

RE-IMAGINING THE ECCLESIAL/PROPHETIC VOCATION OF THE THEOLOGIAN

As we reflect on the vocation of the theologian today there is much to celebrate. If we but consider the membership of our own theological society, we have witnessed—in the span of our own lifetime—a shift from a membership that was once exclusively male and clerical, most often white and dedicated primarily to seminary education, to a membership which better reflects the diversity of the people of God in North America. Today, more than half of the theologians belonging to the CTSA are lay men or women. Our members, both lay and ordained, come from a much broader range of social and cultural backgrounds. The same can be said of our students in both seminary and university contexts, where women are often in the majority. If we look beyond our continent, we observe a similar trend as lay men and women are taking their place together with the ordained in the leadership roles of other Societies of Catholic Theology around the globe.

The vitality of contemporary theology can be seen not only in the changing profile of the theological community, but also in the breadth and increasingly multidisciplinary engagement of our peers. Catholic theologians from around the world report the growing importance of issues pertaining to ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue, to ecology and global economics, and to new styles of church leadership.¹ The multiplication of contextual theologies is a reflection of both the globalization of Catholicism and of sustained attention to forgotten voices. Contextualization is a function of a theology that is more historically rooted, engaged with the diversity of cultures and religious traditions in which contemporary Christians find themselves. In countless ways, we see how theology is seeking to respond to the many new challenges confronting humanity and all of creation.

While the profile of the theological community and its methods have undergone rapid change in recent decades, it is possible to discern a shift in the location of theology as well from the seminary, or a narrowly ecclesial context, to the university where theology resides as a scholarly discipline among others—even in the face of skeptics who question its respectability and rigor.² Taking seriously Vatican II's invitation to enter into dialogue with contemporary society, theology

¹See for example, the "Regional Reports" page and the reports from the 2008 International Network Colloquium on the INSeCT (International Network of Societies for Catholic Theology) website: <http://theo.kuleuven.be/insect/page/1/>.

²Popular works such as Richard Dawkin's *The God Delusion* (Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006) and Christopher Hitchen's *God is not Great* (Toronto: Emblem,

frequently benefits from the insights of the social and applied sciences, as theologians collaborate with scholars in other fields in the development of interdisciplinary approaches. These shifts in the profile of the theologian as well as the object and location of theological reflection, though producing many good fruits, nonetheless contribute to a certain sense of displacement, of destabilization, or even tension as we attempt to negotiate not only a whole new set of church-world relationships, but new relationships within the church itself.

One of the tragic anomalies of our current theological context is that while Catholic theology has never been as diverse in perspective and seldom as rich in content, the ecclesiastical context for the practice of theology remains dominated by suspicion. Sadly, too many theologians report that they are seldom consulted by their local bishops on theological questions. In some regions, lay men and women find themselves almost systematically denied the necessary *nihil obstat* to teach in ecclesiastical faculties. Many bishops continue to prefer the counsel of those clergy who possess advanced theological training, often obtained in Rome. They are the *auctores probati* of our time, but their approval is less a matter of scholarly competence and creativity than unswerving fidelity to the ecclesiastical *status quo*. This suspicion of all but a privileged few “safe theologians” is but one of many indications of a widespread ecclesiastical suspicion of the contemporary theological project.

Twenty years ago, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith sought to clarify the role of the theologian in the life of the church in its “Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian” *Donum veritatis*.³ It remains, for better or for worse, the most significant magisterial document on the topic. To its credit, the document affirmed the placement of the magisterium-theologian relationship within the larger context of the whole people of God.⁴ Yet in spite of this tentative move, the dominant tone of the instruction remained cautionary and fixated on a vision of theology innocent of many of the most important contributions of the Second Vatican Council.

The instruction briefly acknowledged the role of the *sensus fidelium*, but it failed to take into account the way in which the *sensus fidei* stands as a privileged mode by which all Christians receive God’s Word and make it their own. Instead, we find dire warnings of the dangers of public opinion (*Donum veritatis*, 32, 35) as theologians are exhorted to offer the people of God the authentic teaching of the church without ever being encouraged to draw insight from the witness

2008) are symptomatic of an unfortunate cultural bias against the possibility of intelligent faith.

³Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian,” *Origins* 20 (July 5, 1990), 117-26.

⁴Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger made this point in a commentary that accompanied the instruction, “Theology is not Private Idea of Theologian,” *L’Osservatore Romano* [English Edition] 27 (July 2, 1990), 5.

of God's people. Although concerned with the *ecclesial* vocation of the theologian, at no point did the instruction acknowledge that the ecclesiality of the theological vocation included a necessary prophetic dimension. The CDF rightly insisted that "theology's proper task is to understand the meaning of revelation . . ." (*Donum veritatis*, 10). Yet it is in this service to revelation that the prophetic dimension of theology finds its origin. Theology's prophetic task demands that its primary loyalty be to the Word of God. Consequently, it can exhibit loyalty to the magisterium only insofar as the magisterium exhibits its own proper service to God's Word. Moreover, if theology's prophetic task lies in its service to the Word, then any adequate account of the ecclesial and prophetic character of theology must be oriented toward the discernment of that Word in the people of God's corporate exercise of the *sensus fidei*.

The instruction affirmed the need for genuine collaboration between the magisterium and the theological community but it then conceived this collaboration in light of the juridical relationship established by a canonical mission. When the theologian receives a canonical mission or *mandatum* from the appropriate ecclesiastical authority this "collaboration," the CDF contended, "becomes a participation in the work of the Magisterium . . ." (no. 22).⁵ Public theological dissent was prohibited altogether, and a theologian who had difficulties with non-definitive church teachings was left with few options other than meekly to inform the appropriate authority. Finally, the instruction presumed an astonishingly expansive view of that divine assistance given by the Spirit to the authoritative teaching office of the church. In summary, the dominant note of this text was one of caution regarding the dangers of theological presumption.

