

APPENDIX A
ADDRESS OF WELCOME

FAITH:
THE ROOT OF THE THEOLOGICAL ENTERPRISE

One of the stunning and awesome products of the space flights has been that magnificent photograph of the planet earth taken from outer space. If a theologian were on that space flight and with a telescopic lens were to look at the universe of theology he would see no doubt the rare and impressive accomplishments of large numbers of his colleagues. He would also see a lot of lively debate on the issues of theologians and the magisterium, liberation theology, the role of women in the Church, justice and peace in Central America, and a host of other questions posed by contemporary civilization.

Surely that telescopic lens would at some point focus on the monumental work of two great theologians, both of whom died last year: Bernard Lonergan and Karl Rahner. Rahner dealt with nearly every aspect of theology. Lonergan's main concern was theological method. Despite many differences in their work, both have something to say about the roots of a vital and creative theology—the life of faith. It is about this which I would like to invite your reflection tonight.

Rahner, concerned above all with the transcendence of the human spirit, discovered the very essence of human nature in being a "hearer of the Word," one whose mind and heart are directed in their radical dynamism to waiting for a word from the "ultimate horizon" of human experience, from the Absolute Mystery whose power and love lie at the source of all reality. In one place he puts it this way,

The human being is spirit, that is, human life is lived in a perpetual reaching out towards the Absolute, in openness to God. This openness to God is not a contingency which can emerge here or there at will among human beings, but is the condition for the possibility of that which the human is and has to be, even in the most forlorn and mundane life. The only thing which makes human beings human is that they are forever on the road to God whether they are clearly aware of the fact or not, whether they want to be or not, for they are always the infinite openness of the finite for God.¹

Rahner sees this dynamism graced and transformed by the divine call to eternal life, the call to the face-to-face vision of God; for God has indeed addressed

¹K. Rahner, S.J., *Hearers of the Word* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), p. 66.

a word to us in Jesus Christ, a word of mercy and unconditioned love. It is this graced dynamism coming to fruition in actual faith and love, that gives meaning to the particular facts and truths which we confess as God's deeds for us in Christ Jesus.

Theology is above all the exploration of this encounter between the Word of God which addresses us and the divinely empowered acceptance of that Word in the activity of faith. However intellectual or academic theology may be, however concerned to relate to the scientific, historical and sociological disciplines of the day, its own roots and the source of its meaning lie in the life of faith. A theology which merely dealt with the study of words and ideas or with analyzing social movements, or with relating different people's opinions, important as all these things are, would be an essentially imperfect undertaking. And so Rahner rightly says that,

For a Christian, his Christian existence is ultimately the totality of his existence. This totality opens out into the dark abysses of the wilderness which we call God. When one undertakes something like this, he stands before the great thinkers, the saints and finally Jesus Christ. The abyss of existence opens up in front of him. He knows that he has not thought enough, has not loved enough, and has not suffered enough.²

And he concludes,

The existential question for the knower is this: Which does he love more, the small island of his so-called knowledge or the sea of infinite mystery?³

Lonergan expressed this same insight in a somewhat different way. He distinguished two phases of theological activity: the mediating and the mediated. Each is characterized by four functional specialities. The first phase endeavors to recapture and to sort out what has been done in the past, to mediate the theological tradition. Its specialities are research, history, interpretation and dialectics. The second phase, which is truly creative, confronts the future and carries forward the work of theology. Its specialities are foundations, doctrines, systematics, and communications. In a summary paragraph, Lonergan recalls what he had written earlier about the second phase,

In a second, mediated phase, theological reflection took a much more personal stance. It was no longer to be content to narrate what others proposed, believed, did. It has to pronounce which doctrines were true, how they could be reconciled with one another and with the conclusions of science, philosophy, history, and how they could be communicated appropriately to the members of each class in every culture.⁴

For Lonergan, this second phase begins with and rests on the fifth functional specialty, foundations. He describes this as the objectification of conversion, which in itself is the foundational reality. Conversion is the intellectual, moral, and re-

²K. Rahner, S.J., *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), p. 2.

