

A wise heart

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [May 23, 2001](#) issue

When I think of the people who have had a special impact on my life, who were catalysts in my formation, I think especially of Joseph Sittler. Sittler was professor of theology on the Federated Theological Faculty and at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. Before I got there, I had never heard of him. I was fortunate enough to be in his “Introduction to Theology” class, and I was enthralled. I remember he had us plow through Gustav Aulén’s *Christian Doctrine*. But I mostly remember that his lectures were like nothing I had ever heard before.

It was not possible to take notes, because each sentence, each phrase, was so loaded with content. You risked missing most of it in the frantic effort to get some of it on paper. I decided not to try to take many notes and simply to listen intently and later write down my impressions. Walt Whitman, Gerard Manley Hopkins, E. E. Cummings and T. S. Eliot were in virtually every lecture, and Sittler was the one who taught me that artists, poets, composers and theologians are often up to the same thing, that art is often an imaginative way of doing what good theology does: to expose the holy in the common and provide a way for human beings to experience, praise and adore it. His own rhetoric was often poetic.

Sittler never wrote a major theological text. His enduring influence would be in the lectures and books and sermons of his students. But he did write, lecture and preach, and, happily, Steven Bouma-Prediger and Peter Bakken have compiled some of Sittler’s writings in *Evocations of Grace*. One of my favorites in the book is “The Care of the Earth,” a sermon Sittler preached in 1963 at Rockefeller Chapel. I smiled in recollection when I read:

We may have missed something. . . . Our traditional churches affirm a heavy kind of solemnity that leaves us with a lugubrious holy, but defenseless and aghast before the joy of, for instance, a Baroque church. Such a church is luxuriant, joy-breathing, positively Mozartean in its vivacity—replete with rosy angels tumbling in unabashed enjoyment among impossibly fleecy clouds against an incredible blue heaven.

“Mozartean in its vivacity . . . a lugubrious holy.” Phrases like that came out of him frequently and opened for me a whole new connection between big ideas and words carefully, creatively and passionately spoken.

In that sermon and in much of his thinking, Sittler was exegeting Thomas Aquinas: “It is the heart of sin that men use what they ought to enjoy, and enjoy what they ought to use.” That insight continues to have relevance as the politicians retreat from hard-fought and progressive environmental standards.

When I returned to Chicago in 1985, I invited Sittler to preach at my installation. I was surprised and pleased that he accepted my invitation and seemed to remember me. I was far from being a star student.

He died two years later. One of his favorite psalms, which he quoted regularly and assigned to his preaching seminar, was Psalm 90. I never read or hear it without thinking about him and offering a prayer of gratitude to God for the privilege of having known him. “So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart. . . . Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands—O prosper the work of our hands!”