The fundamental presuppositions of *Donum veritatis* and its concerns about theological abuse endure in many corners of the church today.⁶ The central

⁵David Schultenover recently observed that the Statutes promulgated by Pope John Paul II for the International Theological Commission, originally established in recognition of the magisterium's need to call upon the expertise of theologians from around the world, reflect a "thoroughgoing subordination" of the commission to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. See "From the Editor's Desk," *Theological Studies* 71:1 (2010), 1-2. He adds: "In advising the magisterium, the charism of theologians certainly serves to support the magisterial teaching office. This, in fact, is a normal aspect of all Catholic theologians' charism, guided by the Spirit of love. But one must also wonder whether their charism does not also authorize a role distinct from this supportive role (. . .) [I]n their teaching and writing role distinct from such consultative work, theologians must necessarily serve the Church's wider need to respond to historical human development, a development resulting from humanity's historical rootedness, including the complexities arising from, e.g., population increase, environmental issues, increasingly sophisticated armaments, and new technologies . . ."

⁶Pope Benedict has returned to this theme often. In his December 2009 homily at a mass celebrated with the International Theological Commission, he takes contemporary theology to task for a lack of humility before the Word of God. See <http://www.vatican.va/>

presuppositions appear in a distinct contemporary form but they draw their life from a trajectory of ecclesiological development that has its remote origins in the eleventh century. The Benedictine theologian, Ghislain Lafont refers to this ecclesiological trajectory as “the Gregorian form” of the church⁷ and contends that much of contemporary ecclesiastical sensibility can be traced back to the reforms of Pope Gregory VII. This ecclesial form acquired further dimensions in the centuries that followed. According to Lafont, the Gregorian form has been sustained by three “supporting elements”: (1) a particular conception of the primacy of truth, (2) a growing emphasis on the primacy of the pope and, (3) and an increasingly sacralized, “holy and continent priesthood.” The first two of these elements relate most directly to our topic today.

Within the Gregorian form, the primacy of truth manifests itself as an “epistemology of illumination” in which truth comes from above and is mediated hierarchically from the higher to the lower ranks of the church. According to Lafont, there is “a quasi-identity of revealed truth and the formulas expressing the truth.”⁸ One of us has described this theological perspective as a kind of “spiritual Reaganomics” or “trickle-down theory.”⁹ Over the course of the second millennium, this epistemic framework has not, of course, gone unchallenged. The introduction of Aristotle into theological reflection in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the emergence of modern science in the sixteenth century, the Chinese rites controversy, the engagement with historical approaches to biblical studies beginning in the seventeenth century, and the reassessment of the morality of loaning interest in the eighteenth century—all challenged the idea that all truth and knowledge came exclusively from “above.”¹⁰

The epistemology of illumination within the overarching Gregorian form has also shaped conceptions of the role of the people of God in the handing on and reception of the faith of the church. Within this ecclesial form, tradition was seen as the handing on of that which was received from above and reception was comprehended within the juridical paradigm of command/obedience. This reduction of ecclesial reception to a juridical act in turn would eventually shape the exercise of theology. Particularly during the polemics of the Baroque, in which the theologian is conceived as the obedient expositor of decrees issued by ecclesiastical authorities,¹¹ the paradigm of command-obedience extended beyond its proper

holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20091201_cti_en.html. Accessed July 8, 2010.

⁷Ghislain Lafont, *Imagining the Catholic Church: Structured Communion in the Spirit* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000), 37-64.

⁸Lafont, *Imagining the Catholic Church*, 39.

⁹Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Teaching with Authority: A Theology of the Magisterium in the Church* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1997), 247.

¹⁰Lafont, *Imagining the Catholic Church*, 45.

¹¹It is sometimes forgotten that both canonists and theologians were forbidden from independently commenting on or interpreting the decrees of the Council of Trent. The Pope

juridical sphere to influence understandings of the theological vocation evident in the emerging neo-scholastic manual tradition.

The second element in this Gregorian form concerns the growing influence of the papacy, the central figure in the modern conception of the magisterium. Lafont acknowledges the political expediency that led to more expansive claims to papal authority over the course of the second millennium. This authority was also expressed within a juridical framework and a thoroughgoing re-imagination of church structure that succumbed to the same Pseudo-Dionysian cosmological vision that underwrote the epistemology of illumination. The history of the papacy over the course of the second millennium is one of diminishing political influence and growing ecclesial influence. Indeed, it is easy to forget that the expansive role of the papacy in the normative articulation of church doctrine is a decidedly modern development. It has been accompanied by an equally dramatic expansion of curial activism, the authoritative character of which has yet to be sufficiently explored.

This Gregorian form, born out of the womb of medieval society, flourished long after the cultural forms of medieval society died out. Indeed, it has persisted into the present, in spite of countervailing forces, not the least of which was the thoroughgoing *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement* undertaken by the Second Vatican Council. This form continues to cast its large shadow over the ecclesial context of the exercise of theology today.

If we are to reclaim the significant role and legitimate authority of theology and challenge the enduring influence of this Gregorian form on the theological task, we must re-imagine the ecclesial context of the theological vocation. Doing so will require a more thorough development of the prophetic dimension of the theological task, a dimension almost completely overlooked by the CDF's twenty-year-old instruction. In service of this project we would like to explore this re-imagination of the theological vocation in three parts: first, a consideration of the biblical roots of what Walter Brueggemann has called the "prophetic imagination," second, a consideration of the prophetic office of the church itself and third, a renewed assessment of theology's prophetic task in service of the prophetic office of the church.

I. THE PROPHETIC IMAGINATION

The biblical prophet is entirely at the service of God's Word. The *navi'im* of the Hebrew Scriptures refer to themselves as "messengers" (Isa 44:26; Hag 1:3; Mal 3:1) and "servants" of God (Isa 20:3; Amos 3:7; Jer 7:25; 24:4), as "shepherds" (Jer 17:16; Zech 11:4), "watchers" (Isa 21:6-12; 62:7), and "sentinels" (Isa 56:10; Jer 6:17; Ezek 3:17; 33:2, 6-7; Hab 2:1-3). The prophet is more often

and his curia were declared the sole legitimate interpreter of the conciliar decrees, according to the papal bull of Pius IV, *Benedictus Deus* (1564).

a reluctant witness than a presumptuous oracle. One need only consider Moses' reply to God's call: "But suppose they do not believe me or listen to me" (Ex 4:1); and "O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, (. . .) I am slow of speech and slow of tongue" (Ex 4:10). He even pleaded with God to "please send someone else" (Ex 4:14).

