

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS:  
CRISES IN CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

I would like to outline certain areas of crisis in contemporary theology that are of particular importance for us today. In doing so, I hope to stimulate your enthusiasm and imagination in the direction of further scholarly research to meet the challenge we face in filling our role in the contemporary theological situation.

By crisis I mean a situation of concern, even of conflict, which presents a special challenge for theology today. With the help of our efficient committee on contemporary problems, the Board of Directors has been able to choose for discussion in this convention some important areas of crisis in contemporary theology. The topics that are being treated in this convention fall into three areas of critical concern for theologians today.

First of all, there is the question of the liturgical dimensions of scriptural and theological studies; secondly, the ecumenical question of union in the Body of Christ, His Church; thirdly, the concern for Christian responsibility, particularly in the areas of parenthood, management, and scholarship.

The study of the liturgical dimensions of theological studies is an important consideration for theologians today, not only because crucial changes are now being made in the liturgy, but especially because the roots of these changes affect so many other things in the theology of the Christian economy. The liturgy is the heartbeat of the Christian community. Just as the Christ-event gave perfect human expression in being, thought, word, and action to the mystery of God's complete self-gift to men, so the continuity of this Christ-event in history finds its culminating human expression within the people of God in the celebration of the liturgy. In the eucharistic celebration, the pilgrim Christian will normally find his most complete encounter with God in Christ because here in all his human dimensions as a free person he can become engaged in the experience of the totality and fulness of the Christian mystery. His other encounters with God, whether in the Bible or in private prayer or

in theological reflection, are by their nature less complete experiences of the Christian reality.

Human development naturally proceeds from experience to understanding and on to judgment in affirmation and conscious free decision only to return again to experience with enriched understanding. We find the same process operative in Christian development: from the experience of faith to understanding through reflection and on to judgment in affirmation and free decision only to return to faith with enriched understanding. It would seem to follow that if a theologian neglects the liturgy where on the level of experience in all its human dimensions he can become engaged in the totality and fulness of the Christian mystery, he will be less a theologian than he should be.

Theology, however, is not liturgy any more than understanding is faith. Still, theology is dependent on the liturgy for the fulness of the experience of faith. Until rather recently, Catholic theology neglected the fact that faith is fundamentally a personal commitment of a person to a person—not to a set of abstract propositions. And (if I am not mistaken) it was the renewal of the liturgy within the Church that brought into focus this personal commitment as a commitment that takes place only *in* and *through* and *with* the community. For the liturgy is the privileged place of our encounter with God. When theology neglects this privileged *site* of the proclamation of the Christ-event and its realization in the pilgrim people of God, it is destined to fall short in fulfilling its role in the service of the Church.

It has been fairly well demonstrated, I think, that the decline of theology after its golden age in the 13th century was fundamentally due to its loss of contact with its source in revelation. In the light of recent developments in our understanding of the liturgy and its place in Christian life, perhaps we can make this statement more explicit; namely, that the decline of theology was fundamentally due to the forgetfulness of the fact that the principal human situation in which the revelation of God is heard and actively responded to is in the liturgical action of the community. Perhaps we can say that the ravages of nominalism and conceptualism would never have

been so great, had not the Christian community already begun to become fragmented by the alienation of the Christian people from the liturgy, not only by its language barrier, but especially by its clericalism and its formalism.

The reformation which issued in Protestantism was in the direction of an individualism in which every Christian celebrated his own liturgy. His faith as an individual before God was sufficient for his salvation. The Catholic counter-reformation, intent on preserving the sacramental structure of the Church, set about not only a reform of the clergy but a clarification of man's sinful condition and the process of his justification and growth in grace through the sacraments. The anathemas that were issued juridically divided Protestants from the Catholic Church. From that time up to our own, the emphasis was placed on the Church as a visible, juridical society whose membership was determined by the law of the Church. The stance taken by the Catholic Church was polemical—a defense of its doctrine and rights. Its concern was to preserve and defend the deposit of revelation. And all through the onslaughts of rationalism, liberalism, and historicism, the Church continued her polemical stance. When modernism gained a foothold within her own walls, it had to be expelled.