³*Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁴Bernard Lonergan, S.J., *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), p. 267.

ligious transformation of the theologian, moving from the unauthentic to the authentic. For this reason, he states,

The threefold conversion is, not a set of propositions that a theologian utters, but a fundamental and momentous change in the human reality that a theologian is.⁵

And he links this conversion with the essential Christian message,

Conversion is a matter of moving from one set of roots to another. It is a process that does not occur in the marketplace. It is a process that may be occasioned by scientific inquiry. But it occurs only inasmuch as a man discovers what the fullness of human authenticity can be and embraces it with his whole being. It is something very cognate to the Christian gospel, which cries out: "Repent! The kingdom of God is at hand."⁶

Though Lonergan regards conversion as a help to the first phase, it is for him utterly indispensable to the second. It is at least theoretically possible to do research, history, interpretation and dialectic in a purely objective way, as one might proceed in any scholarly discipline. No real faith commitment is necessary. And any serious scholar can undertake and do it. No doubt faith is an aid that enables one to appreciate the data one is considering, but it is not an absolute requirement.

But for a theologian to make a positive contribution to the world of theology and through this to the life of the Church, it is not enough to be a great scholar, though this is an absolute essential. It is further required that he or she be profoundly a believer, one whose mind and heart are transformed by the experience of conversion, changed through the love of God that is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given to us.

From the perspective of Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan, if a person's theological output is occasioned by intellectual curiosity, or personal indignation, or social activism, more than by faith that works through love, then, that theological output is necessarily less than what one is called upon to achieve as a theologian in the ecclesial community of believers and disciples.

This rootedness in faith will influence all the work that these theologians do, in both the mediated and the mediating phases. It will first of all direct their assimilation of the tradition. They will always be concerned to discover as far as possible the faith experience that underlies a particular work of theology from the past. To what degree does it reflect the faith of the writer and of the community where it was written, and to what degree might it represent social prejudice, community rivalry, personal ambition, or some other cultural conditioning that is irrelevant to the understanding and expression of faith?

In reading and interpreting contemporary theological literature the same search for an authentic expression of transcendence must go on. One must try to make an assessment of the degree to which what is said comes from a converted mind and heart. Does it reflect and promote the fruit of the Spirit described by Paul in Galatians 5:22: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness" and the rest?

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 270.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 271.

Or does it have more of what Paul speaks of as the works of the flesh: "anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit" (5:20) and so forth? But for this, as Paul also observes in 1 Cor. 2:14-16, one must be spiritual oneself and judge with the mind of Christ.

And so theologians in their research and writing need to operate from a vigorous life of faith, nourished by prayer and meditation, nourished by the Liturgy of the Church, nourished by loving service of others in humility, kindness and patience. They need to live in intimate communion with the Mystery of the Whole Christ drawing life from the Spirit whom the Risen Jesus pours out in the Body of the Church. Theology always remains faith seeking understanding and this root of faith enables the theologian to be not only a scholar but a prophet, one who can evaluate the problems and questions that confront the world today with the insight that comes from the Spirit of God.

And so that theologian in the space ship seeing the majestic panorama of your great theological enterprise may well call to mind T. S. Eliot's words,

O Light Invisible, we praise Thee!
 Too bright for mortal vision.
 O Greater Light, we praise Thee for the less;
 . . . We thank Thee for our little light, that is dappled with shadow.
 We thank Thee who hast moved us to building, to finding,
 to forming at the ends of our fingers and beams of our eyes.
 And when we have built an altar to the Invisible Light,
 we may set thereon the little lights for which our bodily vision is made.
 And we thank Thee that darkness reminds us of light.
 O Light Invisible, we give Thee thanks for Thy great glory!⁷

†JOHN R. QUINN
Archbishop of San Francisco

⁷T. S. Eliot, *Choruses from "The Rock"* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1952), c. X.