

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS:

PAST PERSPECTIVES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS FOR THE CTSA

This year the CTSA will be thirty years old, at least if we determine that its life began with the first moment of conception. The Society was the brain child of Father Eugene Burke. He first suggested the idea to his colleagues on the theological faculty of Catholic University one enchanted evening in October 1945 after a meeting of the editorial board of the *American Ecclesiastical Review*. The idea quickly caught on and other theological centers on the East coast were contacted. On January 27, 1946 a group of thirty-eight theologians met at the Paulist House in New York to formulate plans for the new Society. The enthusiasm for the venture was such that by the following June the first annual meeting was held at the Hotel Commodore in New York. Father Francis Connell, who had chaired the preliminary discussions, was elected first president, a constitution was adopted, officers elected and committees appointed, all on the first day. On the second day the members heard and discussed papers on the wisdom of theology, the ends of marriage and the theology of *Mystici corporis*. Before adjourning and as its first official act, the CTSA petitioned the Holy Father to define the doctrine of the Assumption of Mary as a dogma of the Catholic faith. Thus was brought into being the Catholic Theological Society of America.¹

When I came to my first CTSA convention in 1952 the formative period in the history of the Society was just about coming to an end. The memory of the early struggles and accomplishments were still fresh; the founding fathers were very much alive and active; they still tended to dominate the program and the sessions. One thinks of Burke and Benard, Fenton and Connell, McDonough and Rea, Edward Murray and John Courtney, Ford and Kelly, Hesburgh and Sheedy, Kaiser and Mangan, Carlson and Rock, Gallagher and Palmer, O'Connor and Fearn, John Harvey and John Paul, Healy and McKeever, Corcoran and

¹For a more detailed account, see J. C. Fenton, "The Foundation and Progress of the Society," *CTSA Proceedings of the Foundation Meeting* (1946), pp. 5-12. A photograph of the foundation meeting was printed in vol. 25 (1970) of *CTSA Proceedings*.

Farraher, Owens and Yelle, Doherty and Nugent, to mention only a few whose names for some unexplainable reason come to mind in pairs.

The presidential address in 1952 was delivered, as was the custom in those days, on the evening before the sessions began by the late and still sorely missed Edmond Benard. He was a cultured man who loved to play with words and ideas, to tease them like a toy or a cat. There were 111 members present who paid the pre-inflation registration fee of \$6.00 each. That brought to \$666 the total receipts, the number of the Beast in the Apocalypse. Father Benard switched from that theme to the *Lost Horizon* and the question "What do the lamas do?" What do the theologians do?" he asked.² That, the beast and the lost horizons are questions we have been dealing with ever since.

However that may be, a great deal has happened to theology, to the CTSA and to your incumbent president in the years since 1952. I strongly suspect that the principal reason I am standing here before you today in this capacity is the fact that so much of what has happened to me has been intertwined with what has happened to the Society. Perhaps the best way in which this particular presidential address can serve the Society is to reflect on the achievements of the past, to recall some of the crises and to point to the possibilities for the future that emerge from the Society's history up until now. Much of this is already recorded in the *Proceedings* but perhaps it is also buried there; some of it is only hinted at or only occasionally recalled to mind; part of it is unprintable even now.

Lest they be lost forever, it might be fun for a moment to recall some of the human and humorous things that happened to us on the way to the forum. The history of our conventions is a tale of many cities. In Boston in 1947 it was hot. The meeting took place in the seminary with a consequent scarcity of ice cubes and fresh air; the informal gatherings were held in shirt sleeves or less. That is why it was determined that forever after we should meet in a hotel. Two years later in Cincinnati we ran out of money and the president had to wire his religious superior for the wherewithall to pay the bill before they would let him leave the hotel. In 1959 in Buffalo, Eamon Carroll's seminar on the pains of hell was interrupted when a brass band paraded

²E. D. Benard, "What Do the Theologians Do?" *CTSA Proceedings* 7 (1952), 34.

through the lobby of the hotel—"Good God!" Gene Burke exclaimed, "here come the Scripture men!" In Ottawa in 1961 the hotel guests complained of the noise in one of our suites at 3:00 A.M. The house detective found some of our most distinguished moralists arguing whether it was possible to commit a venial sin in purgatory. In his long experience as a hotel detective he had never encountered anything like this before so he decided to sit down and join in the discussion.

