

AMERICAN CHURCH AND AMERICAN THEOLOGY: RESPONSE TO AN IDENTITY CRISIS

For some time now I have been tormented. This time by a French abbé. That perceptive presbyter was pressing not this patristic scholar across the seas but his fellow Catholics in France. And still he worried me; for he was urging his countrymen to confess frankly that theology, "so beautiful in itself, so engaging and vast," had become a lifeless subject, so dull and dry that students were repelled. "Cut from your course," he told the seminary authorities,

many of the vain questions which tire [the students] without results and which take away from them precious time which they could spend more usefully learning about things applicable to the century in which they live and in the world on which they must act. Everything has changed around you; ideas have taken and continue to take new directions; institutions, laws, morals, opinions, nothing resembles what our fathers saw. Of what use is the most intense zeal without knowledge of the society in whose midst it must perform? We must learn with another method and learn more; with another method, to understand better, in order not to fall behind those for whose guidance we are responsible.¹

The French abbé? Félicité de Lamennais. The year? 1829.

This morning it is only indirectly that the seminary curriculum concerns me (I have made my share of questionable contributions to theological curricula for twenty-seven years). What concerns me is that only within the past decade have we American Catholic theologians been tortured by the truth Lamennais flung at the French 144 years ago: theology is not some sort of desert discipline, a file of defensible theses excogitated in isolation from the hopes and fears, the hunger and hate, of the society that suckles me. What shames me is that only *after*

¹Félicité de Lamennais, *Des progrès de la révolution et de la guerre contre l'église* (2nd ed.; Paris, 1829), pp. 276-77; quoted from John Tracy Ellis, "The Formation of the American Priest: An Historical Perspective," in John Tracy Ellis, ed., *The Catholic Priest in the United States* (Collegeville: St. John's University Press, 1971), p. 4.

our American crises—only after the rebellion of the black and the secession of the young, only after the Vietnam War and the battle of the sexes and the armed neutrality between bishops and theologians—only *after* these and a score more crises that steam up from our streets are we asking in concert: How can American theologians serve the American Church?

At any rate, we are now met to address the question. Fortunately, the function of a keynoter is not to *answer* a convention's question. I say "fortunately" because the convention theme contains three realities, and each of these realities, each of these issues, is vexingly vague, fearfully complex. (1) What is an American theologian? (2) What is the American Church? (3) How in the concrete does such a theologian "serve" such a Church? On each of these issues I bring you neither a brainstorm nor a break-through—only a provocative beginning. And for all my yearning to reflect the best in Catholic tradition and scholarship, what I shall say cannot avoid being *mine*. Regrettably, the best of Burghardt is not simply synonymous with the cream of Catholicism.

I

First then, what is American theology? But before I tag a theology "American," a long word on theology itself. And here I presume to get uncommonly personal. After twenty-seven years of teaching, I am convinced that in reaching for the real, few subjects rival theology. What I started as an academic discipline has changed for me to a searing search. For theology is unreal unless it is a searing search for God and for man, a search through systematic reflection on experience. And in each of these areas—search, experience, reflection—theology is frighteningly real.

In theology I have been searching for God. Not for a God who dwells only in light inaccessible, outside time and space. Rather for a God who has a history—a history shaped by every star and every stone, by each blade of grass, each buck and doe, each human heart. For a God who graces his universe, not only the product of his power, but the breath of his love. For a God whose pulsing image is every man. For a God who *became* man.

And in theology, God-talk though it is, I have been searching for man. For, in St. Irenaeus' felicitous phrase, "God's glory is man alive!" Searching, therefore, for what it means to be man, what it means to be alive, to live—and what it means to die.

