Author Meets Critics: A Theology of Public Life

Opening remarks by **Charles Mathewes**Author of *A Theology of Public Life* (Cambridge, 2007), and Associate Professor of Religious Ethics and the History of Christian Thought University of Virginia

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the neighbor and even from creation. (For Augustine, sin is fundamentally an attempted retreat into privacy.) But such escape is impossible; in every way we are more intimate with one another than we "naturally," in our fallen state, imagine. Divine grace puts us in right relation to God and the neighbor by turning us toward one another, and the story of fallen and redeemed Creation is the story of God's gracious subverting of the boundaries we impose-or rather, it is the story of God's revealing to us that our attempt to impose such boundaries is misguided from the beginning.

This theology illuminates our lives as a form of participation, through Christ, in the Church, in the Divine life in its creation, sustenance and redemption of the created order. This participation, while distorted by the fall, still remains genuine participation, mediated through the world, through our condition as creatures. That is to say, creation is not the "background" to our redemption, ultimately to be discarded in the eschaton; it plays an essential role within it. Our anticipatory participation in this redemption, available even in this life, is most vividly brought to self-consciousness, and deepened in our lives, by understanding our existence through the tripartite structure of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love.

Part Two specifies this theology by detailing how Christians might understand and inhabit public life, civically and ascetically, during the world. It offers an eschatologically-inflected theology of citizenship as integral to our ascetic transformation for the coming Kingdom of God. It does this by arguing that citizenship is usefully understood as a liturgy, the collective act of a community. Yet by engaging in political activities, we also participate in properly theological activities; thus this liturgy of citizenship will find its fullest meaning only before the Lord at the Judgment day. Because the concept of "citizen" is the fundamental political category of modernity, the book argues that political theology must change its fundamental question from the received question of proper obedience to authority, to the question of proper participation in public life. Understood as a question about the

But because our present participation in this political liturgy should fit us for our role in that greater liturgy to come, the virtues also equip Christians with an ascetics of public life. They help us discern how best to inhabit the multitudinous cultural and political forces of our world so that they may best shape our character. Against what Augustinians see as our