In Louisville in 1960 it was again oppressively hot. Then a violent thunderstorm knocked out the air-conditioning and flooded the hotel ballroom where the sessions were being held. A convention of police chiefs was housed in the same hotel, the lobby was full of motorcycle displays and the corridors echoed through the night with police whistles that were given out as souvenirs. That year was an all-time low. Eastern Airlines was on strike and that cut the attendance in half. One of the principal speakers got the dates confused and failed to appear, as did the then all-important chairman of the Current Problems Committee. It was the first convention for Vincent Nugent and myself as secretary and treasurer, and neither we nor the president had a very clear idea of what we were supposed to do. If the CTSA could survive Louisville, it could survive anything.

One year someone proposed that we hold the convention on board ship as part of a Bermuda cruise. This seemed important enough to canvass the membership. "Scandalous," said some; "you're kidding," said others; "morally not permissible for religious—see Canon 594,3" was one reaction; we were accused of aping the American legion, attempting to attract only the deadwood, and of doing irreparable harm. The best response came from the member who thought that the idea was marvelous but think, he said, of the caption in *Time* magazine: Theologians at Sea! Needless to say, we didn't cruise to Bermuda but we have been accused of being at sea many times since.

For the more serious part of this address my first instinct was to review the history of the Society, period by period and year by year, culling the significant facts from the *Proceedings* and sprinkling them with some memories and interpretations of my own. I had in fact some twenty pages or so of manuscript prepared in that direction covering the years from 1946 to that fateful year in Louisville of 1960. With fifteen years and another twenty pages to go, I decided to abandon the project as unsuitable to the literary form we know as the presidential

address. It will be better and more bearable, perhaps, to single out two fundamental characteristics that emerge from that history. In my view, the thirty-year history of the Society has shown a remarkable balance between a sense of identity and a cautious openness. That has been our secret of success in the past; I suspect it may hold the clue to our effectiveness for the future.

The identity of the Society is well summarized in the name: it is Catholic, it is theological and it is American. In the beginning, all of the members were professors of theology in Roman Catholic seminaries in the United States and Canada. Although the membership has broadened considerably since then it remains dominantly Roman Catholic, still concerned for the most part, as our convention programs indicate, with some area or other of Roman Catholic studies and systematic theology. Just last year we devoted almost the entire convention to studying the question: Is there a Roman Catholic theology? The papers in the *Proceedings* attest to a vigorous affirmative response.

Part of our Catholic identity has been manifest in our special sensitivity to the hierarchy of the Church. The early *Proceedings* treat with great seriousness the episcopal addresses of welcome; they record the Latin texts of cablegrams to Rome to affirm loyalty to Pius XII or to congratulate John XXIII and Paul VI on their election. More often than not the principal focus of the theological papers and discussions centered on the texts of Roman and papal pronouncements of even the most routine and rhetorical kind.

There have been few prelates who have been more obviously Catholic and American than the late Cardinal Spellman. From the beginning he showed a special interest in the Society. He seemed to be genuinely convinced of the importance for the Church in America of solid theological scholarship. He welcomed the Society to New York for its first meeting. He put the facilities of the Dunwoodie Seminary at our disposal for our early research projects, along with considerable money to support them. He endowed the annual award that bore his name and was obviously pleased to participate in the ceremony wherein it was conferred. And it should not be forgotten that he lent the weight of his name and influence to protect the academic freedom of some of our best biblical and theological scholars at a time when they needed such support to follow the leads of their advanced research.

More recently our relationships with the bishops have taken a different turn. There has been less emphasis on patronage and more on cooperation and mutual understanding. For some years now we have been trying in some sense to educate the bishops to a greater sympathy for the work, the problems and the vocation of the theologian. We in turn have tried to be sensitive to them. We have not been afraid to challenge or confront the bishops when there seemed to be a theological or a pastoral basis for doing so. On the other hand, we do want the bishops to know that we intend to be loyal to the Catholic tradition, to retain our Catholic identity and to serve the Church in America through our teaching and research. Since 1966 the officers and the Board of the CTSA have maintained regular contact with the episcopal chairmen of the NCCB Committee on Doctrine, beginning with the recently deceased and deeply lamented Bishop Zaleski. During the past year we cooperated also with the General Secretary and the Liaison Committee of NCCB in developing structures for better communication between the bishops and Catholic scholars in every field. Certainly, there is no crisis in the Catholic identity of the CTSA.