The data for this searing search is experience. *My* experience indeed, for it is I who am searching. But not my experience in some narrow sense—my latest eructation identified with the inspiration of the Spirit. Rather as Whitehead read experience:

Nothing can be omitted, experience drunk and experience sober, experience sleeping and experience waking, experience drowsy and experience wide-awake, experience self-conscious and experience self-forgetful, experience intellectual and experience physical, experience religious and experience sceptical, experience anxious and experience care-free, experience anticipatory and experience retrospective, experience happy and experience grieving, experience dominated by emotion and experience under self-restraint, experience in the light and experience in the dark, experience normal and experience abnormal.²

But even this rich experience is not rich enough. As a Catholic theologian, I am inescapably involved in a community experience; and that community experience spans ages and continents. And so I have felt the Hebrew experience of Sinai and the desert, of patriarch and prophet. I have shared the New Testament experience of God's unique break-through in the flesh of his son. I have relived the conciliar experience from Nicaea I to Vatican II, the experience of theologians like Augustine and Aquinas, of mystics like Tauler and Teresa, Origen and John of the Cross.

But even this rich experience is not rich enough. Since Vatican II, the Catholic concept of "church" has broadened beyond measuring. In consequence, I have had to take with theological seriousness not only Archbishop Ramsey but Anglicanism, not only Alexander Schmemmann but Greek Orthodoxy, not only George Lindbeck but Lutheranism, not only Albert Outler but Methodism, not only James Gustafson but Congregationalism. For these are communities of grace and salvation,

² Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), p. 226.

communities where the grace of Christ is at work richly and incessantly, communities in which the redemptive purposes of a God who wants all men to be saved are being worked out through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. I have shared the experience of non-Roman communities, their pens and their pews and their pulpits; and there I have found Christ, have heard the whispering of his Spirit.

But even this rich experience is not rich enough. Theology must listen to the Spirit speaking outside the Christian structure. Listen to the Spirit speaking through the arts—from Peanuts' reflections on another Woodstock, through Samuel Beckett's mind-blowing "Two times anything equals zero," to *Godspell's* glorious "God is dead; long live God!" Listen 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. Listen 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). Listen 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 who does not weep when man bleeds, as he insists that, if he is to find God at all, he must somehow find him in man.

This (and so much more) is the incomparable richness of Catholic experience. But, rich as it is, this is not yet theology; it is only the data, the stuff, of theology. Theology is a reflection, a systematic reflection, on that experience. I am not doing theology just because I have memorized Mark, Trent, and Rahner. I am not doing theology just because I am picketing the Pentagon or flushing out slum landlords. Good, yes; experience, yes; data, yes; theology, not yet.

Theology asks questions, hard questions—asks questions of the data, of the experience. What does the experience say about God and man—what do the data mean? On what ground? How does this experience fit with the broader Catholic experience? How valid is it? If valid, how abiding, how enduring?

These and a score more questions the theologian must ask if he is to be a theologian, if he is to go beyond history and sociology. Here lies theology's ceaseless agony, here its occasional ecstasy. It rends you and it tears you; you curse and you bleed. For you must wrestle with the

past in the present, with ideas incarnate in institutions, with God's blinding self-disclosure and the impotence of man to express it. But the end can be ecstatic: you break the barriers of your own small self, with a new knowledge and a fresh love—of God and of man.

But what makes a theologian "American"? I suggest two factors: a mindset and a response. A mindset. Here, in cowardly fashion, a prudent *praeteritio*. I shall pass over, transmit to you, the critical question, how an American does theology in contrast to an Ubangan, a Chinese, or a German. But this much I must say. My experience with the Papal Theological Commission (thirty scholars from round the globe) convinces me that the reason why I frequently fail to come to terms with a Bouyer or a Balthasar, a Nemeshegyi or a Medina, a Rahner or a Roxo, a Sági-Bunić or a Thsibangu, is not simply that I am stupid—that I lack their speculative subtlety, their rich historical lore, their grasp on the authentic Christian tradition. We differ often, I believe, because they do not look at the world the way I do, do not "feel" the way I do, do not quite think as I think, do not sing my songs or dream my dreams. Our theologies diverge in large measure because we are different *people*, because what we say and how we say it and what it means for us leaps not from naked intellect but from a whole person shaped by a complex culture.

Much the same is true of our younger Catholics. The seminarians of the sixties did not suddenly decide, by a refrigerated act of reflective reasoning, to abandon Aquinas and overturn Descartes. They did not tune into the scholastic system, were not turned on by the scholastic approach, because they were a different breed of man, were no longer (in its best sense) "medieval" men. Scholasticism did not speak to them, and so scholasticism ceased to be our theology; it became part of the history of theology. It was not a realistic response to neuralgic needs. Which leads to the heart of my "American" theology: theology will be American to the extent that it responds, to the extent that we respond, to the needs of the American Church.

