

## THE SEMINARY BETWEEN THE DEMANDS OF THEOLOGY AND PRAXIS

Jack A. Bonsor (St. Patrick's Seminary, Menlo Park, California) began by considering the significance of praxis, the rootedness of thought in life. From this perspective he discussed the major impact of students' life experiences on their approach to theology and their ability to learn it. He noted that what students can think is shaped by their experiences. Several examples drove this point home. The institutional profile of the seminary itself—whether it is free-standing or affiliated, whether men and women laity and religious are prominent in the faculty and administration—already makes an ecclesiological statement that will influence theological thought. Experiences of priests, deacons, religious and laity all taking active roles in the liturgical life of parishes tend to preclude an easy grasp of Vatican II's sharp and ontological distinction between the priesthood of the ordained and that of non-ordained members of the Church. Similarly, the contrast between pre- and post-Vatican II approaches to theology and the radical transition brought about by the Council are very real to professors who lived through those years. They easily take the primary theological importance of this shift for granted, and sometimes fail to note that it is merely nominal for today's students, whose experiences are limited to the post-conciliar years. Since students' experiences are so significant in determining what "computes" for them, professors should listen to them and try to base theological education on their students' experiences.

Prof. Bonsor also considered the place of the seminary between the university and the parish. Though some might fear that the theology taught in seminaries suffers from its isolation from the intellectual challenges of the university, this need not be the case. Rather the seminary and theology school should perform a needed mediation, helping parish life remain intelligent and university theology keep in touch with the praxis of parishes and other settings in which pastoral life takes place. Drawing upon an experience in his own archdiocese of San Francisco, he suggested that one of the best ways to accomplish this mediation is to base theological reflection and education upon the grass-roots praxis of parishes that effectively mobilize to serve the poor and the "lepers" of our own day.

Brian O. McDermott spoke from his nineteen years of experience as professor at Weston School of Theology in Cambridge, during which time he also served as rector of the Jesuit community and now as academic dean. Even though Weston has a theologically competent and ministerially active faculty, he acknowledged that some have called for a better integration of theology and praxis at Weston. However, in his view an even more urgent question pertained

to the kind of person Weston should seek to graduate, with special attention to their preparation for exercising leadership and authority. This question focused the rest of Prof. McDermott's presentation. He noted that Weston speaks often to its students of the importance of authority and leadership but that a number of graduates understand this largely in terms of a charismatic model. This may have its place but is not sufficient. In dealing with this matter Weston has two major resources upon which it can draw: Ignatian spirituality and good academic theology. Cambridge also offers access to Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, with its own resources for leadership and authority. His own hope is that Weston will be able to deploy all these resources in order to make theological education itself a praxis from which one can learn.

Responding to a general need for pedagogical improvements, and in light of his own experiences and hopes, McDermott tried to put this vision into practice in a recent Christology course he offered. He altered his own enactment of leadership and authority in that course and allowed the class to engage together while dealing with the issues. In this more fluid environment "Christology started happening." The reading, reflection, diverse voices, many directions, and one focus, all made real the deeper dynamic of being contemplative while in action. In this class, experience, reflection upon it, and discernment of God's activity all became sources of learning. In the process the professor modeled a different style of leadership and authority. This approach brought forth different evaluations from the students; some found it very helpful while others preferred the traditional model of classroom education or wished to find certitude more quickly. For the professor the experience was very positive even though it raised such issues as the reconciliation of creativity with the need to set boundaries. It added to the base of experience McDermott brings to the future task of trying to base Weston's approach to learning more on a dialogue between spirit and theology, a dialogue that should enrich the reciprocal movement between theology and praxis.

After these presentations many participants spoke of their own experiences in dealing with the relationship between theology and praxis. Several referred to the conflicting pressures facing seminary theologians and administrators. Many have to wear too many hats and cannot do justice to theology or praxis. Other times seminary people hear a double message that both affirms the importance of theology and undermines it by withholding needed support or resisting meaningful academic standards. Problems also occur in trying to address some students' limited academic or diverse cultural and familial backgrounds. In some cases these can be addressed by providing sound personal and modeling relationships both in the seminary and in parish settings. Spiritual direction and other formative experiences can play a critical role in compensating for poor internalization of the Catholic experience, addressing serious personal issues in students' lives, and supplying an essential spiritual dimension to theological studies. The spirituality and quality of the overall interpersonal environment

between faculty and students was found to be a key factor in supporting or limiting such efforts. Several participants also stressed the importance of creative pedagogical approaches, especially those that build upon experiences in class or elsewhere.

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