

METHODS OF TEACHING THEOLOGY IN THE SEMINARY

Just at the time Pope John sounded the call for renewal in the Church, John W. Gardner published an interesting article in the IBM magazine, *THINK* (Nov.-Dec. 1962). It is called, "You Can Tell a Creative Company by the People It Keeps." If, writes the Carnegie Corporation's president, we develop skills and habits of mind which will be instruments of continuous change and growth on the part of the individual, then we will have fashioned a system that provides for its own continuous renewal. The last act of a dying organization, he continues, is to issue an enlarged edition of the rule book.

I believe some of Gardner's thinking in *THINK* is pertinent to our discussion today. Development of skills and habits of mind as instruments of continuous change and growth, I take it, bears on teaching theology as well as other education. Further, I believe the implied question in this seminar's title, "Methods of Teaching Theology in the Seminary," is: changed methods? new methods? But finally, I want to stress that if I do not have a brilliant model to unveil for you today (and I certainly do not), at least I will not subtly sell a rule book edition of a *cursus systematicus*, but now enlarged by biblical introduction plus a postscript of contemporary "meaningfulness." I hope I correctly presume that many of us who have simply added Scripture and "relevance" to the usual thesis propositions somehow feel they are only pedagogical band-aids—the pain is less but the sore remains. Radical surgery is needed. Restructuring must be organic, inside out.

For all that, I interpret my task today as very modest, and that's a good thing since I stand before you unburdened by any special competence. My qualification is single: keen interest in what goes on in a seminary, especially as a learning situation. So I am here to make only the first brief statement in a discussion of the fullest possible participation. The seminar format intends this, I am sure. But more, the topic demands it. I shall happily be faulted on this, but

to my knowledge no one has come up with the adequate combination of revised methodology and curriculum. Many are probing, both in blueprint and actual experimentation, and this session today provides a forum to share that probing. For myself, my own experience is very limited, and since I wear the two seminary hats of professor and administrator, I suspect I am more confused than most. But to make the confusion more congenial, I have aimed the following scattershot in four directions: pressures; problems; perspectives; and possibilities.

I. PRESSURES

By "pressures" I mean only this: we are involved in this concern by push and by pull. The push is familiar enough: lectures and passivity, dogmas and dogmatisms, answers to questions never asked; God's revealed word stifled by thesis method, fragmented by textbook, structured by Denzinger, systematically closed to any real here and real now. These and like charges have become more incisive, more frequent, more articulate, and, though at times somewhat overstated and seemingly undermining, on the whole more substantive. Every seminary professor of theology has felt the push.

But I draw attention to a pull, too. For when Pope John opened Vatican II he noted "the idea is one thing, and its concrete expression in words is another. Whilst still faithfully preserving the pure doctrine, it can be expressed with varying and diverse *concepts* (emphasis mine), according to the mentality and language of the people" (*OR*, Oct. 1, 1962). In an address in Baltimore in April 1963, Cardinal Bea spoke several times in a similar vein: "Only the priest who knows the different philosophical currents will be able to understand our separated brethren in their search for the truth." And again:

It is in theology above all that the priest must excel with a wide and profound knowledge, so as to be able to give adequate answers and solutions to the problems which nowadays are tormenting our separated brethren. Neither should we delude ourselves in thinking that it might be enough to simply repeat the ancient systems and the old distinctions. There is also in the theological field, and in this even more than in others, a continuous movement to evolve. The mentality of our separated brethren at the present time is not

just simply that of the sixteenth century, nor even of the nineteenth century. The answers must correspond to the present situation.

Then in December 1963 came the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* with its expressed general aim "to adapt more suitably to the needs of our own times those institutions which are subject to change;" and more to the point of this discussion, with its now famous sentence in n.16:

Moreover, other professors, while striving to expound the mystery of Christ and the history of salvation from the angle proper to each of their subjects, must nevertheless do so in a way which will clearly bring out the connection between their subjects and the liturgy, as also in the unity which underlies all priestly training.

And granted its wise caution for sober reform, I read still further papal "pull" in Pope Paul's *Ecclesiam Suam*. He speaks of the Church's duty today "to deepen the awareness that she must have of herself." The description of the Church in this document notably lacks textbook terminology and methodology. Rather, the Church is described as a "mystery" whose origin and nature have never been sufficiently investigated or understood; a mystery to be lived, a mystery that we become aware of only by a mature and living faith. In the November 1964 *Constitution on the Church*, too, the introduction speaks of the Church "in Christ like a Sacrament," and the first chapter is itself entitled, "The Mystery of the Church."

One hears, finally, that the redrafted *Propositions on the Training of Priests* include some interesting additions. For example:

In seminaries where there are many students, although a common scientific educational force should be retained, the students should be suitably arranged in smaller groups so that better provisions can be made for the personal formation of the individual students.

In reorganizing ecclesiastical studies special care should be taken that the individual disciplines of philosophy and theology be more suitably coordinated (and that they cooperate harmoniously in opening the minds of the students more and more to the Mystery of Christ which affects the entire history of the human race, influences the Church as well, and above

all is operative in the priestly ministry) . . . Let each of the tracts be arranged. . . Let them learn to seek the solutions of human problems in the light of revelation (and to apply its eternal truths to the changeable condition of human affairs and to communicate them in a manner suited to the men of their times).

And finally, another entirely new proposition:

Since training in doctrine should aim not at a mere communication of notions, but rather at a true and profound formation of the students, the teaching methods should be reviewed not only with regard to lectures, seminars and special exercises, but also in what has to do with encouraging the study of the students, either in private or in small groups. The unity and solidity of the whole education should be carefully preserved, avoiding too great a multiplication of subjects and lessons and omitting in them those questions which have scarcely any importance or which should be deferred until advanced academic studies.

There is a pressure, then, of both push and pull for rethinking on the teaching and study of theology in general, and perhaps on some new principle of theological course structure in particular (e.g.: mystery; sacrament; Eucharistic celebration).

II. PROBLEMS

Granted the pressure for revision of method and curriculum, if revise, revise to what? That, simply, is our problem of staggering complexity. So we must not put it simply or singly, but plurally.

There is, for instance, the problem of reidentifying the seminary's academic objectives. Renewal is not just any innovation and change; it is also the process of bringing the results of change into line with our purpose. Now some have called Vatican II a "pastoral" council (cf. Pope John's directive to the Council Fathers at the opening session: "Ways and means of exposition must be sought which are more in harmony with the magisterium whose character is predominantly *pastoral*"). Yet more and more theologians fear the possible misunderstanding of the label. In an address by Father Schillebeeckx last November we read, for instance:

This council does not think in terms of abstract truths: the key word of this council is *Event*. Not that the truth be-

comes of secondary importance, but the great majority of the episcopate is concerned about how Christian truth ought to be *done*, ought to be accomplished; how Christian truth can become an event in the world of today. It is because of this preoccupation that the schema on the sacerdotal ministry has been rejected by the council (*Documen. Olandese del Concilio*, M. 172 A.).

But in the following paragraph Schillebeeckx continues with a clarification of the highest importance, I think:

The *pastoral* character of this council is nothing other than a new *dogmatic* awareness. In my opinion, it would be a self-contradiction to call this council a "pastoral council" *in contrast* to the preceding so-called dogmatic and doctrinal councils. I am afraid that certain supporters of the minority are mistaken when they finally accept the decisions of the council under the pretext that "it is ultimately only a *pastoral* council" as if, as far as the presentation of Christian doctrine goes, everything will stay and be able to stay as it was after the council, as if the Church would be able to continue in its routines, changing none of its habits. The theologians will have to be very careful about this possible post-conciliar interpretation which, I am convinced, will confront them in the future.

At least this much seems clearly indicated: whatever the revised form and formula, specific seminary academic goals are up for re-tooling.

As noted in the abstract sent by mail for purposes of clear discussion, there is the problem of working distinctions between curriculum *content* itself (what do you "cover," what do you drop) and the more properly *structural aspects* of curriculum (sequence of questions; methodology proper to individual questions within a discipline, as well as to the discipline as a whole; a curricular matrix or principle of structure—should we look for one, do we need one, like "Mystery of Christ," "Eucharist"). Yet the problem of such distinguishing can be genially surmounted in discussion by a mutual agreement to accept any terminology, even jargon, if its idea content is explained.

For ironically, I submit, the greater problem in this regard is to separate and not just distinguish content from procedure. This

is what I mean by *ambulando*, by willingness to experiment with new teaching and learning procedures without the present satisfaction of clearly defined curricular goals, because I am convinced that although *what* is communicated is our more basic problem and should be our major concern, nevertheless experimentation with different procedures of learning and communication have an inevitable way of affecting the *what* of content and its orientation. A specific example: if formal class hours are reduced, a faculty necessarily reconsiders the relative importance of questions within a treatise, necessarily sifts out what can be privately read from what is better publicly discussed, necessarily thinks of supplying the students with what he intended to read to them anyway, etc. In brief, procedure does effect curriculum revision itself, so while distinguishable, their interrelation should not be missed. But more of that in a moment.

Another problem I will only mention is the relationship of philosophy and theology. With all the lively and fruitful discussion about relocating seminaries on university campuses, and especially about adaptation to the American pattern (4-4-4; high school, college, graduate—professional level), it seems essential that we do not further freeze a *layer* structure (first philosophy, then theology) which we might soon regret. Someone must take the question seriously of experimenting with a total sequence in which from the beginning you have an academic and realistic integration of both philosophy and theology. If in the special situation which is the seminary we explored the advantages of a tandem structure, while respecting proper autonomy, we might—to change the metaphor—more effectively stop the philosophical tail from wagging the theological dog.

III. PERSPECTIVES

Let me introduce this brief third section with a grocery list critique. It goes like this. (1) Seminaries fail to provide an understanding of the contemporary context in which priests must work. (2) The approach to the ministry emphasized by the seminaries has been primarily to individuals in conditions of special need rather than to the larger, organized, decision-making structures

affecting the vitality of the whole community. (3) Seminaries are not succeeding in training men to theologize about life as they experience it. (4) Where seminaries overly professionalize a man, he tends to withdraw from life as it is lived among his people and talk only to other professionals. (5) Current seminary training is likely to produce priests who are personally over-sensitive. (6) Seminary training is oriented to specific sets of institutional patterns. (7) Emphases in seminary training often no longer match the needs of the changed cultural scene. (8) Seminaries fail when they do not instill an awareness that priests must continue to learn.

Though that critique has a familiar ring, and is but a paraphrase of "pressures" noted above, I thought it worth quoting for a special reason. Except where I changed "clergymen" and "ministers" to read "priests," the headings are taken almost verbatim from the December 1964 issue of *Concordia Theological Monthly* (Vol. 35, pp. 687-700). I found this Lutheran seminary self-analysis (David S. Schuller is the writer) matching almost point for point the observations I have heard from serious and sensitive Catholic theologians, professors and students alike. In point of fact, here is one line-up which resulted from intensive and responsible local discussion:

"Among the goals which should be operative in restructuring the theology course and method are the following:

(1) the communication of solid doctrine (as against an undistinguished mass of both doctrine and some particular theological system);

(2) the presentation of a balanced view of the whole of revelation (as against self-contained and fragmented tracts structured as a response to some partial polemic);

(3) a knowledge of where theology is moving and of the real problems which constitute current theological concern (as against hand-me-down problems on dead issues);

(4) an inclusion of those solid developments which are orientated toward the Church's present self-awareness, present life, present pastoral concern (as against reducing theological reflection to a matter of seeing the logical coherence of a system);

(5) far more engagement in the activity of actually theologizing through papers, discussions, seminars, etc. (as against mere assimilation of data and systems for examination accountability, with no relish to read once the exam is over);

(6) evidence that 'word' in its primary Christian meaning is not a 'word about' but the word in which and through which the reality itself becomes present (as against seeing Christianity exclusively as a doctrine, an ideology, an exegesis, a body of knowledge about God);

(7) evidence that the study of theology is primarily interested in truth (as against being over-nervous about orthodoxy); and

(8) evidence that theology is a never-ending learning process (as against professed attempts at four-year 'total coverage', never to be unlearned nor replaced with new learning)."

Such a report is neither original, nor comprehensive, nor elegant. But it touches on many of the points better expressed by Davis, for example, and Rahner, and McKenzie, to name a few. And any discussion of method should at least keep these points in mind, yet also remain alert that being meaningful, real, and all that, might be our contemporary seduction to a more sophisticated anti-intellectualism which the Church can always do without, and not ever too well do with.

IV. POSSIBILITIES

I have left little time for the actual topic, "Methods of Teaching Theology in the Seminary." Wisely or no, I did so deliberately. I somehow felt these comments on pressure, problem, and perspective might help situate our discussion, and should be said by someone. Here, then, I will only list some possible procedural methods. It is not an order of importance, either proved or presumed. And I repeat: the level of procedural method has its vital importance, but only instrumentally. The various procedures or methods can, *ambulando*, help force the developmental curricular issue of content and orientation.