II

Last week, in Mobile, the priest-sociologist Joseph Fichter outlined impressively how every society has to respond cooperatively to the

needs of its members. He sketched six universal needs—needs that reach into the hearts and veins and guts of all societies, no matter where, no matter when. (1) To continue that society; hence the needs of family, the complex issues of sex. (2) To hand on the values of a culture, the precious heritage of that society—which is why even the most primitive of societies can be said to educate. (3) Material or economic needs; call it social sharing—often an imperative moral question, if you recall, for example, that ten million Americans, five per cent of our population, go to bed hungry each night. (4) Political needs: the vast problem of leadership, of order, if the society is not to disintegrate and die. (5) Recreation: the congeniality, relaxation, mutual enjoyment, festivity, play, that keep the inhuman from dominating our existence. (6) Religion: that relationship to someone or something transcendent—to God if you wish—that seems a social need in every society.

Family, education, economics, politics, recreation, religion: because these are universal needs of a society, they are needs of the American Church. And so it would be callous and irresponsible for an American theologian to seek a papal dispensation from service to such needs. These experiences of the American Church, in all their discouraging complexity, must shape and be shaped by our theology. Else the market for American theologians will continue to decline, and we will degenerate into an answering service for anxious souls who want to know how soon they can receive Communion after using a diaphragm—or do you know any Jesuit in town who will permit it?

All well and good. But those needs, real indeed, are overarching needs, devastatingly broad, more in the nature of categories. I am concerned this morning, I agonize today, over an experience of the American Church which is (1) contemporary, (2) widespread, (3) increasing, (4) mind-blowing, (5) soul-searching, (6) so perilous that it threatens to destroy American Catholicism from within. I mean the question that racks, puzzles, confuses, scandalizes, at times delights today's Catholic: *What does it mean to be a Catholic?* It is the issue of Catholic identity. Who is a Catholic and who is not? On what standard do you decide? And who decides? Or doesn't it really matter, and the *unum necessarium* is to love God from the bowels of your being, love your neighbor a little less selfishly than you love yourself?

Not long ago the answer was rather simple. The three C's were all-sufficient: creed, code, cult. *Creed*: Do you believe everything the Catholic Church teaches—not only the definitive declarations from the divinity of Christ to the assumption of Mary, but every authentic authoritative assertion whatever its pomp or circumstance? *Code*: Can you commit your conscience to Catholic morality as formulated in the manuals, from ectopics to contraception, without distraction from theological dissenters not in tune with the Sistine choir? *Cult*: Will you worship every Sunday in Catholic churches alone, receive Communion during the paschal period in a state of grace effected by confession if necessary, refrain from meat and its sundry sauces on Friday, and maintain your priests in the style to which they would like to become accustomed?

All I mean by these hyperthyroid remarks—pleasantries rather than flippancies—is that, almost to 1962, Catholic identity was rarely a puzzle. A short, incisive questionnaire would do the trick. Not so now; not any longer. The identification badges, the old tags, are (shall we say?) “inoperative.” Not that the basic questions (creed, code, cult) are irrelevant. Quite the contrary; they are perhaps more relevant than before. The issue is not the questions but the answers. Or, more accurately, the issue is that the questions are now seen as incomparably complex. *Creed*: What does the fundamental faith which is commitment to Christ demand of a Catholic in the area of propositional faith? How much doubt (or denial) in dogma is compatible with Catholic existence? Does Vatican II's “hierarchy of truths” make definitions like the Assumption less imperative for the individual Catholic? And so on. *Code*: What is the relation between hierarchical authority and personal conscience? At what point, if any, does dissent from magisterial declarations lessen one's Catholicity, or even segregate from the community? Can the Church pronounce infallibly on a moral issue? Is there even a specifically Christian morality? And so on. *Cult*: What priority may a Catholic give to effective community liturgy over sheer Sunday obligation? How reconcile the subjective satisfaction with the objective Sacrifice? How much of his personal convictions (e.g., on Cambodia and Chavez) may a priest preach and still protest that he is proclaiming the gospel? And so on.

