

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS:

THE TASK OF THE THEOLOGIAN TODAY

In his presidential address last year, Father Aloysius McDonough considered the professional theologian as an instrumental cause in the *ecclesia docens*. At that time Father McDonough said: "The Professional theologian is a human instrument divinely attuned, an active member—not only of the *ecclesia discens*, but also of the *ecclesia docens*. In relation to the hierarchy, the position of the theologian in the economy of the Teaching Church is auxiliary, subsidiary, but notwithstanding that subordination, his contribution is professionally reliable, influential, invaluable."¹

Since these words were spoken to us, we have had the first session of the Second Vatican Council. As a result, each of us has, I think, a new and deeper realization of their import. The Council has made clear, even dramatically, to all the world the central role of theology and the tremendous responsibility of the theologian. The questions raised, the points debated, within and without the Council, are vital to the life of the Church, of the world, of every Christian, of every human being. The tasks confronting us, as theologians, are enormous whether considered in their number or their variety, their scope or their profundity.

Every aspect of life, individual and social, civil and ecclesial, Christian and non-Christian, is placed before us for theological investigation, appraisal, penetration, evaluation, direction. Many of our problems are age-old: faith and reason, the natural and the supernatural, science and revelation, certainty and truth, the problem of freedom, the problem of evil, the development of dogma. Many are new, of the age of the atom, of nuclear fission, of space, of communication, of emerging races and peoples, of conflicting economies. Many are both old and ever new: the meeting of diverse cultures, the

¹ CTSA, Proceedings of the Seventeenth Annual Convention, New York, 1962, 269.

daily changes of individual and social living, the creative activity of man, the providential action of God. Moreover, toward the statement of these problems and toward their solution, many streams of thought converge, streams in themselves often turbulent and of diverse directions: the developments in the study of Sacred Scripture, the expansion and use of the historical method, the unfolding of philosophies of diverse attitudes, methods, categories and vocabularies. To all this is added for us the responsibility of pedagogy, in the formation of priests, in the guidance of the faithful.

The task is formidable. How shall we meet it?

In his first address our Holy Father, Pope Paul VI, spoke these words: "Our pontifical service will be to preserve with entire commitment the great work launched with so much hope and with bright expectation by our predecessor, John XXIII: the achievement of that *ut unum sint* so awaited by all and for which he offered his life."² "Ut unum sint": the prayer of Christ, the life of John. Therein we find what must be our personal and corporate basic attitude to the problems confronting us. We seek unity, the unity of God, with God, in God. We approach, as did Pope John and now Pope Paul, our quest for truth under the impetus of love, of charity. We are to seek constantly the guidance of the Spirit of God, the Spirit who is at once the flame, the fire of love and the torch, the illumination of truth. It is He who rules the Church, who inspires the Holy Father, who vitalizes the Council.

Implicit is all that John XXIII made explicit by his words, his deeds, his life, his death. We meet one another in a spirit of fraternity, of mutual love and esteem. We serve the Church in her pastoral office, guiding, leading, inspiring, protecting, nourishing the children God gives her—all mankind. The truth we seek, we seek everywhere and in every way. The truth we find, we give freely that all men may know Christ and knowing Him, love Him.

This does not make our quest for truth easy. "Ut unum sint" led Christ to His Cross, John to his death. The way to truth is not

² Pope Paul VI, Address of 22 June 1963, AAS, LV, 10 (1 July 1963), 570-578. (Translation: *The New York Times*, June 23, 1963, p. 2.)

a cold separation of the mind from the will; it is the unremitting commitment of the mind by a will emptied of self, of pride. Only such a will can be caught up in the Spirit of God; only then can the mind be fully free, free to discern and embrace the truth, free to present to man for his love the truly good. The life of the Church manifests again and again the alliance of holiness and wisdom.

Holiness is union with God and, for the theologian, the tasks he undertakes professionally should be an integral element of his personal sanctity. Yet holiness is not theology; the goodness of the will is not a substitute for thought. In the spirit of Our Lord, in the spirit of the Church as manifested in John and in our present Holy Father, we must search for truth out of love, love for truth and love for one another. But, we must search.

That search should, I think, be guided as well as inspired by the Second Vatican Council. That Council is the most important reality in the world today: it is the reality of God among men, the reality of Christ, the reality of the Church exercising her motherhood, proclaiming her mission, invigorating her vocation. She would restore all things in Christ; she would present Christ unmistakably divine, triumphantly victorious, to the minds and hearts of men. The twentieth century for all its marvels has not produced anything of greater import in the history of mankind.

The Vatican Council is the Church at an intense moment of her living. Life comes from within and the living of the Church from the indwelling Spirit of God, from the living presence of Christ. If we are to see and understand the Church living in her Council we must look within, we must see with the eyes of God, of faith; we must understand with the penetration of love, of charity.

The moment that is the Council captures and contains all that has gone before this moment: creation and beyond to the life of God in Himself; Eden and sin and the promise of salvation; the kings and the prophets; the conception of Mary, of Jesus, the crib and the cross; the birth and the life of the Church; the Apostles, the saints, the Fathers, the doctors, the theologians of every century, the popes and bishops of every time and every nation.

