

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AS A THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM IV*

We could approach the topic "Theological Education as a Theological Problem" from various perspectives. Originally, I had thought about tackling the issue from such angles as curriculum design (Upon what theological foundations does a particular model build?), essential areas in a typical course of study (What does theological education, in and of itself, say about God, Christ, Church, grace, sin, etc.?) or teaching methods (Is there a different vision of God and the human person operative in pedagogy and andragogy, in classical lecture and contemporary reflection on praxis?). But none of these took me directly toward the most important component of education, theological or otherwise. That component is the student, an active partner in the process of exploring the truth that sets free. And so I decided to approach our topic from my own experience both as a student and a teacher of theology. I asked the question: When it works, what does theological education do to, for, and with those who engage in it?

In answering this question, I resisted the temptation to indulge in abstract theory. Rather, I thought about what theological education had done for and to me. More important, I solicited from students at St. Mary's Seminary their insights into what, from a theological perspective, their experience had done and was doing to and for them. The results were very instructive. Our context for learning is rather classical, where a lecture-discussion situation prevails. Even here, in a relatively controlled, teacher-centered atmosphere, interesting things can and do happen.

Theological education is an example of the theological problem that is self-transcendence. Call it response to revelation, or the interaction between God's grace and human freedom, or the human person's openness to the incomprehensible mystery of God: theological education (when it works) is an instance of that most basic human experience, being drawn beyond ourselves toward a reality, a truth, a horizon greater than we are and in which we "live, move, and have our being."

The dynamics which such intellectual giants as Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan ascribe to self-transcendence are the dynamics which my own experience, and that of students with whom I spoke, describe as happening in their theological study. I noted three themes common to their remarks and to my own reflection. The first is a human disposition, a basic openness to change and be changed. We all know people who can, literally and very passively, "undergo" their theological education. Some come, especially to a seminary, not to study theology but to be ordained. Three or four years of courses are tolerated and/or endured. Pastoral studies are valued solely for their immediate relevance. Classes are a series of hoops to be jumped through, until a bishop lays on hands and the real world really begins. Such persons manage to remain untouched inside. As a parting shot, they will sell off their books, often posting the sale conspicuously on a bulletin board where all, faculty included, may see. These are not the students with whom I spoke. Rather, I spoke to those who described their experience as "shaking loose." One

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who just graduated put in this way: "At my arrival, I threw everything up in the air. When they came down, I picked up the pieces. And they fit together in a totally new way." Another sees theological education as "an unfinished process that shapes and unshapes us, if we allow the power to penetrate our lives."

Such psychological attitudes reveal a lack of rigidity, an openness to risk, to the otherness of the reality we encounter when we go outside ourselves and allow ourselves to be transformed. Theological education works with men and women open to receiving theology's questions as their own. This insight into the subjective "condition for the possibility" of education leads me to reflect on those dispositions necessary if one is to be, truly, a hearer of God's Word. Given the fact that we all know within ourselves the enduring tension of grace and sinfulness, unlimited desire and partial realization; given the fact that no human being is ever a perfect product: what do our admissions standards say about those whom we admit to our schools? We rely heavily on GREs and Grade Point Averages as predictability factors for a successful student of theology. What about the human factors of rigidity or flexibility? There is always the possibility of radical, dramatic conversion. But if grace builds on nature, then neither a rigid conservative nor a dogmatic liberal will tend to enter into the educative process in a self-transcending way.

The second common element in theological education viewed as a self-transcending process is the component of dialogue or interaction. This interaction takes place between students and texts, the material of their study. I will discuss what happens here more thoroughly in my observations on common element number three. Here, I want to focus on the dialogue between and among the persons engaged in this enterprise. One student described faculty as "people who put nuggets in my head." While some modern educators might see this as a negative comment on the "banking" model of active teacher and passive learner, the student meant it in a positive sense. "Nuggets" are riches to be mined (not without strenuous effort, I might add), to be discovered. Like their vegetable equivalent of seeds, they are valuable. Presumably, they need not all pay off during the years of formal theological study. But they are deposited to be discovered when, under the pressure of life and ministry, their cash value is needed.

My discussions also affirmed the theological importance of dialogue, interaction among students themselves. While there are many problems in a residential seminary such as the one in which I teach, I was struck by the importance that students attached to sitting down and processing together what they were learning. In such an environment, they have a concrete moment in which to recognize, reconcile and, at least minimally, tolerate the differences among people. They have a real call to go out of themselves, to have their ideas and attitudes challenged and corrected. How necessary this is if human beings, not to mention the Church, are to function well. The personal struggle of students to appropriate truths ever ancient, ever new, mirrors the Church's struggle to preach its universal message to people of a particular place and time. The communal struggle is a healthy model, especially for those who try to internalize what being a people of God and what collaborative ministry in that people is all about. This exercise of self-transcendence is also a welcome countersign to the excessive individualism which I see as the original sin of our time.

