

## PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS: TOWARDS AN AMERICAN THEOLOGY

My presidential address is the child of dissatisfaction. I am dissatisfied with Catholic theology in America, with the Catholic Theological Society of America, with the president of the CTSA. I do not think it is end-of-the-year eschatology; it is not gray-headed yearning for a theological Atlantis; it is not even unawareness of the distance the Catholic fraternity has come.

We have come a fair piece. 1968 theology is not 1958 theology. Scripture is no longer a set of propositions heaven-sent to prove pre-established theses. Magisterial documents, from Nicaea through Trent to *Mysterium fidei*, are critically analyzed and methodically demythologized. Scholasticism has been put in its place (or somewhat below), replaced by personalist approaches that lift love over law, community over individual, the concrete over the abstract, Harvey Cox over Henricus Gandavensis. We are dialoguing at a high level of light and love with every species of Reformed theology, have even hopped on the bandwagon of secularity—or is it the caboose? It is hard to believe there ever was a time when live issues included the distinction between grace and charity, the formal constituent of the hypostatic union, Mary's *debitum remotum peccati originalis*. Instead of looking back nostalgically to a gossamer garden with putative protoparents, we are licking our theological chops in anticipation of an Omega Point inexorably scaled by our children real or imagined. And to the horror of all that is Roman, we have stopped talking in dreadfully precise Latin; we are doing our thing in gloriously ambiguous English.

More importantly, Catholic theologians are listening—perhaps for the first time really listening—to what God is saying outside the formal structures of institutional Catholicism. We are listening to the Spirit speaking through Protestantism—not only through the individual prophet, but through the communities that are Protestant, because they are communities of grace and of salvation. We are

listening to the Spirit speaking in the arts—from an unbeliever's *Man for All Seasons*, through Peanuts' latest reflection on reality, to Samuel Beckett's frightening "Two times anything equals zero." We are listening to the Spirit speaking through the university—through personalism and process philosophy, through the exact sciences and the behavioral sciences, through every discipline that reveals a little more about reality, a little more about man. We are listening to the Spirit as He speaks through the Jewish community; for, in the inflexible affirmation of St. Paul, "God has not rejected His people" (Rom. 11:2). We are listening to the Spirit speaking through living man—man as he cries to us that he cannot discover God in our abstractions, as he stands mute before an immutable God whose love does not break through the miasma of evil, as he insists that, if he is to find God at all, he must somehow find Him in man. Catholic theologians are listening. . . .

We have come a fair piece. Why, then, this smoldering dissatisfaction? Because all this is not enough—not enough by half. Not far from this hotel stand two symbols of my discontent. The twin symbols are Resurrection City and the Pentagon. This very day the Poor People are marching on Washington. Naked feet and swollen bellies, they cry out for one thing: bread with dignity. The scandal is, the Poor People's March has nothing to do with the Catholic vision of man. They do not know we exist; if they did know, they would not care. For we have not an effective theology of wealth, effective because not only intelligent but passionate. In their minds Catholic theology has consecrated two values: the sacredness of property and the glory of following the naked Christ naked. We have not convinced them that ours is the vision of that remarkable rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel, the vision he voiced in an article aptly titled "No Religion Is an Island":

To meet a human being is a major challenge to mind and heart. I must recall what I normally forget. A person is not just a specimen of the species called *homo sapiens*. He is all of humanity in one, and whenever one man is hurt we are all injured. The human is a disclosure of the divine, and all men are one in God's care for man. Many things on earth are precious, some are holy, humanity is holy of holies.

To meet a human being is an opportunity to sense the

image of God, *the presence* of God. According to a rabbinical interpretation, the Lord said to Moses: "Wherever you see the trace of man there I stand before you."<sup>1</sup>

A second symbol is the Pentagon. This very day several hundred human beings (men, women, children) will die in Vietnam—blown to bits, burned to a crisp, knifed in the dark. The scandal is, life in Southeast Asia, death in a rice paddy, has nothing to do with the Catholic vision of man. The warmakers (I do not use the word pejoratively) do not know we exist; if they did know, they would not care. For we have not an effective theology of war, effective because not only intelligent but passionate. In their minds Catholic theology has consecrated two values: patriotism and obedience. We have not convinced them that, as theologians, we are concerned about, have something to say about, four aspects of contemporary war which, says the moralist Robert Springer, call for conscientious decision: the misallocation of economic and intellectual resources, the disproportionate loss of civilian life, total war in the use of new weapons, and the Christian vocation to bear witness to the imperative of peace among men. The scandal is not that our theology may be wrong; the scandal is that we have nothing to say.