Today, the Church has taken an entirely new stance; an entirely new tone pervades her dealings with her Protestant brethren. This change is due in no small measure to the liturgical renewal which has culminated in our time in the Constitution on the Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council called by John XXIII. The center of Christian life is becoming once again a worshiping community rather than a juridical Church. Even the primacy of the Pope has been set within the framework of the collegiality of the bishops, within the people of God.

Many other factors have had their part to play in the *aggiornamento*—such as the rise of historical consciousness and the consequent evolutionary dimension of human thought; and of phenomenology, personalism, and existentialism with their emphasis on the concrete situation and on the primacy of the free human person. These factors, together with the renewal of biblical studies and the

persistent demand for an explanation of the meaning of the Church in the modern world, have given rise to a new sense of the community of God's people in Christ.

This new sense of community in history in continuity with the past, together with a newly realized openness of the free human person for the future, has given special urgency to a problem of critical importance for contemporary theology—the problem of the evolutionary development of the being, faith, theology, and life of the people of God. The thematization of doctrinal development is a relatively recent phenomenon in Catholic theology. Within the world of Protestant theology, doctrinal development is still very suspect. Within liberal Protestantism there is still the cherished presupposition that later doctrinal formulations and teachings must be explained in terms of illegitimate transpositions and ecclesiastical additions rather than valid evolutionary developments in strict continuity with the community of the apostles.

When faced with rapid change, we can expect a certain reasonable unrest—even anxiety and crisis. Until we have discovered satisfactorily the laws of evolutionary development in the life, doctrine, and practice of the Church, we can expect theology to be in crisis. A phenomenology of development is not enough. What is needed is the establishment of criteria for judgment of true as opposed to false development. Moreover, we must clarify for ourselves the role of the authority of the Church in its relation to the initiative of the community of Christian scholars. A good start has been made in America in distinguishing purely historical presuppositions, purely cultural and political thought patterns from the nucleus of doctrinal continuity. We think first of all of John Courtney Murray and his work in the area of Church-State relations and of religious liberty. We recall also the contribution of the Canadian theologian, Bernard Lonergan, for his prolegomenon to theological method (his book *Insight*) and by his lectures on theological methodology.

The realization that *all* the dimensions of the free Christian subject-person are present in the Christian experience of the liturgy may be the first step in working out a theory of development that will go far to resolve the contemporary crisis in theology.

## II

This new stance of the Church, this new tone, this renewed sense of community, has set on foot an ecumenical endeavor which could not have been dreamed of in the Catholic Church even ten years ago. And now, in a decree of Vatican II, we have the *Magna Carta* of ecumenism. For in principle and intent, this decree clears the path toward re-establishment of full and perfect union of the churches in the one Body of Christ. "No obstacle," says the decree, "must be placed in the way of Providence nor anything be done that is prejudicial to the future inspirations of the Holy Spirit" (24).<sup>\*</sup> The liberating influence of this decree and of the example of the Secretariate for the Promotion of Christian Unity is already having its effect.

Here I can only point out briefly a few of the significant positions taken by the Church in this decree. First of all, as a basic premise, the decree declares that "It is the Holy Spirit abiding in believers and filling the whole Church and ruling over it who brings about that wonderful communion of the faithful and joins them all together so intimately in Christ that he is in the principle of the Church's unity" (2). Hence, Catholics should beg the Holy Spirit for the grace of a genuine change of heart, for a new outlook, for pardon of God and of our separated brethren, for holiness in keeping with the gospel. "This change of heart and holiness of life along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians should be regarded as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement" (5). Moreover "those who are now born into communities of this kind [churches separated from the Catholic Church] and who are imbued with the faith of Christ cannot be accused of the sin of separation, and the Catholic Church embraces them with respect and love as brothers" (3).