The true prophet is a humble servant of the Word, "one who speaks for another."¹² The genuine prophet is not interested in popular opinion or worldly measures of success, but acts as a self-effacing interpreter of the divine intention for the people of God. The only authority the prophets can claim is found in the Word to which they testify. In Christian iconography, John the Baptist stands as a prototype of all the prophets when he points beyond himself to the Incarnate Word of God in Jesus: "Look, here is the Lamb of God" (John 1:36). In this sense, the prophet acts as a mediator of the Word, engaging in the communicative task of calling the people to heed God's Word and to renew their fidelity to God's covenant. The prophet consumes and is consumed by the Word (Ezek 2:8, 3:1-3; Jer 15:16), and is ready to risk everything for it.

Abraham Heschel wrote that the prophets of Israel were "some of the most disturbing people who have ever lived."¹³ Their communication of divine judgment, at times in histrionic and apocalyptic terms, makes them sometimes repulsive and unattractive. It is often this image—that of the melodramatic iconoclast—which is prevalent in the popular religious imagination. Such an image, however, conveys a very truncated view of the biblical prophet and of the true prophetic imagination. Heschel insists that the prophet is "not a mere mouthpiece of God."¹⁴ Behind the austere message of the prophet is a profound compassion for humankind. For the prophet is deeply attuned to the divine pathos and seeks to express the divine concern for humanity. This pathos is an integral element in the structure of prophetic consciousness. The true prophet, then, is deeply moved to love the people of God, even as he or she calls for repentance. The prophet is "a censurer and accuser, but also a defender and consoler."¹⁵ The prophet not only speaks the divine word, but also acts as an empathetic listener of God's people. The author of the Book of Exodus articulates the divine sympathy that would become the leitmotif for Moses' prophetic vocation, and for the vocation of all the prophets who would follow him. "Then the Lord said, 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them . . .'" (Ex 3:7-8). A true mediator between God and Israel, Moses pled for mercy on behalf of his stiff-necked people, asking that they be spared from God's

¹²Bruce Vawter, "Introduction to Prophetic Literature," in *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990), 187.

¹³Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*. 2 Vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), I, ix.

¹⁴Heschel, *The Prophets*, I, x and xv.

¹⁵Heschel, *The Prophets*, I, 24.

wrath (Ex 32:1-14). The entire Book of Jonah might be seen as a parable of how one prophet passed through a dark night before being educated in the divine sympathy, the unending love of God for the people of Nineveh. The Book of Hosea presents a contrasting image of the prophet in communion with the divine pathos who reveals the wounded love of God through the metaphor of the spurned lover and spouse.

Walter Brueggemann has written eloquently on the prophetic imagination.¹⁶ Describing the “poetic idiom” of the prophet, he notes that “prophets speak in outrageous and extreme figures because they intend to disrupt the ‘safe’ construals of reality, which are sponsored and advocated by the dominant opinion-makers. In the utterances of ‘limit expressions’—that is, utterances that carry Israel to the edge of imagination—the prophets characteristically exhibit acute sensitivity in two regards.”¹⁷ First, echoing Heschel’s insight into the character of prophetic sympathy, Brueggemann contends that the prophets consistently demonstrate an “acute awareness of distress.” It is this awareness of Israel’s predicament that drives the prophet to accuse, to announce God’s judgment, to shatter indifference and appeal for repentance. Yet this is not the end: “consternation (. . .) is but a prelude.”¹⁸ If the prophets begin with a message of doom, they invariably conclude with a word of hope and redemption. The depth of prophetic pathos, reflected in that sensitivity to both the plight of Israel and to divine concern, is perhaps most evident whenever the prophets offer “images of new possibility.”¹⁹ The prophet looks beyond despair to provoke a re-imagining of Israel’s covenant relationship, becoming a mediator of possible futures that are profoundly rooted in the promises of God. These images take various forms from Isaiah’s promise of a new king in David’s line (Isa 11:1-9; Amos 9:11-12), to Jeremiah’s dream of a new covenant founded on forgiveness (Jer 31:31-34), and Ezekiel’s vision of a resurrection and homecoming (Ezek 37:11-14).

The pre-exilic prophets coexisted more or less peaceably with the reigning monarchs and provided a critique of the established order, with its temptation of denial and false construal of reality. It is however in the context of exile that the message of the prophets is more heavily weighted with hope and the evocative memory of the promises of God. They confidently declare that God will do again what God has done in the past, making all things new. The promises of God

¹⁶Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978); *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).

¹⁷Walter Brueggemann, “The Prophet as Mediator,” in *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 625. Brueggemann borrows the term “limit expressions” from Paul Ricoeur, “Biblical Hermeneutics,” *Semeia* 4 (1975), 75-106.

¹⁸Heschel, *The Prophets*, xiii.

¹⁹Brueggemann, “Prophet as Mediator,” 626.

announced by the prophet are “pastoral responses to the desperation and helplessness of the exilic condition.”²⁰ Brueggemann suggests,

If pride is the temptation in the monarchic period, despair is the primary seduction in exile (. . .) The negative counterpoint to the exaggerated claims of the empire, inevitably, is loss of confidence in Yahweh, wonderment whether Yahweh has lost power (cf. Isa 50:2; 59:1), speculation that Yahweh is fickle and has forgotten (Isa 49:14). Despair in Israel is the growing sense that there is no reliable Yahweh to whom to appeal, and therefore one must be governed by circumstance and accommodate oneself to the managers of circumstance.²¹

The prophetic oracles of hope reveal a God who defies all the limitations of Israel’s condition and works to bring about a radical transformation, a new life. They point to a future that belongs to God alone, a God who will not be hemmed in by the constraints of the present circumstance.

Brueggemann has argued that “the Old Testament experience of and reflection upon exile is a helpful *metaphor*” for understanding the current context of Christian faith in North America and is a model of the church worthy of consideration.²² If he is correct in his reading of the present circumstance of the church, then we are living in a time where the people of God are greatly tempted to despair and stand in need of a constructive word of hope. He describes the task of proclamation today as a ministry of “preaching to exiles.” A recovery of the prophetic imagination in the work of theology implies that the primary task in interpreting and proclaiming the Word is to address the dual temptation of denial and despair, to lead the community of faith from denial to reality, and from despair to hope.

