

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS:

A THEOLOGY RELEVANT FOR TODAY

In the year 1952-1953, the board of directors of our theological society made the presidential address a formal and fixed part of the annual meeting and stipulated that it should be "a summary of the theological progress of the year, or a period of time, or recent theological developments and trends, a kind of general conspectus of the field."¹

Whatever we are to say under that heading in this moment of history that is the Second Vatican Council, must emanate from this central fact: the Church is in the throes of adapting her whole life and stance to the revolutionary changes that have swept the modern world.

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Council is the response of the Church to the needs of twentieth-century man.

Yet, in a larger sense, the Council has a significance greater than its origins and a relevance wider than its original application. We must be concerned with the twenty-first century as well as with the twentieth century. This truth will be brought home to us later in this convention when Father Owen Garrigan delineates some of the theological challenges concomitant with such scientific advances as the control of heredity and the imminent possibility of producing real life in laboratories.

That the theologian's task is a never-ending one can be seen by looking into the past. In the thirteenth century, St. Thomas Aquinas succeeded in making the Christian message relevant to the learned world of his day which had been so greatly influenced by Aristotelianism as interpreted by Jewish and Mohammedan scholars. But this is not the day of St. Thomas Aquinas; the modern mind is not prepared to cope with the modes of Greek thought he employed.

But by the same token this is not the patristic period either. It

¹ *Proceedings CTSA*, 8 (1953) p. 174.

is an oversimplification of the theologian's task to imagine that we can recapture the realism of that great period simply by exchanging Aristotelian categories for biblical categories. I submit that the problem goes far deeper.

Since God alone knows the whole design of redemption down to its smallest detail, in every age, until time has run its course, scripture will be replete with senses and meanings that are clearly perceived or known only by God.

Even if it were possible for a human mind in any given period to know the totality of divine thought, it would not be possible for him to express that knowledge, to communicate that knowledge in its totality to other human minds.

As Father Bernard Lonergan says, "Human experience is never complete expression. It keeps its eye on the central meaning; it expedites subordinate and peripheral meanings by lowering standards of adequacy to a sufficient approximation to the purpose in hand"²

It is because of this difficulty inherent in every attempt to put any truth into terms of human expression that biblical scholars recognize two elements in the biblical categories themselves.

The intelligible realities intended and willed by God constitute the formal element. The Semitic or Greek form of these intelligible realities as they are expressed in the Bible comprise the secondary element. Since God intended revelation for all men, the formal element transcends every possible culture and is capable of finding expression in every language.

The theologian's task is comparable to that of the physicist. The latter deals with sensible realities and such objects, in their spatial and temporal relations, are easily expressed in terms of ordinary human experience. But at the same time he must deal with other realities that are apprehensible not by the senses but by the intellect only. These are the principles and laws of his science.

He must of necessity surmount this difficulty if he is to make any progress whatsoever. His is the kind of necessity that is said to be

² B. J. F. Lonergan, S.J., *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, (Philosophical Library, New York, 1958, p. 557).

the mother of invention. Accordingly, he has devised a way to determine precisely which written or spoken expressions can represent these intelligible realities.

He begins with a postulate of invariance and then he uses that postulate as a heuristic norm in determining which expressions can represent physical laws and principles.

According to Father Lonergan, . . . the meaning of invariance is that:

- (1) all scientists expect their correlations and laws to be independent of merely spatio-temporal differences,
- (2) physicists are confronted with a special difficulty inasmuch as they have to use reference frames, and
- (3) physicists surmount their peculiar difficulty by expressing their principles and laws in mathematical equations that remain invariant under transformations of frames of reference.³

An application of this explanation of invariance to theology would run somewhat like this.

(1) God intended His revelation to be independent of merely spatio-temporal differences. He did not intend His revelation to be restricted spatially, that is to say, dependent upon that part of the earth's surface traversed by the Apostles and the Fathers. Moreover, He did not intend the understanding of His revelation to be restricted temporally, that is, to the apostolic and patristic ages.

(2) Theologians are confronted with a special difficulty inasmuch as they have to use reference frames; and

(3) theologians surmount their peculiar difficulty by expressing divine revelation in the abstract, universal equivalents of the *philosophia perennis* that remain invariant under transformations of frames of reference.

The *philosophia perennis* is to the theologian what mathematics is to the physicist, an indispensable tool. St. Thomas properly evaluated it as the *ancilla theologiae*.