*Secondly*, the Catholic Church recognizes "that all those who have been justified by faith in baptism are incorporated into Christ, and so have a right to be called Christians and are with good reason

<sup>\*</sup> Numbers following quotations refer to the numbers in the "*Decretum de Oecumenismo*," as published in *AAS* 57 (30 Jan. 1965) 90-112.

acknowledged as brothers in the Lord by the sons of the Catholic Church." Indeed

even many of the significant elements and endowments which go together to build up and give life to the Church itself can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church: the written word of God, the life of grace, faith, hope, and charity, and the other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit. . . .

. . . a number of sacred actions of the Christian religion in use among our separated brethren . . . most certainly can truly engender a life of grace . . . and they must be regarded as being capable of providing a means of entry into the community of salvation. . . . Hence the separated churches and communities, even though we believe they labor under some defects, have certainly not been deprived of meaning and importance in the mystery of salvation. The Holy Spirit has not refused to use them as a means of salvation, whose power comes from that fullness of grace and truth that has been entrusted to the Catholic Church (3).

*Thirdly*, the ecumenical movement, which is directed toward the promotion of unity among Christians, calls positively for "dialogue between competent people from various churches and communities" that will lead to sincere mutual understanding and appreciation, "greater cooperation" in all things demanded for the common good by any Christian conscience and, finally, common prayer. Indeed, "Catholics ought to be glad to acknowledge and show esteem for the truly Christian endowments, deriving from our common heritage, that are to be found among our separated brethren, . . ." We should remember that "Whatever is truly Christian is never contrary to the genuine good of faith" (4).

*Fourthly*, the decree directs that theology and other subjects "be taught in such a way that the ecumenical viewpoint be always kept in mind so that these studies correspond better with the facts" (10). Moreover "the mode and pattern of expressing the Catholic faith should not be allowed to become an obstacle to dialogue." And while false irenicism must be avoided, the Catholic faith should be explained "in a way and in a language that our separated brethren can really understand." Extremely important is

that we are told to remember that "there is a 'hierarchy of truths' in the Catholic doctrine because of their diverse connections with the foundations of the Christian faith . . ."—a consideration which will "open the way for a kind of fraternal rivalry that will stir up everyone to seek a deeper knowledge and clearer expression of the unfathomable riches of Christ" (11). Special consideration should be given to the "origin and growth" of these separated communities and churches to arrive at a better understanding of our differences.

I have been able to mention only a few of the more significant principles and directives contained in the decree. However, it is possible even within this limited context to discern certain trends of great significance for the future of ecumenism. *First of all*, although the term "separated brethren" continues to be used in the document, the fact that official recognition is given them as brothers in the Lord, having a *right* to be called Christians because incorporated by baptism into the Body of Christ, seems to encourage us to look for a term which will correspond better with the actual situation. After all, implications of terminology can be very important in this dialogue.

*Secondly*, it is clear from the document that dialogue is ordered to fuller communion in the one visible church of Christ. There is no mention of the *conversion* of Protestants; the term "conversion" or change of heart in the document is applied equally to Catholics as well as Protestants. The keynoting expression in the document is "*redintegratio unitatis*," which would be poorly translated as a "return to unity." A better rendering would be "re-establishment of complete unity." Thus the dialogue is clearly distinguished from *mission* whose purpose is conversion to the faith of Christ.

*Thirdly*, we can conclude that unity itself as well as communion and membership in the one visible Church of Christ must have varying degrees and forms of participation. The goal set before us is that of full and perfect communion which Catholic faith holds is found only in the Catholic Church.

*Fourthly*, cooperation in every area of Christian faith and endeavor is positively encouraged—even "cooperation in common worship" is not altogether ruled out provided that the principles governing the signification or sign of the unity of the Church are

upheld. *Finally*, and the most important: the path which opens to fuller communion is not the path of extending or expanding ecclesiastical authority, but it is the path of mutual Christian love expressed in cooperative study, dialogue, and prayer leading to an appreciation of the fulness of the heritage possessed by the one Body of Christ.

