

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

THE TASK OF THEOLOGY TODAY

Presidential addresses, I find from glancing over past performances, constitute a very fluid and undetermined literary genus. They range from discussions of particular points of theology to more domestic concerns about the activity and future of the Catholic Theological Society of America. This present address is an attempt to convey to you some theological convictions concerning the task of theologians today. I have formed or deepened these convictions as a consequence of serving as your president during the past year. Hence it is perhaps not inappropriate to share them with you.

My remarks will fall under three headings: (1) a description of the present theological *situation*; (2) a brief look at the *task* that confronts us in this situation; and (3) a consideration of the *resources* we have for accomplishing this task.

I. A DESCRIPTION OF OUR PRESENT THEOLOGICAL SITUATION

We have just completed a theological convention focused around some of the actual problems that are troubling the Church in America. The selection of these problems was not the work of one man nor even of a special committee. It was the result of communications sent from members of the Catholic Theological Society throughout the United States and Canada. And these problems do not fall neatly into just a few particular areas. They concern almost every aspect of theology: faith, God, Christ, the Church, the priesthood, morality, the meaning of history, the pastoral mission of the Christian community, the context and method of doing theology and much more.

The fact that we have serious, searching, and as yet unresolved problems in nearly every area of theology points, it seems to me, unmistakably to a situation we may call inter-theological, a situation that is both post-theological and pre-theological. It is post-theological because

the ordered syntheses of just fifteen years ago are no longer considered adequate. We can no longer use the textbooks that were then rightly regarded as good introductions to the work of theology. It is not that these textbooks have it all wrong. It is not that their conclusions are now totally discarded. But the approach, the attitude, the formulations, the concerns, have shifted. For example, one does not begin theology now by asserting that it is a science whose certitude transcends that of other sciences; that it flows from truths divinely revealed to us; and that this revelation was concluded with the close of the apostolic age. If these assertions are explained in a certain way, a good case can still be made for them; but the emphasis has so shifted from God's communication of truths to his self-communication in a never-ending act of divine liberality and love that these assertions however understood appear to be missing the point. Similar examples could be taken from almost every part of theology.

This theological obsolescence, however, does not mean theological bankruptcy. It comes from a faith that is strong and active in the Christian community, within the minds of believing men and women. It comes from faith seeking new forms of understanding.

We are not bankrupt, because our condition is just as truly pre-theological as it is post-theological. The older expressions are being displaced by positive efforts to renew and to deepen our understanding of faith; they are not disintegrating from within through contradiction and absurdity. Something fresh is in the process of formation; and with this freshness expressions more suited to another period fall into disuse. It is well to observe that this is not happening for the first time in the history of the Christian Church. Something similar has occurred in the other great cultural transitions through which the Church has lived. The move from Jewish culture to classical Greco-Roman culture was accompanied by great theological confusion as is clear to anyone reading the Fathers of the second and third centuries. Finally, there did emerge a fairly coherent body of reflective Christian thought in the golden age of the Fathers in the fourth and fifth centuries. But patristic theology itself was not a permanent and unchanging acquisition. With the collapse of the Roman Empire, and the cultural shift to the middle ages, a very extended period of turmoil ensued. Then, the growth of the medieval universities led to new theological structures under the guidance of

such radical and revolutionary thinkers as Thomas Aquinas, a man continually at odds with heretics on the one hand and with more traditional theologians on the other. Then, the Renaissance and the sixteenth-century religious disturbances brought forth among Catholics a very different kind of theology from that of the middle ages. This newer theology of the counter-reformation was largely polemical and controversial, more concerned to prove and to refute than to understand and to develop. This period was marked by great disagreements not only between Catholics and Protestants, but within each of these larger groups as well.

What was happening at each of these times is precisely what is happening today. As man's way of understanding himself, history and the universe shifts, so also his way of understanding all these in relation to God shifts. And this is what theological change means most fundamentally. In the last two or three centuries, the scientific view of the world, our understanding of the historical process, our insights into psychological and sociological forces, our grasp of the way the mind operates and expresses itself have all undergone immense development. When we try to think these things anew in their relationship to the ultimate ground and goal of all reality, to the God who has come close to us in Jesus Christ, we discover that making minor adjustments will not suffice. A major overhaul is called for, so that our understanding of faith may be coherent with our understanding of everything else. Pope John XXIII and the second Vatican Council acted as a great catalyst within Catholic theology to precipitate this work of overhaul by the call for *aggiornamento* and for updating and renewal. The often quoted words of Pope John in his opening address to the Council are pertinent here: "The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, but the way in which it is presented is another."¹

The present situation has been in formation for a long time. At the beginning of the century the Modernist heresy threatened the Church by urging two problems in particular, the questions of historical consciousness and of human subjectivity. The solutions proposed by the Modernists themselves subverted the essential meaning of the Christian

¹*The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. by Walter M. Abbott, S.J. (New York: Guild Press, 1966), p. 715.

dispensation and were rejected by the Church. However, the questions themselves remained unanswered and have continued to be a ferment within the believing mind.²

And we can view our situation from a still broader and more extended perspective. Five hundred years ago most educated men in Europe thought of the earth as the center of the universe which had been created seven or eight thousand years before. It was composed of four basic elements, fire, air, earth and water, and these were characterized by four basic qualities—hot, cold, dry and wet. These educated men thought of the human race and of the world as very much the same as it had been from the beginning of time. They then fitted their religious experience of God, their encounter of the divine into the world they understood in this way.