American Catholics, by and large, are confused. The causes are indeed complex. There is the background of a changing culture, the new experiences of a "new people." We live in a different epoch. An epoch, Fergus Kerr noted eight years ago, has "its genius, its particular creative and inventive capacities, its prevalent feeling, taste, ideology, its character and spirit—its vocation even."³ What is this genius of an epoch, this something unique, original, unrepeatabe? As Kerr saw it:

It is . . . the consensus about ideals and standards in human experience which is registered and communicated in the anonymity of the common language of a generation. It is a consensus about what is meaningful at all, about what counts as sense in the first place. . . . It is a consensus about what is . . . obvious and simply beyond argument; it is a consensus manifested in one's sense of priorities, in one's sense of what counts as relevant, worthwhile and significant, or pointless and ridiculous. It is one's perception in community of the totality of meaning which constitutes the context in which words like "real," "true," "beautiful," "Nature," "history," "love," "God," etc. can have any sense [i.e., direction] in the first place.⁴

A paradoxical problem of our changing American culture is that the fresh consensus is not yet; it may never be. There are, at best, conflicting consensuses, a new pluralism. In the meantime the American Catholic must live within a world radically different from mid-century. (1) It is "universal": there are no isolated islands—whether nations or cultures or continents. (2) This new world is not fixed, not static; it is developmental, dynamic. The reality of structures is change. (3) Humanism: contemporary man centers not on some cosmic order, not on the divine, not on God, but on man.⁵

Besides cultural change, there was, of course, Vatican II. Take, as splendidly pertinent here, the new directions the Council conceded or

³Fergus Kerr, O.P., "Theology in a Godforsaken Epoch," *New Blackfriars* 46 (1965), 668.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵Cf. Thomas Berry, C.P., "The Threshold of the Modern World," in *Proceedings of the Teilhard Conference 1964* (New York: Fordham University, n.d.), pp. 57-69, esp. 57-59.

canonized in ecclesiology. Avery Dulles summed up the ecclesiological significance of Vatican II at the close of a masterful article last year:

... Vatican II made great strides toward opening up Roman Catholic ecclesiology to ideas that had originated in other traditions and were previously deemed incompatible with Catholic orthodoxy. Without abandoning the "substantialism" characteristic of previous Roman pronouncements [i.e., the Church exists where the substantials subsist—in doctrine, sacraments, and ministry], the Council modified this substantialism in two important respects. First, it interpreted this doctrine inclusively, rather than exclusively, so as to allow that other Christian communities authentically participate in the reality of the Church of Christ. Secondly, it in many ways relativized the supremacy claimed for the Roman Catholic realization of the Christian Church. For one thing, it restricted this claim of supremacy to the institutional aspect, thus leaving open the possibility that the Church as an interpersonal community, or as a mystical sharing in the divine life, may be realized more strikingly outside the boundaries of Roman Catholicism than within them. Further, Vatican II held that the Church as a universal and abiding institution exists to foster Christian life and conduct on the personal and local level. The realization of the Church as a community of faith, worship, and service may, at least in theory, be better achieved in certain non-Catholic communities than in Roman Catholic dioceses and parishes.

To this it may be added that, in the perspectives of Vatican II, the institutional perfection of Roman Catholicism is by no means absolute. All historical realizations of the Church are seen to be provisional and reformable with reference to the ultimate eschatological goal. While adhering to the position that there are essential and permanent structures of divine origin, the Council acknowledged the need for institutional as well as personal reform within the Catholic community. Thus the general thrust of Vatican II was to stress the solidarity between Roman Catholicism and other Christian bodies, both in faith and in service toward the total human family, and to speak less confidently of the supposedly singular privileges of the Roman Catholic Church.⁶

But the Catholic theologian cannot simply point an accusing or

⁶Avery Dulles, S.J., "The Church, the Churches, and the Catholic Church," *Theological Studies* 33 (1972), 233-34.

