

SPIRITUALITY

Topic: The Discipline of Christian Spirituality and Catholic Theology
Convener: Diana L. Villegas, Acton, Massachusetts
Presenter: Sandra M. Schneiders, Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley
Respondent: Mary Frohlich, Catholic Theological Union

Sandra Schneiders addressed the question of how systematic theology and the academic discipline of spirituality are distinct and how they are related. Schneiders presupposes that spirituality is one of several theological disciplines (such as Christian ethics or biblical studies) that study the Christian faith from a confessional perspective, but which are not subdisciplines of systematic theology.

The most significant distinction between the two disciplines lies in the object of each. Schneiders and others have argued that the object of study of spirituality is experience. In this presentation Schneiders sought to further specify how to understand this object, namely as the study of the individual or particular as understood by Ricoeur. Thus, the scholar of spirituality studies a particular experience, whether of an individual or group (e.g., a devotion or movement in spirituality). Systematic theology, on the other hand, engages in second order reflection regarding revelation and tradition, and seeks to elaborate the principles of the faith in terms of contemporary cultural categories. In short, spirituality studies the living out of the faith whereas systematic theology studies the faith. This distinction was illustrated through an extended example regarding the different ways in which a systematic theologian and a scholar of spirituality might study conversion in Teresa of Avila. The scholar of spirituality would be interested in understanding Teresa's experience of conversion from an individual perspective. That is, how was this experience lived by Teresa, how exactly did it transform her in particular, how did her conversion affect her experience of the faith and the manner in which she lived the faith from then on. The systematic theologian, on the other hand would want to reflect on conversion as a category of faith, and would study Teresa's experience in terms of how it contributes to an understanding of the general category. Another way of understanding the distinction between spirituality and systematic theology is in terms of the type of "knowing" for which each strives. Spirituality seeks concrete, personal knowledge through thick interpretation which, while individual, has general applications. Systematic theology aims at conceptual, theoretical knowledge arrived at through study of sources of tradition and revelation.

Schneiders added that systematic theology is always relevant to the study of Christian spirituality in that individual Christian experience takes place in the context of Christian faith, the object of systematic theology. In addition, particular studies of individual experience may include systematic theology as a major interpretive discipline.

In her response, Mary Frohlich raised the question as to whether Schneiders's understanding of the object of spirituality is sufficiently specific, given that other

theological disciplines, such as contextual, feminine or liberation theologies also study the individual or particular. Frohlich suggests the unique object of spirituality is “living spirit,” that is, the human person as oriented toward transcendence, and the transformations of “spirit.” If this is the object of spirituality, then there is a constitutive relationship to systematic theology. Systematic Theology thinks through the “rules for thought” deriving from Christian revelation, and one of the most basic rules is that spirit can only be construed appropriately if the contingent and manifest dimension of spirit is understood in its relation to ultimate reality (i.e. God). Returning to the example of Teresa’s conversion, Frohlich contends that unless a study in spirituality takes account of these “rules for thought” we would not be studying Teresa’s actual spirituality. Instead, her experience might be studied as literature, as psychology, or as a historical event, etc. In short, Frohlich contends that systematic theology is essential to the study of Christian spirituality.

In light of the above argument, Frohlich invites the group to reflect on which studies are to be included and which excluded from the discipline of Christian spirituality. This question as well as Frohlich’s formulation regarding the object of spirituality as the transformation of spirit led to a lively and strong discussion, where a plurality of reflections was expressed.

In light of the Society’s proposals for restructuring of the convention and group governance, we sought to invite participants to commit to forming a core group in spirituality which will help guide the direction of the group and make possible the regular rotation of an administrative group. Twenty four persons have agreed to form part of a core group and a new administrative group of three persons was chosen.

DIANA L. VILLEGAS
Acton, Massachusetts