It is in this way that the Church presents the same unchanging

³ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

doctrine and meaning through a diversity of expressions. It is in this way that the intelligible realities of divine revelation, that is to say, the formal element of the biblical categories, retain their identity through a diversity of conceptualizations and expressions.

This is the same method of metaphysical analogy that enables the Catholic theologian to steer a middle course, "between a nominalist agnosticism that exalts the divine transcendence to a point where whatever ideas we express about God are pure verbalisms and symbols and the unconscious and crass anthropomorphisms that attempt to define God in material terms. . . ."⁴

Moreover the *philosophia perennis* is the *ancilla theologiae* in the sense that the transposition of biblical categories to philosophical and abstract classifications is a natural and normal process in any growth of understanding. For example, Father John Courtney Murray tells us that the logic of history demonstrates the fact that theological inquiry into "the problem of God" must inevitably pass from the level of biblical notions or categories to inquiry into the ultimate terms of intelligibility or understanding which he calls metaphysical "is-ness."⁵

Father Lonergan states the case even more lucidly when he explains that just as every full interpretation of reality "has to mount to a universal viewpoint, so the Church takes advantage of the *philosophia perennis* and its expansion into speculative theology" to enrich its understanding by achieving the universal viewpoint. Hence he says that

the theological interpreter (of Sacred Scripture) has to operate from the firmer and broader base that includes the theologically transformed universal viewpoint; and so . . . the dogmatic decision is, and the technical thesis of the dogmatic theologian can be, the true interpretation of Scriptural texts, patristic teaching, and traditional utterances.⁶

⁴ E. Burke, C.S.P., "The Use of Scripture as a *Locus Theologicus*," *Proceedings CTSA* 14 (1959), p. 88.

⁵ Cf. "On the Structure of the Problem of God," *Theological Studies* 23 (1962) pp. 9-10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 740.

While Fathers Murray and Lonergan, make it abundantly clear that it is inevitable that every full interpretation of reality must mount to this universal viewpoint, the fact remains that this viewpoint is not the ultimate goal of theology; it is but a means to an end. In the words of St. Thomas Aquinas, "*Actus credentis non terminatur ad enuntiabile, sed ad rem.*"⁷

At this point, a new vista opens up to us and we see three distinct phases of theological inquiry. Its starting point is the concrete historical reality of divine revelation in salvation history. From this first phase, we have seen that the mind is compelled to inquire into the ultimate intelligibility of the divine mysteries that have been revealed. But, after ascending to this abstract plane, descent to the singular concrete situation seems to be an intellectual process every bit as natural and normal as was the ascent.⁸

It is in this third phase of theological inquiry that we, at long last, come to grips with the task of making theology relevant to our time. It is in this third phase that we see the new theology in its true perspective. It is in this third phase that theology becomes pastoral in the sense in which the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council urge us as theologians to make our discipline truly pastoral.

They give to the term pastoral a meaning different from the one we have given it for years in our seminary courses. But theirs is not a new meaning.

It is rather a return to the full-orbed beauty and richness of the original meaning coming from the Latin "*pascere*," from the Greek βοσχε, ποιμαινε, and reminds us of Christ's solemn commission to St. Peter as head of the Church, "Feed my lambs . . . Feed my sheep."⁹ It is a meaning that is especially fitting in our era, for men starved spiritually in a sensate culture, to use Sorokin's term.¹⁰

The architects of this new phase of theological inquiry could

⁷ S.T., 2-2, 1, 2 ad 2m.

⁸ Cf. J. Thornhill, S.M., "Towards an Integral Theology," *Theological Studies* 24 (1963) p. 264 sq.

⁹ John 21, 15-17.

¹⁰ Cf. P. A. Sorokin, *The Crisis of Our Age*, New York, E. P. Dutton and Co., 1942, p. 20.

well use as a model the heuristic structure now employed by empirical inquiry which Father Lonergan lays bare for us in these words:

For just as insight is a necessary intermediary between sets of measurements and the formulation of laws, so also it is needed in the reverse process that applies known laws to concrete situations. Hence, a concrete scientific inference has not two but three conditions: it supposes information on some concrete situation; it supposes knowledge of laws; and it supposes insight into the given situation. For it is only by the insight that we can know:

- (1) which laws are to be selected for inference,
- (2) how selected laws are to be combined to represent the spatial and dynamic configuration of the concrete situation, and
- (3) what dimensions in that situation are to be measured to supply numerical values that particularize the selected and combined laws.¹¹

Just as Father Lonergan stresses the need for insight into a given situation in order to apply the known laws of empirical science to a concrete situation, it appears that theology cannot possibly achieve relevance for contemporary man without a comparable insight into the concrete situation that is contemporary man.