The Church begins anew but her newness flows from her immortal vitality, from the inner wellsprings of her unchanging life in God, with God. She is the "ever ancient, ever new" of Augustine. She begins at the beginning: the will, the truth, the love of God. In the treasury that is her mind, her heart, are all the insights, all the love that God has poured out upon her in her children. For her tradition is not the recollection of a dim, dead past, not a recitation of historical monuments. It is her living mind, her wisdom, judging, enriching, transforming the present, shaping the future. Of all the wealth she possesses, nothing shall be lost, all shall be put to the service of souls, the glory of God.

The moment that is the Council is a climax in the life of the Church, a moment for which God prepared in every century and especially in our own. In the words of Pope Paul VI: "At the beginning of our pontifical ministry, it is agreeable to our spirit to remember our predecessors who left us a spiritual, sacred and glorious heritage: Pius XI, with his indomitable spiritual strength; Pius XII who illuminated the Church with the light of teaching full of knowledge; and finally John XXIII who gave to the whole world an example of his singular goodness."³ In the providence of God no one prepared so effectively, so exactly, so perfectly as Pope Pius XII. Consider the proximate concerns of the Council: biblical studies, the liturgy, the role of the laity, the ecumenical movement, the missions. Each of these was initiated, given impetus, direction, encouragement by Pius XII. By his allocutions, his encyclicals he reached to the heart of every activity, intellectual and practical, every search for truth, every quest for good. He unmasked evil and error, pointed to dangers; called for courage and dedication; rallied priest, religious and layman to see with the eyes of God, love with His love, live with His life.

The Council is too easily misunderstood by standing too close to men, by being too absorbed in minutiae. We can be excited or dismayed, encouraged or depressed. We do not have as yet, nor can we, the perspective of history. Yet, in a way, through Pope Pius, we do have. In his promotion of the great movements within

³ *Ibid.*, 570.

the Church he set the goals, indicated the means, foresaw the perils. So did he dissipate confusion, check unorthodoxy, give release to the surge of new biblical, apologetic, pastoral endeavors. As did John who followed him, he moved forward despite dangers, seeing in peril a condition of life, yet the good to be gained: the enrichment of life, the meaningfulness of living, life itself—as justifying, as the goal set by God.

The dangers discerned by Pius are grave and very real: atheistic existentialism, relativism, voluntarism, subjectivism, eclecticism, historicism. They could undermine the quest of philosophic and theological truth. Yet the direction of Pius was ever positive: "We must build truth upon truth."⁴

A man who has dedicated himself to what he prefers to call the "renewal" or "growth" of theology, echoes the concern and the optimism of Pope Pius. Father Edward Schillebeeckx finds the occasions for renewal in the advances in biblical studies, in the historical investigations of the patristic period and especially of the Greek Fathers, in contact with Protestant theology, in contemporary philosophies, especially those of phenomenology, personalism, existentialism. Reflection on these will, he hopes, issue in new aspects of truth, new grasp upon reality. Thus there could be, to his mind, a more powerful grasp of faith; but, he warns, there is also new possibility for error.⁵

Key to his approach is the theory of knowledge as elaborated by De Petter.⁶ Sometimes called "implicit intuition," this theory affirms the absolute character of the truths of salvation, the attainment of objective certainty, yet also emphasizes the imperfection, growth, historicity of human knowledge, the role of perspectivism. Father Schillebeeckx is acutely aware of how easily theological reflection on the basis of this theory can become relativistic, of how

⁴ Pope Pius XII, *Humani generis*, AAS, 42 (1950), 561-578. Cf. J. Levie, S.J., "L'Encyclique 'Humani generis,'" *Nouvelle Revue Theologique*, LXII (1950), 788.

⁵ Cf. articles in *Tijdschrift voor Theologie*, especially, "De nieuwe wending in de huidige Dogmatiek," I, 1 (Jan. 1961), 17-47.

⁶ Cf. De Petter, "L'intuitif implicite dans l'acte de la connaissance," in *The 10th International Congress of Philosophy Report*, Amsterdam, 1948, I, 352-355.

important to balanced judgment is a discerning faith and a solidly grounded metaphysic. De Petter himself criticized a work on existential phenomenology as subjectivistic and the death of philosophy and theology.

I am not competent to judge the validity of the position of Father Schillebeeckx or to evaluate his contribution. Study lies ahead and prayer for balanced judgment. I most certainly agree with him in one conviction: the relevance and importance of the teaching of Saint Thomas, that his teaching is the guide, the guardian and fruitful source of a new era of theology. This might be expected; we are both Dominicans. Our confidence in this relevance, this importance does not derive from the encomiums showered upon St. Thomas' doctrine over the centuries nor solely from the confidence manifested in it by the Church. The conviction has grown out of personal, intimate, daily involvement with the mind of St. Thomas. The profundity of that mind and its endless fruitfulness can only be humbling and that humility must be incentive to find in that profundity a renewed vitality capable of dealing with the needs of our time.

"We must build truth upon truth." So said Pope Pius. Such certainly is the spirit of St. Thomas. Thus do the conciliar Fathers, under the guidance of God, approach the gigantic task that is theirs. As theologians, "instruments, divinely attuned of the *ecclesia docens*" we are to make, we must make, in the same spirit, our contribution if it is to be "professionally reliable, influential, invaluable." The tremendous, intricate, difficult work of the Council and its commissions is indicative of our personal responsibility for thought, for study, for discussion, for balanced judgment. The union of so many in the resolution of common problems should manifest to us our urgent need for cooperative activity. The saints have claimed it to be of the divine will that we sanctify one another. Is it not also of that same will that we teach one another and so bring to men the wisdom of God?

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