Please understand me: I am not concerned here to apotheosize Abernathy or to outlaw war. For me, Resurrection City and the Pentagon are symbols—symbols of theological impotence, of a radical failure within the CTSA—failure to produce or even initiate an American theology. I mean a theology whose neuralgic problems arise from our soil and our people; a theology with a distinctive style and rhetoric; a theology where not only is the Catholic past a critique on the American present, but the American present challenges and enriches the Catholic past; where the Catholic theologian is heard because he is talking to living people, about themselves, in their own tongue. Why the failure? Several reasons conspire to explain it.

First, American Catholic theology is still *derivative*. Not totally derivative, but largely so. It stems in large measure from outside.

<sup>1</sup> *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 21 (1965-1966), 121.

The names that shape our thinking, that frame the questions and produce the answers, are in the first instance foreign: Rahner (already supplemented by Metz—and soon it will be Bruno Schüller), Schillebeeckx and Schoonenberg, Bultmann and Moltmann, Bonhoeffer and Teilhard, Häring and Janssens and van der Marck, Rondet and Lyonnet—yes, Lonergan and Dewart. And where the influences are not Continental or Canadian, they still derive from outside the Catholic tradition. Take the death-of-God theologians: Altizer and the Hamiltons, Vahanian and Ved Mehta. Or so much of the new, contextual morality: Paul Lehmann and Richard Niebuhr, Sittler and Fletcher, Ramsey and Bennett, and so on and so forth.

Oh I know, we cannot do theology in a vacuum; we must be open to whole worlds of ideas. Too often, however, these other worlds are simply translated verbally into our world; rarely do we confront them with our Catholic past or filter them through our American experience; they dominate our thinking instead of stimulating it; they *are* theology, not part of theology's history. The ultimate Catholic argument used to be "definitur in Concilio Tridentino"; today it is more likely to be "as Karl Rahner says so well."

The pressing need is the type of thing John Courtney Murray did so well in the area of religious freedom: to take for inspiration a critical American experience, face it with the totality of Catholic tradition, and come up with that paradox of all living theology: something at once genuinely Christian and radically new. He could do this because he had a prophetic conviction, born of his experience here and now, that the essential definition of man as "rational animal" is not enough to define him existentially in our time. In this new era, he insisted, at this point in the evolution of man and society, you cannot define a human being adequately unless you bring in the dimension of freedom. And so he fought, with ultimate success, to have the Church declare unequivocally that religious freedom is a human right, that this right has its foundation not in state or religion or even in objective truth, but in the very dignity of the human person. And so he sought, without success, to have the Congress acknowledge the right of discretionary armed

service, recognize the legitimacy of selective conscientious objection. Murray's theology of freedom got a hearing, was heard in our land, because it was at once profoundly Catholic and passionately American.

Second, American Catholic theology is *not interdisciplinary*. We have indeed begun what Vatican II (see *Gaudium et spes*) saw as indispensable: that we sit at the feet of the world and listen. Moralists, for example, have recognized with fair acuteness how much their judgement on man's actions depends on their vision of man, and how much their vision of man depends on the exact and behavioral sciences. But on the whole our theologians, even in the universities, give little evidence of a developing theology in intimate contact with technology and the theatre, with linguistic analysis and anthropology, with all that incredible explosion of knowledge apart from which the theologian can hardly begin to stammer about man or God.

Little wonder that we have no contemporary theology of wealth or of war, of work or of woman, of technology or touch, no theology of the dance. (And without a theology of the dance, the most graceful of Sister ballerinas in a Catholic sanctuary will only raise eyebrows and hackles.) In isolation from the creative streams that have brought America to world prominence, we cannot do theology.

Our relative isolation from where the American action is has paradoxically made us miss so much of the contemporaneity in our Catholic past. You may recall that in *The Secular City* Harvey Cox made the point that apart from Chalcedon technopolis is unintelligible, that far from being a relic of a dead and distant past, Chalcedon is the center and sense of what is going on in technopolis.