Brueggemann’s reflections on the prophetic imagination provide a helpful framework for reimagining the ecclesial vocation of the theologian by placing theology’s prophetic engagements into the foreground. Just as the prophets adopted different stances toward God and Israel, so too we might recognize the distinctive stances of theologians toward the ecclesial community and its living tradition of faith. The prophetic character of theology consists in its service to the ongoing dialogue between God and God’s people. That dialogue has continued for two millennia but it has been conditioned by different stances toward the Christian tradition. Terry Veling explores three possible hermeneutical stances toward the Christian tradition in his book, *Living in the Margins*.²³

²⁰Brueggemann, “The Prophet as Mediator,” 638.

²¹Brueggemann, “The Prophet as Mediator,” 641.

²²Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 1.

²³T. A. Veling, *Living in the Margins: Intentional Communities and the Art of Interpretation* (New York: Crossroad Herder, 1996). For this discussion, see Richard R. Gaillardetz, “The Reception of Doctrine: New Perspectives,” in *Authority in the Roman Catholic Church: Theory and Practice*, ed. Bernard Hoose (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001), 95-114, especially 101-102.

Veling uses the written text of a book as a metaphor for the Christian tradition. In the first interpretive stance, one stands “within the book,” appropriating a *dialogical* hermeneutic which is engaged in the retrieval of the rich classics of the tradition. Within this interpretive stance, the theological vocation serves the historically embedded dialogue between God and God’s people by employing the scholarly tools of responsible historical retrieval. The prophetic character of theology manifests itself here as a confident exploration of the riches of our Christian tradition as a corrective against a dangerous “presentism” that can succumb to the faddish idolatries of the contemporary moment.

While many continue to look to the tradition in confident hope of finding the resources and insights required to meet the demands of contemporary Christian living, not all share this tranquil sense of confidence. Critical studies have helped us to understand that tradition²⁴ can distort as well as disclose, it can reveal and conceal aspects of the Word and has at times been co-opted to convey the values of ideology and dominant self-interest. A more critical awareness of the vulnerability of tradition suggests the need for a second stance which Veling calls an *exilic* hermeneutics. He is especially sensitive here to the stance of “those who feel exiled from their tradition yet still cannot ignore it.”²⁵ They stand “outside the book” and harbor a deep hermeneutic of suspicion. Nonetheless, they are unable to turn their backs entirely on the tradition and continue to look toward it with a longing for home. The prophetic work of theology appears within this stance as an openness to dissonant voices at odds with the tradition. It diligently seeks to uncover the revelatory character of what Edward Schillebeeckx referred to as “contrast experiences,” moments where God’s revelatory power is encountered in the contrast between the reality of suffering and evil and God’s will.²⁶ Yet theology must also attend to those “contrast experiences” which are connected with the church’s present institutional structures and policies and the toxic elements embedded within its tradition.²⁷

Lastly, Veling advances a third hermeneutical stance which he describes as standing “in the margins of the book.” This *marginal* stance “lives within the tension between the dialogical and exilic hermeneutical stances”²⁸ and is constantly shaped by the interplay between the hermeneutics of suspicion and retrieval. Veling refers to this marginal hermeneutics as a “hermeneutic of creative reconstruction.” He describes it as “what happens when the twin events of belonging and non

²⁴In this context, we maintain a distinction between “Tradition” and “traditions,” that is to say, the content and heart of the Christian faith or the “apostolic tradition,” and the external forms intended to convey its fundamental meaning.

²⁵Gaillardetz, “The Reception of Doctrine,” 102.

²⁶Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Understanding of Faith* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1974), 96-7.

²⁷Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 60.

²⁸Gaillardetz, “The Reception of Doctrine,” 102.

belonging, faith and doubt, trust and suspicion, the written and the unwritten, presence and absence—when these ‘unresolved two’ burst into life in the thin interpretive edge that both joins and separates them.”²⁹ Many believe that it is here, on the margins, that theology is doing its most important prophetic work today.

In Veling’s discussion there is an echo of Brueggemann’s insistence on confronting the dual temptations of denial and despair with words of truth and hope. Both authors enable us to consider the ecclesial reception of God’s Word as much more than a juridical reality in which the theological task is reduced to mediating official church teaching. Both take seriously the living reality of the faith as it has been experienced in the past and as it continues to be experienced today by the whole community of faith with all of the doubts, fears, and anxieties that this entails. Both authors insist on the importance of engagement *with* and in the retrieval *of* the core tradition of faith in a constructive, creative, and hope inducing witness of faith.

In a final note on the biblical, prophetic consciousness, Yves Congar reminds us that the prophetic oracles of the Hebrew Scriptures, which are taken up in the New Testament, promise that the knowledge of God and the gift of interior discernment are granted to the whole people of God (Jer 31:31-34, cf. Heb 8:8-12; Isa 54:13, cf. John 6:45; Isa 60:19, cf. Rev 21:23; Ezek 36:24-27, cf. 1 John 3:24; 4:13; Joel 3:1-2, cf. Acts 2:17f).³⁰ Prophecy is, in the end, the task of all God’s people. It is Congar’s insight regarding the prophetic office of all the baptized to which we must now turn.

II. THE PROPHETIC OFFICE OF THE CHURCH

We see in much of Congar’s historical and ecumenical retrieval an attempt to recover an ecclesial alternative to the Gregorian form. Congar reclaimed a more ancient ecclesial vision, one grounded in central convictions regarding the prophetic character of the entire church. He drew on the thought of both John Calvin³¹ and John Henry Newman. Newman, under the influence of Aquinas, divided up the roles of legislator, priest, and king among different factions of the church,³²

²⁹Veling, *Living in the Margins*, 136.

³⁰Congar, *Jalons pour une théologie du laïc*. 2ème edition. Unam Sanctam 23 (Paris: Cerf, 1954), 369. Any citations here are our free translation from the original French version. [English translation: *Lay People in the Church: A Study for a Theology of the Laity*. Trans. Donald Attwater (London: Bloomsbury, 1957).]

³¹Calvin applied the prophetic office not only to the ordained—a tendency inherited from the medieval theologians—but to the whole church. See *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. Neill. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles. Library of Christian Classics XX (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) Book II, xv, 2, 496.

³²*Summa Theol.* III, q. 22, 3: “As stated above (7, 7, ad 1), other men have certain graces distributed among them: but Christ, as being the Head of all, has the perfection of all graces. Wherefore, as to others, one is a lawgiver, another is a priest, another is a king; but all these concur in Christ, as the fount of all grace.”

and contrasted the episcopal tradition of the authoritative teaching office with the prophetic tradition of the theologians.³³ Congar sought to overcome this division of labor—one which is not supported by the biblical witness—by turning to the insights of Russian Orthodoxy³⁴ into the conciliar or synodal character of the whole church expressed in the dynamic notion of *sobornost*.³⁵ Only in this way, Congar believed, was it possible to move beyond what he saw as an “obsessive” concern to maintain the distinction between the teaching church and the learning church.