If we take Anselm's definition of theology as *fides quaerens intellectum*, we are brought face to face with the fact that, in our day, faith is seeking understanding neither in the mind of the patristic age nor in a mind conditioned by the culture of the schoolmen. What then is the mind in which faith seeks an understanding today?

At the moment, it would appear that we do not have a ready answer to that all-important question if for no other reason than the fact that our culture is so complex. But, by the same token, no age has been so blessed as ours in the development of such sciences as anthropology, sociology and psychology. These, taken together with the newer philosophy of social change which has been called "meta-history"¹² can give us an insight into the concrete situation that is twentieth century man such as theologians of bygone days

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹² Cf. Thornhill, *op. cit.*, p. 275.

dared not even dream. Should not these disciplines now become the handmaids of the new and third phase of theological inquiry, the new pastoral theology, in the same way that Greek philosophy became the *ancilla theologiae* of the second, or speculative stage of theological inquiry for St. Thomas?

Or to come closer to our own day, let us recall the series of events, the chain reaction if you will, that began back in 1943 when Pope Pius XII was inspired to reach out to the long-suspect critical techniques developed by Protestant and Jewish biblical scholars, to reach out to ". . . the aids offered by history, archaeology and other sciences, in order to discover what literary forms the writers of that early age intended to use . . ." ¹³ and made of these, one and all, handmaids of biblical scholarship.

It is as a result of this that W. D. Davies, professor of Biblical Theology at Union Theological Seminary in this city of New York, humbly and sincerely says: "I wouldn't dream of undertaking a scholarly work without studying what Catholics have done first."

There are those who see the whole movement toward Christian unity as starting at this point in 1943 and I suspect that this Father Ferrer Smith had in mind when, in his presidential address last year, he said: "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 providence of God no one prepared so effectively, so exactly, so perfectly as Pope Pius XII . . ." ¹⁴

Future historians might possibly regard *Divino afflante spiritu* as one of the most fateful documents ever written. It set in motion ideas and forces to which that great intuitive soul, Pope John XXIII, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, reacted spontaneously. The Church, he calmly said, is experiencing "a new Pentecost."

Like the Apostles on that first Pentecost, their successors, assembled in the council chamber of the Vatican, have demonstrated to all men of good will a mighty desire to bring Christ into closer touch with their world.

¹³ "Divino Afflante Spiritu," *Enchir. Bibl.*, 558.

¹⁴ *Proceedings CTSA*, 18 (1963), p. 194.

As I stand here charged with the duty of giving you "a summary of the theological progress of the year, or a period of time, or recent theological developments and trends, a kind of general conspectus of the field,"¹⁵ I feel somewhat like Abraham Lincoln must have felt when, in 1863, he stood on Gettysburg's battlefield. He had come to dedicate a portion of it as a military cemetery. He said that in a sense, ". . . we cannot dedicate this ground."¹⁶

Likewise, I would say that, in a sense, we cannot give a conspectus of the field of theology in this tense and hope-filled time when theological debate dominates conversation and invites history's scrutiny. In Abraham Lincoln's words I choose to say ". . . It is rather for us to be dedicated here to the unfinished work . . . to the great unfinished task remaining before us . . ."¹⁷

That task, in part at least, is to embrace such sciences as anthropology, sociology, psychology and the newer philosophy of social change in the way Pope Pius XII embraced such disciplines as archaeology, ethnology and study of literary forms. These give us the insight that is a *conditio sine qua non* in that process of bringing our theology down from the lofty heights of abstraction and fitting it into the concrete situation of contemporary man.

Nay more, these sciences will enable theologians to go beyond the exigencies of the moment. We must have accurate ways of measuring not only the mind of the twentieth century but also the mind of the twenty-first century. The new theology must never again lose touch with any culture, become out of date so to speak. We must, in this our day, form and fashion a theology that will anticipate social changes rather than adapt to the social change centuries after it has taken place.

In every age we must be instruments of the "new and eternal covenant" between man and his God. Our theology must present the same unchanging doctrine, the same intelligible realities intended and willed by God in His revelation, the formal element of the biblical categories, in any and every century. The new theology must

¹⁵ *Proceedings CTSA*, 8 (1953), p. 174.

¹⁶ Gettysburg Address.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

retain the identity of these intelligible realities through the diversity of conceptualizations and expressions that will inevitably and naturally evolve in the course of human events as the centuries roll by. Ours is the day and the age of the *theologia perennis*.

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