approving finger at culture or Council. Theologians stand generally within the culture, not outside it: within its science and its humanism, its philosophies and its music. And Vatican II did not spring full-blown from a triple tiara or 2500 mitres. The Council documents reflect theological development, often conflicting theologies, at times the theology of long-term "prisoners of the Vatican" such as Congar and Murray. The Council oscillates uneasily between the classicist mentality of certain theologians (objective truth "somewhere out there," apart from history, apart from people) and the historical consciousness of others. More than that: we theologians have gone beyond the Council; understandably so. Take, again, the issue of "church":

Since the Council, ecumenically oriented theologians have tended to amplify the Council's concessions to nonsubstantialist positions rather than to insist on the substantialist elements that undoubtedly remain in the Council documents. Under the probing of scholarly research, Catholics are increasingly aware of the difficulty of clearly distinguishing between the substantial and the accidental of the Church. They tend to subordinate the institutional features to the mission of the Church, and to hold that a heavy burden of proof rests upon anyone who wishes to show that a given structure is immutable. Accenting the common bonds between all committed believers, many younger Christians question the importance of the distinctive features of any particular denomination. All of this puts strong pressure on academic and official theology to insist less on confessional differences and to enlarge the area of common Christian sharing.⁷

We are, in large measure, responsible for the indistinctness of Catholic identity today. Because we are the Church's theologians. Because, as theologians, we question, we rethink and reformulate, we disagree and dissent. Because today our questioning and our dissent move out quickly from *TS* to *TV*, from a seminary rostrum at Union to a syndicated Catholic column. Because we seem to challenge everything—from age-old adages like *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* to the living hierarchy's succession to the apostles. And so we confuse, to the puzzlement of the pilgrim and the wrath of the *Wanderer*.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 234.

III

My third and final point: Confounders by profession, can we still serve? Specifically, are we agreed on what it means to be Catholic? And how can we share our insights, our riches, with the prelates and people to whom we minister? This, on even broader and deeper levels than I have indicated, is what gathers us this year. I am not asking for a capsule or a bromide, a dictionary definition: in twenty-five words, what makes Catholics different from others? The four volumes of the Catholic-Lutheran dialogue suggest how fatuous a simplistic solution would be. And still the American Church's experience of rootlessness cannot leave us cold and uncooperative. My several suggestions lie at the edge of this convention's search, but they may prove not altogether impertinent.

First, a near tautology: our primary responsibility as theologians is to be theologians; we dare not betray the discipline itself. An arduous task today, for more than one reason. (1) Theology is inseparable not only from content but from method; and you need read only Lonergan's *Method in Theology* (New York, 1972) to realize how shallow most of us are in conceptualizing the transcendent; within the Catholic community we are still uncertain how we know. (2) All too many Catholics see the theologian's function and glory solely in terms of *Humani generis*: to show how the teaching of today's magisterium is to be found in Scripture and tradition. (3) To many bishops we are irrelevant: they no longer fear us, and they no longer need us. A tragic instance of all three reasons in one is the fate of the Report of the Subcommittee on the Systematic Theology of the Priesthood. It lies on the episcopal shelf, copyrighted by the NCCB, publishable only if revised in harmony with the text of the document on ministerial priesthood approved by the 1971 Synod of Bishops.

Second, to expand on the previous sentence, I would ask the American bishops to recognize the close connection between faith and theology. Some of you may remember that in the fall of 1970 an American cardinal residing in Rome told a Missouri audience: "Faith is something you get from God; theology is something you get from a guy in Germany who writes books." Clever yes, but surprisingly superficial. More insightful was Raymond Brown's recent remark to the NCEA in

New Orleans: "Every formulation that we accept as part of the contents of our faith is the product of theological reflection."⁸ Even the splendid *Guidelines* issued by the American bishops for religious instruction will prove an exercise in futility, will end in a generation ignorant and alienated and disbelieving, unless the men and women who instruct are theologically alert, abreast of the best in research and reflection, from the primal apple to the final coming. American theologians are frightfully unprepared to serve these teachers, and I suspect that many a bishop will leap for joy if the CTSA does not muddy the doctrinal waters.