The theological aspect of the Society's identity would seem to be equally obvious and to require minimal affirmation or elaboration. Yet this has assumed a new significance in the light of the recent emergence of the broader field of religious studies. This development has served to highlight the specific character, the methodology and the importance of the strictly theological enterprise. One way to understand one's identity is to know what one is not. Much as we profit from and depend on the advances in other disciplines, we are not professional philosophers or historians, psychologists or sociologists, biologists or anthropologists. The specifically theological aspect of our identity was never clearer than in our recent contacts with other learned societies in the field of religion through the Council on the Study of Religion. There is no other Society quite like ours, none other devoted primarily to the exploration of theological questions or the systematic study of religious experience from the viewpoint of a faith tradition.³

³A possible exception is our Protestant counterpart, the American Theological Society, but membership therein is very restricted and by invitation only. As such it is not an "open" society and has not been considered eligible for membership in the CSR.

A third aspect of the identity of the CTSA is the fact that it has always been consciously American. In its very first meeting in January 1947 the Committee on Current Problems listed as the number one topic for consideration by the Society the question of an authoritative Church in a democracy. Papers were delivered successively at our second and third annual meetings by Joseph Clifford Fenton and John Courtney Murray respectively. This gave rise to the great and often acerbic debate over Church and state⁴ which led rather directly to what many consider to be the distinctively American contribution to Vatican II, the Declaration on Religious Liberty.

The recent emphasis on American theology is something that emerged from the Washington meeting in 1968. The theme that year was the transcendence of God; it might as well have been his absence. Washington was like a ghost town which the shadow of the Pentagon seemed to haunt. Constitution Mall was occupied by the lean-to shanties and mule wagons of Resurrection City. There was even talk of adjourning the convention so we could go out to support the protest in the name of social justice. (We took up a collection instead.) In this context our President, Walter Burghardt, shook our complacency as only he knows how: "Resurrection City and the Pentagon are symbols," he said, "symbols of theological impotence, of a radical failure within the CTSA—failure to produce or even initiate an American theology."⁵ Taking this challenge to heart, the Society has addressed itself to the various and specific elements needed to develop a better American theology. We may not yet be as American as apple pie, but neither do we look for our pie in the sky bye and bye. We're trying to find it right here.

There is a second characteristic that emerges from our thirty-year history. That is a cautious but growing openness. When the CTSA was first organized it was composed of a closed and rather tight-knit group of seminary professors, all of whom were priests and, it goes without saying, Roman Catholic and male. When I rather innocently crashed the

⁴A hint of the content and tone of the theological debate that was to come can be found in the summary by Francis Connell, C.S.S.R., entitled "Discussion of *Governmental Repression of Heresy*," *CTSA Proceedings* 3 (1948), 98-101.

⁵W. Burghardt, "Presidential Address: Towards an American Theology," *CTSA Proceedings* 23 (1968), 22.

meeting at Notre Dame in 1952 I precipitated something of a crisis. Although I was Catholic, male and a member of a religious order I was not a priest and had no intention of becoming one. Furthermore I was being trained all the way to the doctorate to teach theology in the college and university rather than the seminary. The constitution was consulted and it was found that there was no mention of priests or seminary professors. On the other hand, that had always been presumed; there was a fear that once an exception was made all sorts of dubious claims to theological competence might arise. Accordingly, in Baltimore the following year, 1953, the constitution was amended to define active members as priests or religious brothers with at least the pontifical licentiate, associate members as priests desiring to identify with the aims of the Society. The door was thus closed and open at the same time but a principle was established that kept it ajar.

The closed policy on membership extended also to the meetings, but in this area too a gradual and cautious openness developed. That crisis came ten years later in St. Louis in 1963 when extensive advance publicity attracted large numbers of sisters, lay students of theology, seminarians and members of the press, all of whom had to be excluded from the sessions. Many of them solved the problem pragmatically by remaining in the lobby where the presentations could easily be heard. But this also had the effect of forcing the Board of Directors to address the principle involved. By that time it was clear that neither theology, theological training nor theological competence could any longer be tied exclusively to the seminary course. The following year, 1964 in New York, the constitution was again amended to admit to active membership anyone holding either a pontifical licentiate or a doctorate in the sacred sciences from any recognized university. Associate membership remained restricted to priests. It was only in the subsequent revisions of 1970 and 1974 that all references to priesthood and pontifical degrees were dropped from the constitution.⁶ Meanwhile, in 1967, by a referendum, the membership showed itself overwhelmingly in favor of opening the meetings to the press. In this respect at least we were a step ahead of the bishops.

A more serious criticism came as a response to a questionnaire sent to the members after the near disaster of Louisville in 1960. Although

⁶Cf. *CTSA Proceedings* 25 (1970), 245ff. and *ibid.* 29 (1974), 424.

anonymous, one of the responses is worth quoting since it reflects what many in the Society felt at the time: better than anything it shows how far we have come since then. The member wrote as follows, and remember it was 1961:

Too often the annual meeting betrays the fact that this is not the "Catholic Theological Society of America" but the "Catholic Seminary Professors Society of America." The papers reflect their narrow interest and their narrow training. Humanism has no home there; Protestant theology is not known; the great modern theological questions such as the pages of *Hochland*, *The Christian Scholar*, *Cross Currents* and *Signes du Temps* are host to, are not discussed there. Result: jejune meetings, to which one is glad one may not invite one's non-clerical friends.⁷

Well, things began to change after that, and because of that, as well as other similar sentiments expressed by the membership at large.

In 1962 Jaraslov Pelikan became the first Protestant scholar to address the CTSA. He spoke on the Protestant Concept of the Church. On that occasion, the secretary notes in the *Proceedings*: "There was a tremendous surge of applause and the members rose at the conclusion of the talk in appreciation."⁸ At St. Louis in 1963 the small group seminars were multiplied, discussions of recent and lively books were a new feature of the program, and for the first time a distinguished European in the person of Bernard Häring addressed the membership. The New York meeting in 1964 attracted a record number of participants, something close to four hundred. The Eastern Orthodox were represented for the first time by John Meyendorff who gave a paper and also led a discussion of his latest book. That year Rabbi Abraham Heschel also led a discussion of his book on the Prophets in two successive sessions. Attending the meeting as guests of the Society were several Protestant scholars including Cyril Richardson, Roger Shinn, Paul Minear and John Krumm. In the following year, as a result of the constitutional revisions, Dr. Massingberd Ford was the first woman admitted to the Society: she was followed a year later by several sisters

⁷This response, together with some others and the tabulated results of the questionnaire, are contained in the unpublished report of the treasurer to the Board of Directors, June 1961.

⁸V. J. Nugent, "Minutes of the Pittsburg Convention," *CTSA Proceedings* 17 (1962), 280.

who had earned the doctorate including one Agnes Cunningham who has since played a special role in the development of the Society. The first Protestant scholar to be admitted to active membership was Dr. Arthur Cochrane who only recently wrote to us to tell of his affection for the CTSA as he retires from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. This development in the direction of a greater openness was finally articulated in a thoroughly revised statement of purpose adopted in the 1970 constitution which says of the CTSA:

Its purpose, within the context of the Roman Catholic tradition, shall be to promote studies and research in theology, to relate theological science to current problems, and to foster a more effective theological education, by providing a forum for the exchange of views among theologians and with scholars in other disciplines. In this way the Society seeks to assist those entrusted with a teaching ministry in the Church to develop in the Christian people a more mature understanding of their faith, and to further the cause of unity among all men through a better appreciation of the role of religious faith in the life of man and society.⁹

That statement is as good a summary as one could want of the Society's sense of identity and cautious openness to conclude this part of our reflection on the past history of the CTSA.

If we try now to project ourselves into the future, it seems to me that the survival and future effectiveness of the Society depend on preserving those two characteristics, identity and openness, in order to derive new sources of energy from the tension that develops between them. We cannot be any other than Roman Catholic in our attempt to do theology in the American context. In daring over the last few years to ask the Catholic bishops for financial support, which they have generously provided, we have posited a sign of our loyalty to the Catholic Church in America and our intention to serve it. More importantly, to abandon our familiarity with the Roman tradition and our competence in understanding it would be in effect a betrayal of the ecumenical dialogue and scholarly discourse in the field of religion. Those outside our tradition expect us to preserve and interpret for them what is peculiarly our own, as Richard McBrien stressed so tellingly last year. If dialogue can be ruined by pressure tactics and intrans-

⁹*CTSA Proceedings* 25 (1970), 245.

sigence it can also be ruined by our failure to know what we stand for or a lack of confidence in it.

However, I do not think that our Catholic identity has been or is likely to be the problem area for us, especially in our corporate image and endeavor as a society. It is the other side of the polar tension that has created difficulty in the past and continues to challenge us. Identity has been our strong point; our openness has been real enough but perhaps overly cautious. One of the dangers for the CTSA in the publicity attending the recent Hartford statement on the loss of transcendence¹⁰ is that we may think that it applies to us. I have great respect for the distinguished scholars who formulated the statement, many of them members of the CTSA including, indeed, the distinguished theologian to whom I shall presently turn over the presidency. I respect and I think I understand what they were trying to do. But the statement has all the disadvantages of the typical Roman condemnations. It is always dangerous and difficult to determine those to whom it applies, a game that too many in the Catholic community love to play. This address may suffer the same fate: there are those who are capable of hearing only one side of any balanced statement and that, of course, is the side they need least to hear.

That is why I would encourage the CTSA corporately to use the thirteen points of the Hartford statement to examine whether it has been open enough to modern thought, to human experience, to other religions, to human potential, to self-realization in human community, to the oppressive character of some of our institutions and traditions, to social concern and action, and to the struggle for a better humanity. If we do this as Catholics and theologians we need not fear to lose our sense of transcendence. If we use that fear as an excuse to turn in on ourselves and our tradition we shall become even more irrelevant than we have been, incapable of relating to other scholars and scholarly disciplines, and ultimately ineffective in our attempts to promote theological progress and to serve the Church in America.

There is one area in particular where it might be possible for the CTSA to manifest a more open stance. There is an urgent need to develop an American counterpart to the European political theology and the Latin American theology of liberation. We experience both

¹⁰Cf. *Origins* 4, 33 (February 6, 1975), 522-3.

Church and Society in a way that is very different from what either church or society have meant in the European experience of Metz or the Latin American experience of Gutierrez. To develop such a theology we need help and we need experience. We need the help, especially, of the social and political scientists to understand the dynamics of our American social and political life. This convention has tried to supply the beginnings of a better rapport with these disciplines.

More importantly, we need to broaden our experience of American life itself. As theologians and Catholics most of us share the background and experience, values and preoccupations, of what the politicians and journalists call middle America. The Catholic communities in which we have grown up are largely suburban, politically to the right of center, hawkish rather than dovish, committed to the Puritan sexual and work ethic, survivors of the immigrant ghettos and the great depression, mistrustful of artists and intellectuals, parochially educated in every sense of the word. As theologians and Catholics very few of us have experienced the America of the power elite: the center of political, economic and industrial power where the decisions are made that renew the face of the earth but where our theology, much less the Holy Spirit, has barely been able to penetrate. As theologians and Catholics, some of us, but not many, have experienced the poverty and frustration of the ghettos or the migrant workers, or even indeed what it means to be black, female, Mexican or Puerto Rican in America today. Until both the authentic experience and the scientific analysis can be brought to bear on our theology we will never be able to develop that American theology which Walter Burghardt described: "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 of 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."¹¹

What better forum then than the Catholic Theological Society of America to begin the discourse that could lead to such a theology? Yet the time is short and it may already be too late to take the initiative in such an enterprise. The Canon Law Society of America, for example,

¹¹Burghardt, "Presidential Address," p. 22.

has already adopted a policy resolution to promote and support interdisciplinary studies; several specific studies of various aspects of Catholic life in America are in fact already underway. Other organizations, including the USCC and some of our Catholic universities, are sponsoring conferences and workshops designed to bring our Catholic tradition and faith experience to bear on the pressing problems of American social and political life. So far the corporate contribution of the CTSA to these projects has been minimal and ineffective with the initiative left for the most part to our individual members. Part of the problem for our Society is practical and structural. We are limited in our resources, personal more than financial, with a transient presidency, volunteer help, and executive officers who have to steal the time from their many other professional and ministerial obligations just to maintain the routine functioning of the Society. Yet the potential is there and we must try harder to make our corporate and creative contribution to the growing experience-oriented and interdisciplinary search to understand what it means to be church in American society today.

The conclusions to these reflections on our past, present and future can be mercifully brief. In 1952 Edmond Benard spoke of the Beast, the lamas and the Lost Horizon. We may not know what the lamas do but we know who we are and what we are about despite the diversity and dissent during the last decade or so. No beast could be capable of the self-examination and the self-criticism in which we have engaged. We may have lost some of our horizons but we have taken cautious but firm steps in the direction of new opportunities and challenges. The chances seem good that thirty years from now some future president of the CTSA will review its sixty-year history and be able to report that the promise of our first score and ten has blossomed in a distinct Catholic theology of society in America.

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