All the faithful are, in principle, enlightened and actively engaged in the prophetic task of receiving and proclaiming the apostolic Word. Moreover, Congar insisted, the exercise of the prophetic teaching office cannot be reduced to the authoritative teaching of doctrine. Doctrinal teaching is but a partial expression of the faith of the church and is completed by the living faith of the whole community. The multiple witness of the church on earth, expressed diversely in the authoritative teaching of the magisterium, in the reflections of theologians, and in the teaching and witness of all the baptized coalesce into a “symphony.”³⁶ The dialectical interplay of each section of the orchestra contributes to the harmonious proclamation of the divine Word.

Within the communion of all the faithful, some—the bishops—are called by virtue of their office to serve as authoritative custodians of the apostolic faith; still

³³Newman seems to locate the priestly function of the church in the ministry of the priest and the laity in the parish community, the prophetic function in the *schola theologorum*, and the governing function in the ministry of the bishops. See John Henry Newman, Preface, *Via Media of the Anglican Church* (1877) i:xl. See also: *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. Sixth Edition (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989) chapter II, II, 2, pp. 76-77. Avery Dulles comments that Newman’s “division of powers among bishops, theologians, and the laity is not easily assimilable [sic] today. His position, moreover, can scarcely be reconciled with the Second Vatican Council . . .” “Authority in the Church,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Henry Newman*. eds. Ian Ker and Terrence Merrigan (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 184. Newman affirmed elsewhere that “all His followers in some sense bear all three offices,” yet he seemed more interested in exploiting these categories to develop a framework for understanding the set of dialectical relationships which ensure the search for holiness, truth, and good order in the church. Compare J. H. Newman, *Sermons on Subjects of the Day* (London: Rivingtons, 1869), 54-56. See also, Nicholas Lash, “Authors, Authority, and Authorization,” in *Authority in the Catholic Church: Theory and Practice*, ed. Bernard Hoose (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001), 59-71.

³⁴Congar shows his debt here to the “Paris School” of Orthodoxy, citing, among others, the works of N. Berdiaeff, Serge Boulgakov, Georges Florovski, A. Khomiakov. *Jalons*, 380-387.

³⁵Yves Congar, *Jalons*, chapter VI, “Les laïcs et la fonction prophétique de l’église,” 367-453.

³⁶Congar, *Jalons*, 407. On this point Congar cites Matthias Scheeben, *Dogmatique*, § 11, n. 154. [A French translation of *Handbuch der katholischen Dogmatik* (Freiburg: Herder, 1948-1961).]

others—theologians—place their knowledge and study of Scripture, tradition, and contemporary sciences at the service of the Spirit. In Congar’s schematization, all three: the baptized faithful, theologians, and bishops, exercise the teaching office in a unique manner and contribute to the ongoing reception of the Word in the life of the church. All three help maintain the church in the truth. Further, a true knowledge and reception of the truth of the Gospel depends upon the dynamic interplay and organic relationship among them for, as Congar observes, “truth is revealed in the living communion of the whole church.”³⁷

Vatican II’s Vision

Much of Congar’s thought on the prophetic calling of the whole church finds its way into the documents of the Second Vatican Council.³⁸ The council embraced the theological framework of participation in the threefold ministry of Christ who is priest, prophet, and king in its reflection on the dignity of the entire People of God in chapter II of its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen gentium*, 10-13).³⁹ In a key paragraph of *Lumen gentium* on the people of God’s share in the prophetic role of Christ, participation in Christ’s ministry is grounded in the anointing of the Holy Spirit received at baptism (LG 12, cf. 1 John 2:20, 27). This spiritual anointing awakens that active capacity for spiritual discernment, the intuition that is formed by listening faithfully to the Word of God and worshipping in communion with the ecclesial body, which tradition refers to as the *sensus fidei*, the supernatural sense of the faithful. The prophetic roles of the magisterial teaching office and of the theologians are to be exercised within the communion of, and in service to, the prophetic witness of the whole body. The entire body of the baptized, in turn, receives from, and actively contributes to, the apostolic witness of the church. Nor is the exercise of the prophetic office understood on purely intra-ecclesial lines. The whole people of God is called to learn and receive from the world, recognizing the transforming presence and activity of God’s Spirit in other social movements, cultural and religious traditions, and in the wisdom of secular knowledge. Indeed, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, exhorts “the people of God as a whole . . . and especially pastors and theologians, to listen to the various voices of our day, discerning them and

³⁷Congar, *Jalons*, 384.

³⁸It would, of course, be inappropriate to attribute any conciliar text to a single author, for this would fail to account for the complex work of redaction undertaken by the Doctrinal Commission and the numerous amendments introduced in the course of the conciliar debates. Congar himself has left us a record of those texts in which he had a hand. These include large portions of LG chapter II, a key text for our present consideration. See *Mon journal du concile* (Paris: Cerf, 2002), Vol. II, 511.

³⁹The framework of the tria munera Christi is further developed and applied to the ministry of hierarchy in *Lumen gentium* 19-21, 25-27, *Christus dominus* 11-17, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* 2, 4-6, 13, and to the vocation of the laity in *Lumen Gentium* 34-36, and *Apostolicam actuositatem* 2-4.

interpreting them, and to evaluate them in the light of the word, so that the revealed truth can be increasingly appropriated, better understood and more suitably expressed” (no. 44; Cf. *GS* 62).

