluation that would be marked on his record. In both a deeper and broader sense, however, his response captured something acutely important about the whole theological enterprise. The ultimate goal of theology is not to get a grade but it is to make a mark, to leave a mark, on the student. Theology is more than study; it is encounter, encounter with the living word of God made flesh in Jesus Christ within the community of his Church. Such an encounter cannot fail to make a mark, to touch both mind and heart in such ways as to leave the student changed as he or she is drawn into the mystery of divine love and God's saving purpose.

Newman Theological College is at the service of this life-changing encounter. It is a place and space where faculty and students together ponder and open their lives to the mystery of God's self-communication in the gifts of the Son and the Holy Spirit. For this very reason it stands at the heart of the new evangelization in Western Canada. We are accustomed to saying that we prepare students for ordained and lay ministry within the Church. This is true, of course. But reflection upon the very nature of theology impels us to say more. The graduates of this college, marked and changed by their encounter with Jesus Christ, are sent forth from this institution to be agents of the transformation of this world.

For the accomplishment of this apostolate, students are trained to articulate with precision the deposit of faith, in order to communicate faithfully, coherently and convincingly to others what God has done for the world in Christ. In addition, they must also be helped to understand the challenges modern society poses to the clear reception of the Gospel. Consider, for example, the issue of words. This is a serious issue today, when the rich vocabulary used by the Church through the ages to convey the faith is less and less accessible to the population, including to our people. The difficulty is compounded by the secular context in which definitions are fluid, no longer linked to nature, to the givenness of things, but arbitrarily determined and changed to accord with self-centered desires. To this is added the current tendency to prefer illusion to truth, emotion to reason and sound byte to substance. Effective proclamation must understand these factors, and many more, which determine the capacity of the listener to receive it.
But this is not unique to our age. Announcing the Gospel in ways intelligible to the people of any given era has always been the challenge of theology and preaching. To assist in this task, theology has traditionally turned to philosophy as a precious and necessary companion. Throughout history it has furnished theology with the analytical and conceptual tools needed to announce with clarity the beauty and truth of the Gospel.

Thus we welcome as a particularly fortuitous gift the installation of a philosopher as president of a theological college. The insights born of his discipline will serve us all very well as they help us to understand the milieu in which we are called to preach the Good News of salvation in Christ.

I think it accurate to say that Dr. West didn't see this coming when he embarked on his career. Yet the call to embrace the unforeseen comes to every disciple who says with the psalmist, "Here am I Lord." Indeed, the letter to the Hebrews tells us that total openness to the will of God is the very essence of the life of Jesus, who makes clear in the Gospel that he expects the same of those who would be of his company.

Jason, those of us who have had the joy of getting to know you realized from the start that you are a man of God and of the Church, one who understands his personal, family and professional life in vocational terms, and thus seeks only to do the will of God. We are grateful that you have responded generously and with faith to this particular summons. As we now witness your installation and look forward to benefiting from your many gifts, we pledge you our heartfelt support.

Most Reverend Richard W. Smith
Archbishop of Edmonton
Chair, Newman Theological College Board of Governors

January 29th, 2013