Joseph Goering: A Tribute

Joseph Goering writes medieval history with the soul of a pastoral theologian. His craft is history, and in conventional terms his skills are those of a highly accomplished medievalist. He was heir to the finest in training at Toronto's Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies and Centre for Medieval Studies, and himself emerged as the continuator of that tradition with nearly forty dissertation supervisions to his credit, a record for his generation and an achievement garnering him the CARA teaching award in 2015 from the Medieval Academy of America. Over the past forty years Goering has made himself a refined expert in a wide-ranging and previously under-studied body of materials on matters theological, canonistic, and pastoral, all left to us in manuscript from the European Middle Ages, much of it previously unknown or unedited. Joe Goering loves nothing more than uncovering a text still buried in manuscript, unscrambling what it is and how it came to be, transforming its gothic scrawl into whole sentences, paragraphs and thought units, then setting it before us in an intelligible edition: a text new to us and likely unread for hundreds of years. The point here is not his technical proficiency and all that it takes for granted, however hard-won that may be and the real pleasure it may yield. The satisfaction lies in opening to us yet another new text in all its intricacies, a thought-world otherwise obscured or forgotten, a chance to enter again into the mind and spirit of those who first articulated its vision of life, who first tried to resolve the human, moral, and spiritual complexities they wrestled with honestly in both thought and practice. In these forgotten or unknown works Goering has sought to make manifest what in them may still speak, also to invite historians in, to look more deeply into the complexity of the human condition as these medieval writers experienced, imagined, and reflected on it.

All this might seem quite far from prairie Kansas where Joe Goering grew up amidst flatland Protestant and Mennonite communities – as indeed the libraries and streets of Toronto, his working home for much of his adult life, and the ancient manuscript repositories of England lie far from the big skies

and open fields of those small Midwestern towns. But Joe never really left these towns. Instead he undertook to grow a larger world around him. His sense of character and community, of face-to-face responsibility and care for others, of measuring success in human and humane terms – this he carried with him, and it remains with him still. Indeed a core sense of human and religious community has informed a great deal of what he went looking for in the medieval past – even as he also grew it immeasurably in range and depth by plunging fully into the intricate complexities of schooled theology and law in thirteenth-century Europe. In this tribute we will call to mind his scholarly achievements. But we should not forget that bemused sense of good humor and genuine curiosity which accompanied him all along the way: into his own quite individual and ingenious quest for the holy grail, into teaching military history as a staple, indeed into an extraordinarily wide range of teaching. Nor should we forget the Midwestern kid who rounds up friends for a Blue Jays game. Students and friends and colleagues can each add their own stories about his deep and caring and genuine humanity.

Joseph Goering left Kansas to study theology at Yale Divinity School with Jaroslav Pelikan. His first aim was indeed to leave those flatlands for the high peaks of stellar medieval thinkers, figures such as Thomas Aquinas. That core ambition never left him. Indeed in recent years he undertook to teach Toronto graduates and undergraduates Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, in English translation to be sure, nonetheless the medieval university's textbook for theology. He left Yale to anchor his theological interests in medieval culture more broadly at Toronto, embracing, as he would later note on occasion, Étienne Gilson's expansive vision of a medieval thought-world grounded broadly in medieval culture and society. During his student years at the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies Joe Goering came into the charmed circle of Leonard Boyle, that extraordinary Dominican friar, palaeographer, codicologist, and religious historian who concluded his career as Prefect of the Vatican Library. Among the many students that Boyle taught and the many lives that he influenced, Goering seems to me to have become the true heir to Boyle's signal and most original project, his identifying of *pastoralia* as a central feature of the literary, intellectual, cultural, and religious landscape of the High Middle Ages.

Goering first distinguished himself, and earned tenure, by putting on the map a Paris-trained theologian, William de Montibus (d. 1213), who made his reputation as a master at Lincoln Cathedral, the city where he was likely also born. This book has as its telling subtitle "The Schools and the Literature of Pastoral Care." In his book on William de Montibus Goering offered complete

or partial editions of some sixteen texts, with subjects ranging from penance to proverbs, basic instruction to elementary theology, literacy to spiritual guidance. Here, in a way not evident in traditional studies of "Scholasticism" or for that matter in the formal rulings of diocesan synods, we see the work of teachers whose eyes were not just on their careers but on people, and their efforts in providing teaching materials which might aid in religious education and in sorting moral dilemmas.