The third common element that marks theological education as an occasion for self-transcendence focuses on the material of theological study: the presuppositions which determine one's initial approach, the facts confronting those presuppositions, and the direction of thought and action to which study can lead. In this regard, I was reminded of my first Scripture course, at the University of San Francisco. Cherished certainties were exploded. Long held absolutes went the way of long held absolutes. And I had to discover new anchors, more able to stand firm amid the pounding waves of the historical-critical method. The students' observations on this dimension of theological study were most exciting to me as an educator. They had a genuine appreciation for the faith-purifying possibilities of the historical-critical approach to Scripture, prayer forms, theological and magisterial statements. They saw the life-giving connection between solid theology and healthy devotion. In a paper written for a course on Mary, one student described what happened to him in the course of his study. His words speak more eloquently than I. "I began with the wrong approach . . . narrow . . . relating everything to a single, important, and valid theme . . . I had pre-decided what was going to be useful and what no longer applied for me today. . . . At some point in the process of this course, with hardly a moment of recognition, my approach changed. Rather than relate the information to my already-formed category, I simply let the knowledge speak on its own behalf . . . in its own context."

To me, his testimony illustrates the truth that the way we interpret determines what we allow to happen. Letting the facts, the tradition speak on its own behalf drew this student out of his preconceived, personal, relevant framework. He let the challenge of Biblical exegesis, historical relativity, and theological images change him. He allowed the context, the how and why of particular historical emphases, to speak to him. He had begun his study of Mary with one emphasis, a very valid and contemporary one at that, Mary as disciple. But he transcended this one image to the richness that variety offers, to an appreciation for the complex human process that is tradition. He picked up on the major theme of the role of imagination in theology by confessing "that theology is an art as well as a science. The beauty of images being evoked which go deeper than words or pictures could possibly explain is something which I had lost in my need to define and categorize. The life had become stifled by the process, rather than letting the process enliven."

At some mysterious moment, by some mysterious connection, this student went beyond his own familiar world, into new territory. One of his peers describes that going beyond by the image of "innocence"—not naive inexperience, not pollyannic optimism, but the enduring moment of "always moving into unknown territory." That is not a bad image for the fact that, no matter how many new lands we enter, we enter them as innocent, as always new.

These students' insights remind me of the words of Joseph Sittler: "Learning disorganizes and complicates the stifling simplicity of the purely personal."¹ To

¹Joseph Sittler, *The Care of the Earth and Other University Sermons* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), p. 143.

learn is an act of faith, in that we give ourselves over to consequences that we do not know. Like the seventeenth-century philosopher Pascal, we wager that God will be there at the end.

In a paper written for a Biblical course, another student expressed well the process of theological education as a dialogue between our self-consciously recognized prejudices and a particular text. He describes the act of interpretation as testing out and critiquing our guesses, seeing a text functioning as "a tool that allows us . . . to dialogue with the sky," a dialogue from which meaning emerges. The sky is that which is beyond our reach, but always beckoning. Rahner might call this image "the Whither of transcendence." In this case, the object of interpretation is a Lukan parable. The student comments: "The meanings the parable could have had are in conflict with the meanings we want it to have. Out of this conflict, the ineffable voice of God can be heard speaking afresh to the listener." He cautions against absolutizing any single method of interpretation. If we take seriously the paradoxical nature of revelation, then "there is an undeniable riddle quality (to parables) that cannot be explained away by allegory *or* by form criticism." Parables are "paradoxical, mysterious, inviting, confusing. If they are to be in any way revelatory of the Mystery of God, they have to be. Such is the nature of a God who is both immanent and transcendent." Education is the process of honing our ability to recognize and live with that riddle.

The insights expressed above witness to openness to the "other" of the reality we meet in and through the study of theology. They attest to the experience not only of grasping truth, but of being grasped by it. In theological truth, if anywhere, there is always more. Two thousand years after the fact of Jesus, we continue to research and write because no one formulation, no single image can say it all. In David Tracy's words, the best we have is "a rough coherence, a relative adequacy." Each new and partial insight becomes a new starting-point, a fresh stimulus to examine the truth and beauty ever ancient, ever new, revealed and hidden at one and the same time.

In the foregoing remarks, I have developed what we might call the poetry of theological education as a movement of self-transcendence. But the prose of the process is no less important. In the ordinary, confining, taken-for-granted situation of calendars, meetings and deadlines, we realize the limit-situation of our being created, the situated freedom of our human condition. When students approach after turning in an exam or paper with the plaint, "I needed more time," I answer: "Think about how wonderful it is that you know more than you can say. We are more than any limited expression of ourselves and our work." That too is self-transcendence, viewed under the guise of reality therapy, of responsibility.

This process of giving ourselves over to a reality greater than we are could also be described in the traditional category of grace—a grace which, in Rahnerian terms, is always, already present before we ever reflect upon or name it. Good education is like good preaching. It taps into human experience and puts words of recognition on that experience. When you are teaching and the connection clicks, you can see it in students' eyes. One admits: "Perhaps I knew this before the course. Or, perhaps I had experienced this but never took the time to reflect upon it in detail and put it into words. In either case, the end result is a vigor, a renewed

appreciation for the connection between theology and devotion, head and heart." Not a bad statement of that elusive quality upon which faculties spend hours of discussion and integration.

There are many more variations on this theme of theological education as a religious act, the act of self-transcendence. I shall close my remarks with a quote from James White's book, *Sacraments as God's Self-Giving*. "Without (such) knowledge, we are captive to the familiar. With (such) knowledge, we can transcend our own limitations."² And, it is hoped, the end of that transcendence will find us at home in the breadth and depth of God.

PATRICIA SMITH, RSM
St. Mary's Seminary and University
Baltimore, Maryland

²James White, *Sacraments as God's Self-Giving* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), p. 123.