All of these trends seem to point in the direction of the essential task of ecumenism: that of investigating with mutual respect and genuine Christian charity the tradition of the apostles as it has been handed on in the Christian community. This problem of tradition has come to the fore in the Council in the schema on revelation, particularly in regard to the relation of Scripture and tradition as sources. It is in this area of tradition, which is operative in the total Christian community, that we can look for giant strides in our ecumenical endeavor. This is one of the most important tasks to which we must dedicate ourselves today. For as our understanding of tradition is clarified and as our tradition is purified, not of its variety of expression but of its illegitimate accretions, we can gradually achieve fuller communion in the authentic tradition of Christianity. For continuity in unity is established only through tradition that is authentic.

### III

Finally, we come to the most critical and most vexing problem today—that of Christian responsibility in the complexity of the modern world, especially in regard to parenthood, business management, and scholarship. No other area cries more loudly for clarification.

Responsibility in regard to parenthood and management is being discussed in this convention by specially chosen people of competence. My purpose here is merely to point up the principal elements of the problem that call for the serious consideration of theologians today. The problem of responsible parenthood is complicated by the fact that some theologians today are questioning the very competence of the Church in the area of natural morality. Others, although relatively few in number, are taking the stand, especially in private discussions, that the Church herself is presently

in a state of indecision in her authentic teaching about the contraceptive use of the pill, and even about contraception itself.

The positions taken by these theologians are an important factor contributing to the confusion of the Christian conscience in this area today. In the past, moral theologians have, no doubt unconsciously, tended to exercise *control* over the Christian conscience by making decisions which the faithful should have been making for themselves. Too often, ready-made capsule solutions have been handed out for rather complex personal problems. But the theologians I have spoken of, in spite of their praiseworthy endeavor to develop and form and not to control the Christian conscience, have left it floundering without basic and sufficient guidance.

The crisis has its ramifications, both in regard to the laity and to the professional theologian. For the layman, the problem is *how* to take back his own conscience (which must be done) in such a way that he can make truly responsible decisions for himself. And since seminarians are the future guides of the Christian people today they above all have to attain full maturity in this area of Christian responsibility. Hence, the critical importance of seminary training today.

For the professional theologian (whether clerical or lay), the problem involves his necessary confrontation with the contemporary development of science and technology. To communicate with the world today, he must be deeply aware of the advances being made in technology and in the natural and human sciences while at the same time maintaining a Christian viewpoint that will enable him to see how these discoveries fit into the Christian economy. This is not an easy task.

Neither the Church nor her theologians can close the doors to advances in technology, science, and philosophy by any precipitous judgment, nor can *they* open the doors to just any and every stir of opinion that is in the air.

Hence, what is imperative for the theologian today is, first of all, involvement in dialogue with the scientific community, especially in the university which is the center of intellectual and cultural development; secondly, a better understanding of the role of authority in the Church, precisely as liberating Christian life and

thought so that it can grow and develop in accord with its own inner dynamism. Too often in the past, ecclesiastical authority has been used to set limits to intellectual inquiry to the neglect of its much more important role of positively freeing the Christian mind and heart for the fullest possibilities of growth and development.

Moreover, just as in our ecumenical endeavor we need not only an openness but positive initiative in establishing dialogue, so too in theology, openness itself is not enough. A positive approach to the modern world of technology, science, and philosophy is required if theology is to fulfill its role in modern life.

It seems that two conclusions can be drawn from these considerations:

1. Theology must become part and parcel of the intellectual and cultural centers of our communities, namely, the universities. Whether this demands the re-establishment of our seminaries and schools of theology on university campuses is a further question and of great importance. I think that it does—*definitely*; but we cannot go into this question now.

2. Theology must elaborate much more carefully and more fully the proper competence of authority in relation to the development of mature freedom in Christian life and thought.

In summary, what I have tried to say is the following:

1. The liturgical renewal is demanding that we face squarely the problem of evolutionary development in the Church.

2. The current ecumenical endeavor demands that our cooperative dialogue center more and more on the question of authentic tradition in all the Christian churches as the key to unity in continuity of the one Body of Christ.

3. In the area of Christian responsibility the present crisis demands an active engagement on the part of theologians in the intellectual and cultural centers of the world together with a developed theology of the liberating character of Christian authority in its competent exercise.

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