Our view of the world and of man has changed significantly in the last five hundred years and more especially in the last one hundred years. Not only has the world grown immensely larger, and the earth from a physical point of view has become extremely insignificant, but the age of the world has stretched from seven or eight thousand years to billions of years. But perhaps the most fundamental shift in our view of the world is to see the whole universe in process of development.³ We have become profoundly aware of the evolutionary change which has brought about the present condition of things, including the emergence of man from prior forms of life in the world. All of this has served to underline the historical conditioning of our knowledge and expression. There is inadequacy and imperfection in all our formulations and perhaps most especially in our ways of speaking about God.

Furthermore, modern technology through communication and transportation has so shrunk the world that our transition is not just from classical to modern culture but from Western to world culture. This then has caused adjustment and modification in the categories of our thought and in our norms for action and interaction.

The fact that these structural and organizational changes are taking

²This was a central theme in Leslie Dewart's *Future of Belief* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966).

³See Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), pp. 216-26.

place in human thought and human society does not necessarily mean that something better is being created. We must remember that structure and discipline of themselves are barriers against anarchy, chaos and the demonic. Sometimes it becomes necessary to change structure and discipline when they begin also to quench the Spirit. But when they are changed, it may be the demonic rather than the charismatic that emerges. And for this reason, discernment as well as new structures is required.

There are now many signs within the Christian community of the renewal action of the Holy Spirit. We observe the emergence of ways that manifest anew God's creative presence among us. But it must be confessed that most of these are also ambiguous; that they become at times occasions for the emergence of the chaotic and the demonic. In themselves, they are reasons for hope and for gratitude. But they are also occasions calling for the exercise of clear judgment. We may note, first of all, the charismatic movement itself with its great promise of spiritual renewal. Then there are new and developing forms of worship. There are more effective ways of teaching Christian doctrine. We are discovering a new maturity in ecumenical relations. There is a more pervasive interest in prayer and in individually directed retreats. We find a greater concern for the building of genuine human community and for the communal discernment of spirits. We note a renewal in the meaning of authority, with a greater emphasis upon collegiality and upon the need to hear the grace given to each one. We observe a missionary concern that recognizes God already there among the mission population preparing by indigenous religious insights for the good news of what he has done for us in Jesus Christ. We detect a greater cooperation of different groups within the Church as between bishops and theologians, between laymen and clergy. There is also a greater concern for justice in racial, political and economic relations. The Spirit is certainly at work but we need to discern and we need to find the appropriate formulas and structures not to quench or to inhibit the Spirit but to keep us from the chaotic and the demonic.

We can, I think, learn an essential lesson for our times from the earliest Christian crisis, the passage from Pharisaic Christianity to gentle Christianity. St. Paul summed up the central lesson of that experience in the expression: "The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor

3:6). A written law, a specified way of thinking and action by itself kills, for of itself it does not promote the discovery of truth nor confer the ability to live according to it. For this reason, Thomas Aquinas said that even the gospel, considered as a written code, kills.⁴ It is rather the Spirit, the inner force toward the future, the living presence of God that gives life. The Spirit in different circumstances will find embodiment in appropriate external symbols and in suitable written norms; but the symbols and norms must never be worshipped; only the God who is present and active in them, who justifies their presence, is to be worshipped. This must likewise be the operative principle in our transition: the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

II. OUR TASK TODAY—A SUMMARY LOOK

In all of this what is the task of the theologian? How are we to do theology in this time of profound cultural change and spiritual activity? How are we to serve the Church today and so build up the body of Christ? Or to put the question in a way that clearly indicates the central task of theology: How do we today provide an understanding of faith?

It is well to recall here that intellectual understanding is necessary to all human life. Mere affectivity and good will are not sufficient to create a way of life that is genuinely human. It is necessary for us to grasp the alternatives: to understand what is being offered to us; to realize what it is we do when we decide to act in one way rather than another. More particularly, understanding is necessary for Christian life. This is not a plea for a new Gnosticism, in which the possession of special information about God automatically makes us good and better than other people, but it is an assertion that we must, as far as we can, understand the meaning of God's gracious initiative in our lives and in history. And we must likewise understand the kind of response we are called upon to make to him. The task of the theologian within the Church then is to try first to understand God's self-communication in creation, the incarnation, and the sending of the Holy Spirit. The theologian must then try to situate this understanding of divine self-communication in our time and place, to grasp it in terms that have

⁴See *S. T.* 1a-2ae, q. 106, a. 2.

meaning here and now. And finally, the theologian must endeavor to communicate this understanding, so situated, to the Christian community and to the world. He may do this either directly or indirectly through other teachers, catechists, or missionaries.