Vatican II’s theological vision stands as a corrective to the dominance of the Gregorian form. First, the council challenges the epistemology of illumination in which divine truth was given to the church only through the mediation of the magisterium. Instead, Vatican II insists that the Word of God is addressed to and received by the whole church. The theology of divine truth which is communicated in the council’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, presents divine truth not so much as something we possess as a divine reality that possesses us. Moreover, the council would stress the eschatological character of divine truth, teaching that “as the centuries go by, the church is always advancing towards the plenitude of divine truth, until eventually the words of God are fulfilled in it” (DV 8). As Joseph Ratzinger observed in his commentary on *Dei verbum*:

The Council’s intention in this matter was a simple one. . . . The fathers were merely concerned with overcoming neo-scholastic intellectualism, for which revelation chiefly meant a store of mysterious supernatural teachings, which automatically reduces faith very much to an acceptance of these supernatural insights. As opposed to this, the Council desired to express again the character of revelation as a totality, in which word and event make up one whole, a true dialogue which touches man in his totality, not only challenging his reason, but, as dialogue, addressing him as a partner, indeed giving him his true nature for the first time.⁴⁰

The council’s teaching that the Word of God is addressed to the whole church led to a theology of the church’s apostolicity that did not begin with apostolic succession, but with the apostolicity of the church itself. Several conciliar texts allude to what John Burkhard has called a “substantive apostolicity” that is rooted in the life and witness of the entire Christian community.⁴¹ In *Lumen gentium* the bishops reflected on the prophetic calling of the whole people which is exercised in the *sensus fidei*. This supernatural instinct for the faith allows all believers to adhere to the faith of the church more profoundly, penetrate it more deeply and apply it more fully in their daily lives (LG 12). The council taught that this apostolic tradition resides, not only with those who hold apostolic office, but with all believers “who ponder these things in their hearts” and actively participate in the dynamic unfolding of tradition (DV 8). This theological vision insists that divine truth is not mediated exclusively by the hierarchy, but is given to the whole church.

⁴⁰Joseph Ratzinger, “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Origin and Background,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), vol. III, 172.

⁴¹John Burkhard distinguishes between four aspects of the church’s apostolicity: the apostolicity of church life and, apostolic office or succession, an apostolicity of origin and apostolicity of doctrine. John Burkhard, *Apostolicity Then and Now: An Ecumenical Church in a Postmodern World* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004), 26-41.

The Ecumenical Reception of Vatican II

Many of these insights are being received and more fully developed in numerous post-conciliar ecumenical dialogues, especially in their effort to recover a common understanding of the exercise of authority in service of the prophetic witness of the church. The 2005 Faith and Order study on the *Nature and Mission of the Church*⁴² describes the complex configuration of the content of faith that the whole church seeks to express and hand on. “The apostolic faith does not refer to one fixed formula or to a specific phase in Christian history.” It is contained in the Scriptures, in creeds and confessions of faith, in canonical traditions and contemporary preaching. Faith is “confessed in worship, in life, service and mission—in the living traditions of the Church” (no. 70). Given this rich understanding of the apostolic faith as the fruit of lives and communities in every age and every context imbued with the Word and the Spirit, any attempt to discern and communicate the faith—whether by the magisterium or by the theological community—must be attentive to the living witness of the whole people of God who, together, form “a community of prophets” (no. 19). The *Nature and Mission of the Church* and the Statement by the 2006 Porto Allegre Assembly of the World Council of Churches, “Called to be One Church,” contain important reflections on the church as a “communion of believers created by the Word of God.” Here, too, the reception of the Word by the whole church and the anointing of God’s Spirit ground its apostolicity.⁴³

One of the most significant instances of an ecumenical reception of the renewed attention to the *sensus fidelium* in contemporary ecclesiology is reflected in the 1999 agreed statement by the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC), *The Gift of Authority*. Here ARCIC affirms:

The people of God as a whole is the bearer of the living Tradition. In changing situations producing fresh challenges to the Gospel, the discernment, actualization and communication of the Word of God is the responsibility of the whole people of God. The Holy Spirit works through all members of the community, using the gifts he gives to each for the good of all. Theologians in particular serve the communion of the whole Church by exploring whether and how new insights should be integrated into the stream of Tradition. In each community there is a mutual exchange, a give and take, in which bishops, clergy and lay people receive from and give to others within the whole body.⁴⁴

⁴²Faith and Order, *Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005).

⁴³World Council of Churches, “Called to be One Church (as adopted by the Assembly) 23.03.2006,” <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/porto-alegre-2006/1-statements-documents-adopted/christian-unity-and-message-to-the-churches/called-to-be-the-one-church-as-adopted.html> (accessed July 8, 2010); also *Nature and Mission of the Church*, 23.

⁴⁴Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC II), *The Gift of Authority: Authority in the Church III* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1999) no. 28, 23.

Theologians have their role to play in the symphony which is the church and they, too, by their participation in the prophetic office of the church, must be alert to the *sensus fidelium* in which they share in living out the ecclesial character of their vocation.

III. THE PROPHETIC VOCATION OF THE THEOLOGIAN IN SERVICE OF THE WORD

We have waited until this point in our argument for an extended consideration of the prophetic task of theology because we are convinced that it is misconceived if it is not grasped within the context of the prophetic calling of the church itself. What we find in the work of Congar, the theological vision of Vatican II, and the witness of many ecumenical conversations is the recognition that no theology of tradition can be adequate which is not at the same time a theology of the reception by the whole church of God's Word mediated in history. This active appropriation is a creative process of making the Word of God one's own. Ecclesial reception necessarily entails ecclesial transformation, both of the receiving community and of that which is received. While reception always involves receiving something that is recognized as familiar, it at the same time "produces something new."⁴⁵ The Venerable Bede once observed that "every day the church gives birth to the church."⁴⁶ Commenting on this, Joseph Komonchak writes:

The apostolic Gospel comes with the power of the Spirit and is received by faith, and where this event of communication takes place, the Church is born again. Where this event does not take place, where the Gospel is preached in vain, no Church arises. Where the Gospel ceases to be believed, the Church ceases to exist. The whole ontology of the Church—the real "objective" existence of the Church—consists in the reception by faith of the Gospel. Reception is constitutive of the Church.⁴⁷

In this daily "birthing" of the church the prophetic vocation of the theologian takes the form of a humble midwifery, applying the skills of our craft to the birthing of the Word both within the life of the church and in the church's witness and mission to the world. Theology does this, first of all, by preserving the priority of the lived faith of the church over its doctrinal formulations. Simply stated, *kerygma* precedes and informs doctrine. This means that the primary act of ecclesial reception is not that of the faithful obediently embracing the decrees of the magisterium, but the humble reception by the magisterium of the pluriform witness to the Gospel by the whole people of God. This testimony, of course, does not take the form of precise propositional formulation, but rather finds expression in art, hymnody, folk narrative, devotion, and the witness of daily Christian living.