This is the heart of Goering's vision, the connections between university teaching and parish-level practice. To what degree do theologians and canonists have an eye on that level? To what degree do university teachings, manuals, and prescriptions make their way down to the libraries and practices of parish priests? There are no easy answers to these questions, and the story only really begins in the thirteenth century. But this is the new religious and cultural world that Joseph Goering has focused upon and sought to open up for the rest of us. He has done so with an exquisite balance between the heightened expectations of trained clergy emerging from universities and the human realities of local worlds practicing religion following long-familiar customs. Goering's vision is the one that ought certainly to be the point of departure for all interested students of high medieval parish life.

If one part of Joe Goering never left Kansas, another part has intellectually never strayed far from Lincoln. Of Goering's thirty-eight article-length publications to date, including an electronic publication essentially of book length, fourteen, or a little more than a third, concern Robert Grosseteste, in his later years bishop of Lincoln. R.W. Southern some years ago wrote an influential monograph with sweeping arguments about a distinctive English form of university and religious education. Joe Goering has instead worked patiently text by text to reconstruct this highly disparate literary output, and then to link the works to their larger theological and pastoral purposes. All these studies taken together have over time, bit by bit yielded a whole new vision of this remarkable intellectual and bishop.

Emphasizing Goering's approach to medieval texts would slight his achievement if we did not consider the broader career. Over the past fifteen years he has co-edited eight volumes of essays on medieval themes from liminality and rule-making to exegesis and medievalism. With Frank Mantello, often a partner in his editorial work, he has translated into English the letters of Robert Grosseteste, a stunning editorial and scholarly achievement awarded the Margaret Wade Labarge Prize from the Canadian Society of Medievalists. And in 2005, in a venture both imaginative and daring, he offered his own take

on that enchanting mystery, the "grail," this book translated into French five years later. As a scholar Joe has confidently gone his own way, a move not in fact so easy or common in the present guild of historians. He has not made himself a "monographs" man. He is a "texts" man. But that is not quite right either, or right only if you add to it a "peoples" person. He is above all an empathetic historian of peoples working out their moral and religious lives within the setting of the medieval parish communities, and more largely of university-trained lawyers and theologians attempting to sort out those same dilemmas in highly complex intellectual forms.

If there is one genre of pastoral literature, or one aspect of the new religious expectations emerging in the thirteenth century, that has especially fascinated Goering, it is penance, the formal account-giving expected of all baptized Europeans after 1215, this to be done before their "own" priest. The tariff books of penance that had reigned for hundreds of years now began to disappear, and manuals on confession emerged. What we have are literary and priestly guides, with their model questions and theological justifications, while actual practice in the act of confession in fair part still eludes us. Nonetheless these works take us deep into a very delicate moment in the life of churchmen acting as overseers and into the life of parishioners concerned to make their lives right before all-knowing and all-judging God.

In recent years strong claims, Foucauldian-like in their sweeping version of oversight, have been issued about the church's oppressive surveillance. What we find in treatise after treatise that Goering has uncovered and edited is often something far more nuanced: care to justify the need for this practice and guidelines in how to exercise it, how to discern fittingly the multitude of human troubles and faults likely to arise in the practice of penance. Even if these works are ultimately "theoretical," they offer true glimpses into the intricacies of ethical reflection as well as the range of human dilemmas priests might confront. In more than one essay Goering has laid out the finest available guides for any working scholar to the literature and practice of penance in the thirteenth century, foundational materials of which interpreters far from history or religion (literature, for instance) must also avail themselves.

Penance was regarded in the Middle Ages as the "internal forum," that is, a kind of court of law, one ruling over matters of moral guilt and conscience rather than property or office (the external forum). For the practice of the Christian life as the schools were rethinking and reorganizing, law was as important as theology, in many cases more so, and Goering is in fact fully as much a student of canon law as he is of theology. He can follow his texts and

arguments and sources into canon law, into Gratian or the *Decretales* just as readily and easily as he does into Scripture or Peter Lombard's *Sentences*. But we must note and honour that. In my experience not many scholars of medieval religious life prove themselves equally ambidextrous.

This volume is filled with essays by students who would never have found their own medieval text, or been encouraged to follow a medieval text into difficult manuscripts, or been helped to sort out its context and connections, or been encouraged to consider its theological or canonistic framework were it not for the caring attention of Joseph Goering as teacher and supervisor. His understanding of community life and indeed of religious life is not a matter just of the head – though his head works with remarkable productivity and clarity – but of the heart too and of human commitment. Understanding medieval parishes and the teachings and practices that marked them in the wake of the new schools is not simply an "interest" of Joe. In some deep sense it is who he is, grounded in his own deeply and religiously centered humanity. It is what as a teacher and adviser, also as researcher, writer, and instructor, he has practiced in his own life, and what is made manifest in the community of grateful young scholars and older friends that have gathered around him.

John Van Engen
University of Notre Dame