As we face this task, it is well for us to realize that theology, like every specialization, runs a risk of isolation. This risk has not always been successfully avoided in the past. There is danger that an in-group will emerge who speak to one another but are separated from the experience of faith and the Spirit, from contemporary culture and from the service of the community. They would be a group who failed "to do the truth in love" (see Eph 4:15). This would inevitably mean bad theology. It is St. John who assures us, "He who loves . . . knows God. And he who does not love does not know God" (1 Jn 4:7-8). For a theologian to be ignorant of God is indeed essential failure.

III. RESOURCES FOR ACCOMPLISHING OUR TASK

Before indicating what seem to me to be the two fundamental projects which are both challenges and resources for doing the job, I would like to mention some helpful and necessary, but still insufficient means: it is not enough that we should have careful and exact scholarship and research. This is indeed indispensable; but by itself it is isolated and by itself it easily becomes another kind of letter which kills, devoid of the Spirit that gives life. We shall return to this topic of scholarship and research a bit further on.

Neither, as in the reply to Modernism, is an insistence upon orthodoxy sufficient. That insistence in the past left the basic questions unanswered. Therefore, it is not enough for us today to present a new systematic organization of Church teaching.

Furthermore, biblical theology alone does not give us the answer. The biblical teaching is often culturally alien to us taken just by itself. We are, for example, not used to shepherds and sheep, and the Pauline metaphor of justification does not explain itself. Likewise the Pauline contrasts of *psyche* and *pneuma*, flesh and spirit, are easily misunderstood. Finally, the discussion of theological method, while it can be of immense help in guiding our efforts, by itself does not construct a new theology. It is a map; it is not itself the journey, nor does it provide the

fuel for making the journey.

I see then, two essential projects of greatly unequal importance (though both are indispensable). They constitute, as I said, challenges and resources at the same time. The first project is renewed contact with the Holy Spirit, a new sensitivity to his presence, with a new willingness to respond to him. And the second is a deeper contact with contemporary world cultures, not in the sense of being "conformed to this world" (see Rom 12:2) but of an endeavor to understand God's Word and to speak it in a way that will make sense today.

No one is likely to deny the need to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit in doing theology. But I think it is necessary to recall, to clarify and to thematize this so that we do not neglect in practice what we affirm in theory. This renewed attention to the guidance of the Holy Spirit is necessary for the renewal of the whole Church as well as for the renewal of theology. When a person has an exaggerated view of the importance and the necessity of his own human work, he creates impossible burdens for himself and at the same time practically guarantees the failure of what he is undertaking. Whether one is a theologian or a bishop, or a priest, or a religious superior, or a parent bringing up children or any other responsible person in the Church, it is necessary above all that he or she rely upon the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit. We need then a renewed awareness of the creative attraction of the transcendent. We need a renewed response to the Holy Spirit given to us by Jesus, who is Lord, and by God, who is Father.

I see this renewal as required in three areas: (1) The theologian in his own life of faith must renew his attention and response to the Holy Spirit. We have here what Bernard Lonergan has underlined as religious conversion.⁵ (2) There is necessary also a sensitivity to the presence of the Spirit in the Christian community and in the world at large; and (3) We require an awareness of the continuous action of the Holy Spirit in history, in the past of the Christian community and of the world.

First, then, the theologian must newly appropriate his own faith. It is necessary for him to clarify his experience of the Spirit, to purify his response to the Spirit, and to articulate this encounter for himself and

⁵See *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), pp. 240-42.

for others. It was Wilhelm Dilthey who pointed out that subjective experience provides the fundamental insight for understanding and interpreting the evidence that human activity in history offers us.⁶ This task of renewed awareness of the presence of the Spirit in one's own life indicates again the need for a discernment process, for a way of distinguishing the action of the Spirit from the anarchic, the chaotic, the demonic. This same need appears in the two other areas of community and history and we will endeavor to say a word about discernment after we have spoken of these areas.