(1) *Team teaching*. This has received wide publicity (AER article, Nov. 1964; NCEA Major Seminary Department meeting

last Easter). The tried format divides the team approach into three "foundation" areas: historical, doctrinal, and moral. In my judgment, its greatest thrust is this: men professionally trained in different disciplines sit down together and plan a syllabus, then sit in as other team members conduct their own implementation of the syllabus, and both in these regular class sessions and special seminars all team members are involved in a give-and-take learning situation among themselves and with the students. This clearly can be a major attack on duplication, pulverization, unreflected irrelevance. More positively, it encourages dialogue on the highest professional level, involvement of the entire academic community, and eventually a strength in content selectivity that could never be achieved in faculty meetings, recreation rooms, in committee or administrative office.

(2) *"Double-track" system.* This is the "honors program" applied to seminaries. The point here is that seminarians, like people, are different and, therefore, the curriculum should be adapted accordingly. The program tracks are variously described: academic and seminary; honors and general; degree and pastoral; etc. One hears it can tend to carry a certain "poor-man's priest" stigma, though such an inference might be leveled at the execution of the program rather than the immature reaction of the student participants. As an exclusive either-or option, it is questionably a total solution for a sizable student body, but as one option among others, it has proved itself.

(3) *Principal of option.* This, as I know it, has been mistakenly equated to "unlimited cuts." Educationally, such a procedure would be not only upsetting but naive, if not stupid. The option should be first of all the professor's—the option to depart from the rigid structure especially of daily lecture, and to experiment widely with reading assignments, tutorials, smaller group discussions, "spiralling," all on *company time*. But if no such experimentation is opted for by the professor, then it seems reasonable to give some option of non-attendance to the seminary students. Again, no solution, but it invites serious professorial reconsideration of hitherto unchallenged daily classroom procedure.

(4) *Core curriculum*—so called. This label, evidently, has different meanings for different people. It can mean, it seems, a series

of particular questions as "cores" (cf. Lee's "Negro question" in *Seminary Education in a Time of Change*) where several disciplines, several viewpoints, zero in on some central topic. Though I would not so describe it, I suppose it could also mean what I earlier called a matrix or structuring principle (the mystery of Christ, the Eucharist, e.g.) which acts as a controlling point of departure, point of reference, and point of return for all theological inquiry. But it also can mean "the basic matter a priest ought to know," and therefore this is what everyone ought to do for, say, two years, followed by two subsequent years of interdisciplinary electives according to talent, penchant, and probable future assignment. The formula of undergraduate-graduate level (STB-STL/M) is obvious and attractive. But for discussion on this point at least two questions: (a) who is all that sure what a priest "ought" to know; and (b) would many after two years of such "instant" theology (presumably straight textbook, propositional theology) want to elect anything further (cf. Strasburg geese—force-fed; plump, but indigestion problems).

(5) *Spiral technique*. This methodology has been widely and successfully tested in other disciplines (cf. Jerome Brunner, *Process of Education*). Its application to theology still needs more experimentation. In general, it means you treat the matter about three times, with increasing depth and intensity so that it is not at all mere repetition. Applied to the totality of theology, it would be very close, I think, to the two-years' basic matter program above. This would be the first circling about ("helicopter"; "sail around the island"). In subsequent years, you would circle again, say, in historical approach (e.g., scriptural, patristic, conciliar); and then again in depth in more personal, particularized specialization.

But the spiral is also applicable (and proved to be highly effective) in individual treatises. The first spiral is a concentrated, global view by a few lectures. The second spiral is a time period of assigned particular questions and applications to be explored through personal reading and group discussions with a careful report made to the professor. The third spiral is a wrap-up and repetition, again in total group session.

V. POSTSCRIPT

By way of postscript, I would restate a conviction. These possible "methods of teaching in the Seminary" (and, of course, there are others) must be distinguished from more basic, more important concern with curriculum, properly speaking. But the procedures, I believe, can help us, even force us, to a desirable new structure or structures. Am I correct that we are inclined, reasonably enough, to think and operate otherwise? That is, we seek a structure first, and then we set up procedures and pedagogical modes of communication. I respectfully submit that in the mood and with the spirited assurance of the Vatican II *kairos*, we should openly, courageously, professionally, and indeed intelligently commit ourselves, at least for a tried while, to learning by doing.

TERRENCE TOLAND, S.J.

Woodstock College

Woodstock, Maryland