Third, American bishops and theologians should take seriously Richard McCormick's thesis that, to be effective in our time, the style of magisterial teaching must shift radically.⁹ The authoritarian, paternalistic mode that reflected preconiliar culture unduly separated the teaching and learning processes, identified the teaching function with a single group, and isolated one aspect of teaching, the judgmental, the final decision. In that situation the teaching was as good as the authority was legitimate; the response to teaching was heavily obediential; and theologians were agents of the hierarchy, with creativity a suspect charism. Our postconciliar culture, a fresh vision of the Church as *communio*, educational sophistication and style demand a learning process even for those who teach, make of teaching a multidimensional function wherein the judgmental is but one facet, and involve the gifts of all in the community. Less emphasis will therefore be placed on the teacher's authority, more on his reasons and his power to persuade; the immediate proper response to noninfallible teaching will be a docile personal effort to assimilate; and the creative reflections and reactions of the whole community will be indispensable. Do the American bishops believe this?

Fourth, a neuralgic American need is American liturgy. I mean the celebration of *this* people or *these* peoples. Celebration, therefore, that grows out of *their* experience of God and man, not conceived for them

⁸Raymond E. Brown, S.S., "Catechetics in an Age of Theological Change," *Origins* (NC Documentary Service) 2, No. 43 (April 19, 1973), 691.

⁹Cf., e.g., Richard A. McCormick, S.J., "The Teaching Role of the Magisterium and of Theologians," *CTSA Proceedings* 24 (1970), 239-54.

in an enclave across the sea or in empyrean abstraction. Our liturgists must be (1) theologians who (2) can, with other disciplines, penetrate to the core of the American Catholic experience. Theologians indeed, because the liturgy is neither a side show for bored adolescents nor a means of avoiding sin nor a senior citizens' get-together. Man meets God in a festivity of love unparalleled on earth. But it must be the American Catholic experience that is expressed and reflected, because it is today's man, here and now, with his own Watergates, his experience of blackness and napalm, his laughter and his tears, who must hear God speaking to him and respond, who will taste only dried bread and not the living God unless he touches God here, now.

Fifth, a slap on your collective wrists. With other theologians and educators, I have argued for academic freedom in our discipline.¹⁰ I have pleaded that the work of theologians be appraised primarily by their peers, not settled by hierarchical ukase. I still believe it. My present anguish stems from a conviction that the Catholic identity crisis would be lightened if we peers took more seriously the task of mutual criticism, in such a way that this internal evaluation came consistently to the attention of bishops and laity. Oh yes, there is fierce attack: columnists have savagely excommunicated Raymond Brown. But this sort of criticism leaps from a polarized position incapable of dealing with the issues on a scholarly level. My plaint is that within the fraternity of those who do theology in responsible fashion, and sometimes within the same methodology, there is not the ceaseless give-and-take whereby the discipline develops, not the open challenge that keeps a theologian honest. Whether it's contraception or consequentialism, immutability of dogma or mutability of moral, we have given the Catholic populace as much the impression of an enclosed society as the episcopal club of which John Cogley once complained. Have we not in recent years roared for our rights and muted our responsibilities?

Sixth, theology and the media. Last September, in a special TV feature on Work, I reached more men and women in one hour than in a quarter century of writing and lecturing. And last week an NC news

¹⁰Cf., e.g., Walter J. Burghardt, S.J., "Freedom and Authority in Education," *Theology Digest* 16, No. 4 (Winter, 1968), 310-16.

release reproduced for all editors a Catholic editorial that traduced my theology of life's sacredness into a supposed assault on Catholic hospitals. To tell the most exciting story ever, God's continuing converse and tenting with man, we have far more resources than most institutions on earth. But in telling the story, we are either babes in the woods or clawing tigers. If you do nothing else this week, fashion a Subcommittee for Theology and the Media. Remember Peanuts' remark: "Communication is everything. If you don't communicate, you're nothing." But remember, too, Snoopy off to the side: "What does that mean?"

Ladies and gentlemen: The geography of Catholicism is dotted with names that were once synonymous with Catholic creed, code, and cult—and are now missionary lands. We have no assurance that North America will not go the way of North Africa, Chicago the way of Carthage. If it does, one large reason will be that American Catholicism will have lost its sense of identity, its reason for being; and one large reason for that alienation will be the impotence of the theologians, our inability to read a revealing God and communicate what we read to a community.

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