Secondly, since the theologian does not receive the Spirit as a private individual but as a member of a community, indeed of several communities, he must be sensitive to the social dimensions of the Spirit's action. He must hear in the words of the Apocalypse "what the Spirit says to the Churches" (see Rev 2:7). For if it is true that Jesus as the Word enlightens all men, and if it is true that the Spirit is everywhere at work, to create, to renew, to build up, and to perfect, then we must become sensitive to this action of the Spirit within the Christian community and within the world generally. We must listen to others openly, with a genuine desire to understand them and to appreciate their point of view. We must trust the action of the Holy Spirit in other men of good will. Here too an action of discernment is necessary. We theologians, even as we listen to one another, must endeavor to help one another by challenging and even by disagreeing with one another at times. We should do this, not in an attitude of polemics in order to win a debate, but with courtesy and respect as we search together for deeper understanding. This need for public, honest disagreement is all the more important today when Church censorship is relaxed and many who look on fail to realize the great diversity of opinion among theologians.

And finally, for understanding God's action in ourselves and in the world today, we must be alert to the Holy Spirit in history. Catholic theology's most distinctive characteristic is its sense of continuity, not precisely in verbal formulations, but in the radical meaning intended by these formulations. The continuity in question here is not just a socio-

⁶See H. P. Rickman, ed., *Pattern and Meaning in History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 122.

logical phenomenon, but a theological conviction, even a conviction of faith, that the Spirit abides with the Church throughout history, continually leading her into truth (see Jn 16:18). We cannot, then, ever simply write off a serious declaration of the Church's self-awareness of God's guidance. We cannot, for example, say about Chalcedon that the question of one or two natures in Christ was their problem and we have now our own problems. We must assimilate the action of the Spirit in history, distinguishing as best we may what is of the Spirit from what is human bias and cultural conditioning.

In all of these three areas of recognizing the action of the Holy Spirit, in ourselves, in the community and in history, it is necessary, as we said, to engage in discernment, in distinguishing his activity from other drives and impulses. I would like to submit here one consideration out of very many that can be made and should be made. I wish to propose a criterion of discernment, to help determine the validity and the importance of what we observe in all of these areas. This criterion is also a guide for directing our theological efforts.

The criterion (in all cases) is that of establishing and developing a genuine community. The opening of St. John's first letter gives the basic indication. He writes in the third verse: "That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you so that you may have fellowship (community, *koinonia*) with us and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ (1 Jn 1:3)." I take it that we can describe the ultimate condition intended by God's self-communication in creation, redemption and sanctification as *community*, persons sharing life with Father, Son and Holy Spirit and with one another. God communicates life to us. This life is among us; and this life leads us back to God. This is our community in pilgrimage toward a final community in everlasting life. What then promotes and develops this community is from the Holy Spirit, and what hinders or destroys this community is not from the Holy Spirit. Another way of expressing this criterion is self-transcendence, a transcendence that leads us from the isolation of our own self-interest to sharing with one another the divine self-communication given to us in Christ and in his Spirit. It seems to me that the criterion of community both helps us to distinguish what is of God from what is not of God, and also points to the dimension of the theological task before us. We must in various ways and from different

points of view highlight the meaning and inclusiveness of this community.

The second project we must undertake as theologians is to become truly modern men and women, not indeed accepting as ultimate the horizons and values of secular man, but grasping more and more the framework in which the self-communication of God is today to be understood and announced. There is no doubt that this framework cannot contain or limit the meaning of the good news of Jesus Christ, but it is to men in this framework that it must be preached.

It follows then that to rely upon the Holy Spirit, rather than upon ourselves and our own scholarship, means no dispensation from hard work. Rather the Holy Spirit leads us to undertake the difficult work of more deeply assimilating contemporary culture and of speaking God's Word from within this assimilation. The whole of the experience of the Spirit, as given in the personal life of prayer, as given within the life of the community and as shown in the action of the Spirit in history is to be grasped and conveyed within the cultural framework of the contemporary world.

These two requirements of following the Spirit and of being contemporary men and women means that we must avoid merely "pop" theology, the easy slogan, the tyranny of the latest fad. We recognize the trap into which much religious writing of the late 1960's fell, when lack of substance eventually brought disenchantment and the failure of much religious publishing. The Spirit then calls us not to less but to more hard work and to patient scholarship. He will manifest his presence and he will achieve his purpose in and through what we are willing to do in response to his guidance and not apart from our efforts, as though through some kind of magic.

I should like to say one brief word in conclusion about the kind of theology I expect to see as we move from a pre-theological into a new theological age. The theology being engendered by these Spirit-guided efforts is not likely to be the fairly uniform organization characteristic of the last several generations. It will rather be a unity within variety, complementarity, and pluralism, the same sort of unity we observe in the biblical writings themselves and in nearly every period of theology except that of the recent past. The theology being born will reflect in its pluralism the inexhaustible truth of God's self-communication, in its

deep continuity with the past the abiding presence of the Spirit, in its coherence with the rest of human knowledge the Word of God spoken to us in our day, and in its power to build up the Christian community the same power of God which raised Jesus Christ from the dead and makes all things new.

JOHN H. WRIGHT, S.J.

Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley