

APPENDIX B

REPORT ON A SPECIAL MEETING OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS

This special meeting of the CTSA Board was held on February 6, 1982 in order to devote an entire day to examination of the issues that currently face American theologians, and more specifically the CTSA. Since it was hoped that this might give some guidance to future planning of the CTSA board and perhaps provide some clarification of the present needs and potential of North American theology, the Board decided to publish a digest of its discussion in the annual *Proceedings*, to inform CTSA members and to solicit their reactions.

The governing questions of the discussion were: What should theologians, as individuals and even more so as a community of scholars, be doing to respond to the needs (present and future) of the Christian community? And what role should the CTSA play in fostering this response? Throughout the discussion it was clear that the inquiry was a continuation of the self-examination that the CTSA has been engaged in from its inception.

However, it was also noted that the rapid shifts that have recently taken place in the theological enterprise and in the ecclesiastical situation in the Catholic Church make it specially necessary to appraise our present position and plan creatively for the future. Our present situation, in the Church as a whole and in our theological efforts, is not completely clear. For one thing, there may be quite different needs and kinds of development in different regions of the continent and among different groups (such as Spanish-speaking), which would mean that there are quite different issues to which theologians should address themselves. Accordingly, some members of the Board stressed the need for a careful phenomenological study of the actual religious situation in North America, with special concentration on the Catholic communities.

Underlying this desire for a more structured description of the actualities of American Catholic life were basic areas of agreement among the board members:

1) Theological reflection must deal with the *real* needs of the Christian people (and beyond that of all the world's people). An instance of such a real question is the need that a Christian community has for an *ordained* celebrant in order to celebrate the Eucharist. There would be a risk involved in raising such questions, the risk that theologians would incur the displeasure of elements within the Church, and even on some issues the opposition of some bishops. Yet, theologians have the responsibility within the Church to give the honest intellectual guidance that is needed if Christian people are to live out their faith life as an integral part of their involvement in today's world.

2) As a discipline of knowledge, theology is meant to mediate between faith and human culture, fostering a creative interaction of the two. In order to accomplish this purpose, theological research and reflection need to follow faithfully their own disciplinary criteria.

Taking such a view of the responsibility and the specific ministry of theologians in the Church does represent a basic shift in attitude and understanding for many theologians and even more so for many Church officials. At one time it was a not uncommon view that theologians (above all, theologians teaching in seminaries) were meant to provide a reasoned defense and apologetic explanation of Church doctrine. As such, theologians were an extension of one aspect of the bishops' pastoral office. Now, however, there is increasing awareness of the complementarity that must exist between episcopal and theological clarifications of Christian belief, with the result that theology finds itself somewhat more aligned than previously with the prophetic elements in the community's life.

This shift is accompanied by several other changes in the American theological scene:

1) There has been during the past decade or two a rapid increase in the number of non-seminary, non-clerical, teachers of theology, both women and men. Not only are the theological background and training of these people quite different from the "older" group whose orientation towards theology was strongly "Roman," but the context of doing theology in which they operate is quite distinctive—some would say "quite secular." As a matter of fact, a number of younger faculty teaching in university-linked seminary situations have also been trained in "non-Roman" graduate programs.

2) There has been an accompanying movement of much theology away from a ghettoized scholasticism and towards forms of theology that take into account, even in many instances incorporate, modern thought. One aspect of this change is a theological pluralism that reflects the increasing pluralism of contemporary intellectual life. Such a development clearly causes problems for those who see Catholic theologians as defenders of a monolithic formulation of Christian doctrine.

3) There has been a basic shift in theological method in recent decades: whereas the long-established manual tradition used doctrinal (or, if possible, dogmatic) formulations as the starting-point for theological reasoning, increasing numbers of theologians have recognized that the faith experience of the believing community (which, of course, includes both Scripture and historical tradition) is the most basic "word of God" which must be the starting-point for theological reflection. In attributing such a foundational role to Christian experience, one is not using "experience" in a narrow sense: the theologian must reflect on the extent to which such experience is conditioned by a given cultural context, and reflect also on the manner in which Scripture and the Church's historical tradition influence this experience. All this is closely linked with, though broader than, the stress on Christian *praxis* by the "liberation theologians."

4) If one accepts such a starting-point, i.e. faith experience guided by the Gospel and Christian history, pastoral concerns are not applications of theology but the very stuff with which theology must wrestle. And, in consequence, the social differentiations of various Catholic communities (mentioned above) must be seriously considered by theologians as they try to help meet the real needs of these communities.

The rapidity and drastic nature of these changes indicate the difficulty of answering the questions: To what issues should the theological community give

its attention? And how should the CTSA contribute to this effort? One of the most important steps is to foster the attitude that this is what theology should be about, i.e. trying to deal with the real and present needs and potential of the Christian people in the light of the Gospel. Without this attitude there will be no serious attempt by theologians to deal with reality. But the complexity of the task is such that there must be interaction between theologians and specialists in other disciplines (such as the social sciences) who can alert them to critical issues in contemporary human experience and help in the analysis of Christian faith and life. It would be instructive to discover just what topics are being researched in graduate program across the continent. It would be helpful also to see what religious issues are being dealt with by groups such as the Religious Education Association or the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion—often their discussions have important theological ramifications. Within the CTSA it is important to be aware of the diverse groups, each with its own constituency and with its own valuable point of view, and to keep these groups in creative conversation with one another.

The opening statement of the Board's meeting—that the purpose of the session was not to arrive at solutions—was confirmed by the day's conversation. Yet the general feeling was that a definite advance was made in understanding the agenda of the CTSA for the coming months and in keeping our planning both creative and realistic. At the same time, there was a gratified sense that this direction towards the future was in strong continuity with the CTSA's history, in particular its attempts to bring Catholic theology into the mainstream of North American intellectual life. A by-product of this realization was the suggestion, which received very favorable response, that there be a collection of selected essays from CTSA *Proceedings*, a collection that would illustrate the ongoing development of Catholic theology within the changing challenges of the American scene.

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