⁴⁵Bernard Sesboué, "Reception of Councils from Nicea to Constantinople II: Conceptual Divergences and Unity in the Faith, Yesterday and Today," *The Jurist* 57 (1997), 116.

⁴⁶*PL* 93:166d.

⁴⁷Joseph Komonchak, "The Epistemology of Reception," *The Jurist* 57 (1997), 193.

Consider Catholic social teaching. A case can be made that the primary carriers of Catholic social teaching have not been the papal encyclicals or the pastoral letters of episcopal conferences, but rather the work of thousands of Catholic social activists and mediating social institutions like the networks of Catholic hospitals and service agencies.⁴⁸ The same can be said of the role of popular devotion as a carrier of the wisdom of the faith. Theology must be vigilant in identifying these often overlooked bearers of the tradition; it must act with determination to give voice to their witness. In service of this prophetic responsibility, the theological community applies the tools of its trade to excavate this embedded Word and give it expression in a coherent and systematic manner. We are charged with rendering an explicit and systematic expression of the socially and culturally embedded witness of the people of God.

A particular challenge of our present context, and one which we identified earlier as both a sign of the vitality of our discipline and a reflection of a truly global expression of Catholicism, is the increasing contextualization of theology. This diversity of theological expression is viewed by some as a threat to the unity of the church's teaching and witness, or an overly subjective approach that accords an inordinate priority to the lived experience of the local churches over the universal. To be sure, a lack of humility could lead to a cacophony of competing voices or methods and approaches, each convinced of the superiority of its particular expressions of faith, worship, and mission. Authentic unity requires the theological community's commitment to communion in faith across a diversity of living faith communities. The future coherence of theology and the credibility of its ecclesial engagement will depend upon the theologian's capacity to articulate and mediate the gift of these varied receptions of the Word to the communion in faith of the whole church, in other words—to the catholicity of the faith. Ormond Rush has suggested that Catholic theology might learn from the methods of ecumenical theology in order to support the ongoing *synchronic* reception of the church's tradition from these diverse *loci receptionis*. The way forward toward a new synthesis might be opened, he contends, when we work together to recognize the common ground behind each other's interpretations of the apostolic faith and discover there a unified diversity.⁴⁹

Of course, Catholicism grants a normative role to the magisterium, but once a dogmatic pronouncement has been made, the work of theology goes beyond the merely catechetical to consider how the legitimate interpretations of the pronouncement are to be appropriated, particularly in historical and cultural contexts often quite different from those in which the formulations first emerged. Here the

⁴⁸John Coleman makes this point in his essay, "The Future of Catholic Social Thought," in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations*, ed. Kenneth R. Himes (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005), 522-44.

⁴⁹Ormond Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II: Some Hermeneutical Principles* (New York: Paulist, 2004), 66-67.

theologian serves the handing on of God's Word by assisting the people of God in the critical reception of these normative teachings.

This reclamation of the prophetic aspect of theology as integral to its ecclesial vocation demands a thorough re-imagination of not only the role of theology but that of the magisterium as well. It begins with the fundamental insight that the authentic exercise of normative teaching by the magisterium begins, not with the act of teaching itself, but with an act of reception, the exercise of humble listening. Legitimate, normative pronouncements can only follow from this magisterial exercise of ecclesial reception.

Consequently, a crucial element of the theological task lays not so much in extending the magisterium's teaching ministry, but in assisting it in its obligation to attentive listening. This means, in turn, that theology must help the people of God to express their genuine insight, the fruit of their Spirit-assisted reception of the Word, in ways that can inform the magisterium's listening process. Theologians assist the birthing of the Word in the pluriform witness of the people of God by identifying fresh receptions and articulations of the Gospel that will nourish and enhance the effective proclamation and witness of the Gospel.

IV. GIVING VOICE TO WORDS OF TRUTH AND HOPE

We began our reflections today with a concern that the contributions of contemporary theological scholarship have been underappreciated in many ecclesiastical circles due to a limited and reductive understanding of the ecclesial vocation of the theologian, in particular of the prophetic dimension of the theological task as it is related to the participation of all the baptized in the prophetic office of Christ. Yet we must admit that the warning against theological presumption is not entirely without foundation. As theologians, we would be less than honest if we did not recognize the relatively privileged place that many of us hold, at least in North America. We must recognize the temptations to write for the sake of preserving our academic respectability and the approval of tenure and promotion committees. We must also acknowledge that there is a pseudo-prophetic voice that is easily appropriated when we place upon ourselves the mantle of righteousness and certitude at little personal cost. But the antidote is not a facile subordination to the uncritical exercise of magisterial authority, for presumption is not the unique temptation of the theologian, but of the church office holder as well.

What is demanded of those who place themselves in the service of God's Word, of both the *schola theologorum* and the magisterium, is an eschatological humility in the face of a truth that is always, to a certain extent, beyond our grasp. It is a humility that recognizes that we cannot exercise our proper vocations within the life of the church without the willingness of bishops, theologians and the entire Christian faithful to engage in the sometimes painful *askesis* of respectful conversation, critical inquiry, and mutual correction. Finally, this humility requires us to join with the doctrinal teaching office in the recognition that as we move from fundamental principle to concrete prudential judgments regarding the specific application of gospel

values, our claims must become more and more modest. Many of us have complained of the disturbing failure of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to honor the necessary limits of moving from principle to complex public policy evaluations in its contributions to the recent health care reform debate. However, we theologians are often guilty of the same lack of modesty when, assuming an unsailable prophetic tone; we denounce concrete public policy on war in Afghanistan or immigration without recognizing the limits of our own prudential judgments.