Is Jesus God or man? Does his life represent an act of God for man or the full response of a man to God? The perennial answer of theologians has always been that He is both, and that the amounts of one or the other are not measurable. When the problem was discussed in the language of Greek substance philosophy, the formulation of the Council of Chalcedon held that Jesus was fully God *and* fully man. When the same discussion is translated into the vocabulary of contemporary social change, the issue is whether history, and particularly revolution, is something that happens *to* man or something

that man *does*. Social determinists have battled with advocates of something called the "freedom of the individual" over this question for years. Is man the subject or the object of social change?

The only convincing answer is that he is both, and efforts to sort out amounts of one or the other inevitably fail. True, there are moments when man seems to step out and launch vast new initiatives. There are other periods when the tides of history seem to sweep man along despite all he can do. But the secular city, the fusion of secularization and urbanization, stands for that point where social movement and human initiative intersect, where man is free not in spite of but because of the social matrix in which he lives. Just as some theologians have interpreted the deity of Jesus as his readiness to accept and execute God's purpose for him, so the secular city signifies that point where man takes responsibility for directing the tumultuous tendencies of his time.

The Kingdom of God, concentrated in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, remains the fullest possible disclosure of the partnership of God and man in history. Our struggle for the shaping of the secular city represents the way we respond faithfully to this reality in our own times.<sup>2</sup>

And if further confirmation of Chalcedon's pertinence be needed, Paul Lehmann has confessed that Cox's vision of Chalcedon and technopolis as symbols of the creative connection between Christian orthodoxy and the industrial, urban society that shapes our ends has changed his mind, has significantly altered his approach to technopolis and to theology. For Lehmann as for Cox, Chalcedon has come to technopolis.<sup>3</sup>

Does this kind of thinking make sense to the Catholic theologian? I am afraid not. On broad lines, the older Catholic continues to inhabit Chalcedon, the younger Catholic has signed a life lease in technopolis, and rarely the twain shall meet.

Third, Catholic theology in America is *not collaborative*. In an age characterized by co-operative effort, where teams attack the atom and isolate the virus, where organized expeditions track down

<sup>2</sup> H. Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), pp. 111-112.

<sup>3</sup> P. Lehmann, "Chalcedon in Technopolis" in *Christianity and Crisis*, July 12, 1965, pp. 149-151; reprinted in D. Callahan, ed., *The Secular City Debate* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), pp. 64-68.

the footsteps of man and re-create the birth of his world, where it takes thousands of human beings to launch one astronaut into space, where men march arm-in-arm for justice and bread, we walk alone. No scholar is an island—except the Catholic theologian. The closest approximation to collaboration happens every fifty years: a Catholic encyclopedia; but even there the only genuine collaboration is among a handful of editorial heroes, the while a thousand scholars labor alone, each in his private foxhole. At this challenging, frightening moment in American history there is not a single gut issue of human existence that has summoned our theological fraternity to a systematic effort, to bring its many-splendored resources to focus in creative agony. We each do our little thing, from Adam to Zeno; we somehow find the few dollars to keep our private projects breathing; we skirmish with Roman congregations elusive as Vietcong; and the world passes us by, the poor and the rich, the black and the white, the learned and the illiterate, because we have so little to say. We have proved what needs no proving—that God is transcendent; we have not shown that He is intimately involved in our life and our death.

And this, ladies and gentlemen, is the crisis of the Catholic Theological Society of America. Why do we exist? Apparently to promote vital Catholic theology. Do we? Not if you go by results, by performance. Vaguely, we encourage theologians; concretely, we hold a convention; finally, we produce a volume. And the president? As I see it, the task of the CTSA president is to be creatively theological and theologically creative: to harness the incredible intellectual resources of the Society, old and middle-aged and especially young, to significant theological productivity, to put their potentialities to work on the critical issues of God and man. What *did* I do? I spent several hundred hours on business matters that should have been done by a machine. And dear Brother Luke, potential theologian, combines sweat and blood into his annual miracle of transfinancialization, changing twelve thousand dollars into fifteen.

At my suggestion, the Officers and Board of Directors of the CTSA are establishing a special committee to look into the purposes and structures of the organization, with a view to serious and per-

haps radical overhaul. I shall ask the committee to include in its considerations several basic questions. Should we link with a similar, or dissimilar, organization—the College Theology Teachers, the American Theological Society, the American Humanist Society? Or should we cease to exist? In a word, can we, in hard-nose reality, justify our actual, independent, relatively unproductive existence? I say no.

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