From Denial to Reality

Our reflections on the prophetic imagination uncovered the dual temptations of denial and despair. We saw that the prophets challenge us to move from denial to reality and from despair to hope. What might be required of theology's prophetic engagement if we take seriously the presence of such temptations in our own time? First, to address the temptation of denial, the prophetic engagement of theology demands an honest interpretation of our particular moment in history in light of the divine intention. Heschel describes prophecy as an "exegesis of existence from a divine perspective."⁵⁰ An important aspect of this "existential exegesis" in our time is naming the experience of exile. Today many people of faith experience themselves at odds with the dominant culture of society. The old alliance between mainline Christianity and established Western culture has collapsed. Indeed, the fastest growing religious demographic in the Western world today belongs to people of "no religious affiliation."⁵¹ The largest populations of Catholics now live in Brazil, Mexico, and the Philippines.⁵² As the hegemony of Western European expressions of faith wanes, we are called to welcome the gifts of faith as they are being received in the Southern and Eastern hemispheres of the globe. The old certitudes of a homogenous Catholic culture are no longer reinforced by social convention or coercion. We are just beginning to contend with the fact of living in a religiously pluralistic society. The loss of familiar points of reference contributes to a sense of confusion, anxiety, and dislocation where many experience themselves as socially, morally, and culturally exiled and having lost their homeland. They may be tempted to abdicate in despair or retreat into privatized or individualistic forms of piety and religion. In a context of exile, theology must be keenly sensitive to the pastoral need for communities to express their sense of displacement, grief, and "resentful sadness."⁵³

⁵⁰Heschel, *The Prophets*, I, xiv. Here Heschel defines prophecy as "the interpretation of a particular moment in history, a divine understanding of a human situation."

⁵¹Recent estimates put the demographics of this group at approximately 1.1 billion, or 20% of the world population in the year 2000. Noel Davies and Martin Conway, *World Christianity in the 20th Century* (London: SCM, 2008), 12.

⁵²Where in 1900 82% of Christians lived in Europe and North America, that portion had shrunk to 40% by the year 2000. Tim Grass, *Modern Church History* (London: SCM, 2008), 370.

⁵³Brueggemann, "Preaching to Exiles," 4.

Repeating the pat answers of the past would be a form of denial and a failure to undertake the creative task of receiving God's Word anew. An existential exegesis requires creativity and the courage to move beyond safe and accepted construals of reality in a sincere effort of truth seeking. Through the constant interface between the revealed Word of God and worrisome signs of dissonance, a prophetic theology will squarely confront the distance between the church's message and those practices or forms of institutional life that obscure an authentic witness. Honestly facing the truth of our limitations gives us the freedom to place our hope in the possibilities of God. Without romanticizing the past or engaging in a false nostalgia, we are called to draw from the wisdom of tradition to plot a course from sadness to hope, to be midwives in the birthing of a renewed church with a renewed understanding of its place in the world.

From Despair to Hope

Second, a prophetically engaged theology will reach beyond the present to evoke a renewed response to the life-giving Word of God, at once retrieving the memory of God's promise and redirecting the attention of the exilic community toward the future in hope. A key to this constructive effort is confronting the lassitude and torpor induced by despair, "the defining pathology that robs the church of its missional energy and stewardship of generosity."⁵⁴ In our day, we cannot avoid thinking of how the crisis of clerical sexual abuse and the inadequate response of church leaders to this scandal continue to weigh upon the church and undermine the credibility of its witness. We must undertake the task of accounting for our hope with confidence that God's transforming power will not only energize the church, but also empower it for a renewed engagement for and with all of humanity and the whole of creation. In an act of constructive re-imagination, the theologian assists the church to re-imagine home—not as a safe place of refuge or a form of sectarian withdrawal—but as a living community firmly planted in the world. As theology re-describes the defining features of the church's identity, it will envision a full participation in and with the dominant culture of society, albeit with sufficient critical distance and freedom to remain faithful to its transformative mission. Indeed, a truly prophetic theology will serve the whole people of God in its dialogue with contemporary culture and science, discerning the transforming presence and activity of God's Spirit wherever it is found.⁵⁵ Re-describing home in Christian terms

⁵⁴Brueggemann, "Preaching to Exiles," 2.

⁵⁵Number 62 of *Gaudium et spes* touches upon theology's dialogical and dialectical engagement with culture and contemporary science: ". . . for contingent reasons the relationship between culture and Christian formation is not always without its difficulties. Such difficulties are not necessarily harmful to a life of faith and can even stimulate a more accurate and deeper understanding of faith. In fact, recent studies and discoveries in science, history and philosophy give rise to new enquiries with practical implications, and also demand new investigations by theologians, Moreover, while respecting the methods

means simply proclaiming the good news of God's reign.⁵⁶ A prophetically engaged theology will liberate new energies for ecclesial mission by transposing the imaginative language of God's Word, in particular God's promise of forgiveness, new life, and a new creation, to the concrete reality of our present historical context.

Twenty-five years ago, in an effort to call Christians from denial to reality and from despair to hope, one hundred and fifty six theologians, church leaders, and ordinary Christians drew up what came to be known as "The Kairos Document," a theological comment on the political crisis in South Africa.⁵⁷ They challenged the churches to take an unequivocal stand against the unjust system of apartheid, and to dismantle the sinful structures of racism, capitalism, and totalitarianism which converged to sustain it. Re-reading the Scriptures together with the signs of the times, they denounced all theological justifications of the *status quo*. Recognizing the inadequacy of taking "a few stock ideas derived from Christian tradition and then uncritically and repeatedly [applying] them" to their situation,⁵⁸ they appealed for an existential exegesis, including a thorough social and structural analysis of their predicament. They called for a prophetic theology that would be both sufficiently critical—identifying the enemies of the common good, and hopeful—pointing to the places where "God is at work in our world turning hopeless and evil situations to good so that his 'Kingdom may come.'"⁵⁹ They sought to articulate a message of hope and liberation for the oppressed and oppressors alike. The Kairos Document was a wake-up call for Christians around the world. A generation on, its invitation to "recognize the time of our visitation (*kairos*) from God" (Lk 19:44) still echoes in a profoundly changed global context. Let us continue to take up the challenge faithfully and give an accounting of the hope that is in us (1 Peter 3:15).

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and requirements of theological science, theologians are invited continually to look for a more appropriate way of communicating doctrine to the people of their time . . ."

⁵⁶"It is no stretch to link *homecoming* to *gospel* to *kingdom*. The linkage is already made in Isaiah 40-55 and in Ezekiel 37:1-14." Brueggemann, "Preaching to Exiles," 14.

⁵⁷Inspired by this example, a group of Palestinian Christians issued their own "Kairos Document" in December 2009 calling for peace and justice in the Israeli occupied territories. <http://www.oikoumene.org/gr/resources/documents/other-ecumenical-bodies/kairos-palestine-document.html>. Accessed July 8, 2010.

⁵⁸"The Kairos Document 1985," <http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/library-resources/official%20docs/kairos-document.htm>, chapter 3, 4. Accessed July 8, 2010.

⁵⁹"The Kairos Document 1985," chapter 4, 7.