

## PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

### WHO IS TRULY A CATHOLIC THEOLOGIAN?

It has not been an easy year for theologians of North America whose work is in the Catholic community and tradition. Several members of our society have been deprived of scholarly positions or prevented from taking them by hierarchic intervention. Others have experienced great difficulties in obtaining tenure and promotion because of similar hierarchic interventions, in some cases only on account of their support for colleagues expressed in proper ways through proper channels. This has constituted a crisis for all of us. In one case so far, which we took to be an important precedent, this Convention passed a resolution of support last year, the Board took the matter further with a five-page detailed testimony, and many of you sent in much appreciated letters of support, both singly and in whole faculties acting jointly. That case is not yet concluded. Your President and President-elect acted as official observers on behalf of CTSA, and the President made a further deposition for the academic hearing. Moreover, your President and several Board members, and no doubt others of the Society, have spent a good deal of time giving press and media interviews, and answering correspondence from well-wishers, critics and bewildered Catholic laity and clergy.

The crisis is by no means over, and we must not become too weary to give support to other members of the Society involved in similar problems. It has become clear that a very important component of such support is the dissemination of greater understanding of the task of the theologian within the church. What has become central in all these cases and in all the questions that have been raised about them is the timid but persistent question coming from many quarters: how can there be any discussion among Catholic theologians on a point on which Rome has already spoken? And in this question Rome is understood to mean anyone in any of the congregations or commissions who claims to speak on behalf of the Holy See. The Vatican I definition of papal infallibility has acquired among both Catholics and others, clergy and even some bishops, an extension not dreamed of even by the most enthusiastic Ultramontanists. That is to say: there is an implicit understanding that not only solemn definitions of papal teaching, nor even only teachings of the popes themselves, but directives coming from various members of the Vatican staff are being treated as being beyond question or discussion. But this would seem to extend to all judgements, decisions and utterances of curial bodies or of individuals serving in them the quality of being irreformable and therefore for practical purposes the claim of being infallible or, at the least, of having absolute possession of the indefectibility of the church. I think we may say with certainty that this goes far beyond the intent of Vatican I, and has no warrant in our traditional ecclesiology. This becomes a matter of the greatest concern when it functions in a manner that effectively abrogates the individual and collegial re-

sponsibilities of the bishops, the leaders of the local churches, in the process of formation of the church's teaching. For practical purposes the exclusion of the bishops of the local churches means the exclusion of the voices of the faithful and of the authentic pastoral perspectives that ought to be brought to bear on the formation of the teaching.

Such heavily centralized curial decision making, besides excluding the voices of the bishops and of the faithful, reduces the role of theologians in the church to that of a severely restricted type of catechist—one who repeats the finished formulae and teaches others to do so with greater or lesser comprehension but little or no critical reflection and little or no curiosity over new questions about old assumptions. The model that is implied, when theologians are not permitted to discuss questions on which the Roman congregations or their members have expressed a judgement, is a model popular in the early post-Tridentine seminary manuals. According to that model the teaching of the church is essentially finished and static, needing only to be explained to different generations, but retaining the form that was definitively established during the ages up to and including the Council of Trent. Although in certain peripheral or detailed matters there may be room for development, in the main the teaching is timeless and unconditioned by language or culture. In this perception it is understandable that the teaching is thought to flow from the central Roman *magisterium* to the local churches and from the *magisterium* which declares the teaching to theologians who explain what the *magisterium* has declared, and from there to the faithful who implement what the theologians have explained. Neat as this classical view is, it is quite incompatible with our historical experience of reality, in which it becomes clear that there cannot be any teaching which is not culturally, temporally, and linguistically conditioned. Alerted to this by the historical perspective and the social sciences of the modern world, we cannot but see our participation in a spiralling sequence in which the experience of the Christian people and their first order reflection on it leads to the more specialized work of theologians and ultimately to formulations of church teaching. We are aware that this has often happened in the course of the ages without specific, definitive intervention of hierarchic authority. Only relatively rarely has authoritative, formal intervention of the hierarchic *magisterium* been needed in the process of the shaping of church doctrine.

For these reasons we cannot truthfully regard our role as theologians in the light of repetition and explanation of a timeless body of established teaching. We are bound to become reflexively aware of a number of intertwining roles and functions which fall to our lot. Moreover, by the very nature of the tasks that are ours, we cannot rely solely on the Roman curia and its officials to discern when we are acting in harmony and continuity with Catholic tradition. For this we most certainly need to discern intrinsic criteria and their application. It has, of course, always been important to do this and to become critically aware of the roles we play as Catholic theologians working within both the academic and the ecclesial context. However, it seems to be particularly important at this time of history that we think out our roles quite explicitly for ourselves and communicate the definitions to others in ways that are both intelligible and acceptable in church, university and society. It is not a time for silence or for glossing over difficulties, especially in ecclesiastical circles because that is a context remarkable for fear of conflict and of change.

In the first place we are dealing with a problem that is not only particular to the situation of the Catholic theologian, but is far more general. It would seem that all scholars, teachers and writers in their time play many parts, but that only one or two of those parts are generally accepted, and that these are too often taken for the whole. Indulging a little whimsy one might say that in the case of the theologians each scholar's career is likely in a life-time to include all or several of the following roles: the theologian is sometimes the myth-maker, sometimes the fool; sometimes the comforter and sometimes the builder; sometimes the archivist and sometimes the critic; sometimes the archaeologist and sometimes the ghost. It seems to me that only the roles of comforter, archivist and ghost are generally well accepted. But I shall explain what I mean; I shall take each of these roles and offer some reflections on what the criteria might be for claiming to play that role as an authentic Catholic theologian.

#### THE THEOLOGIAN AS MYTH-MAKER

Theology is always a second level activity in the sense that something has happened before, been experienced before and been expressed verbally in some way before. For that reason there is a tendency to assume that the myth-making function has happened before the theologian takes over. But this is not really so in practice; because all language about God and divine presence and action in creation is necessarily analogical, there is always a quiet process of myth-making at work where theology is being done. It is not always obvious; most of us are not immediately aware of the mythic quality and background of the language when we speak of the Beatific Vision as we are when there is reference to the heavenly banquet. It is obvious that in the course of the centuries some explanatory stories and their images have acquired such a central position in the tradition that they have become touchstones of orthodoxy. Yet it is equally obvious that the myth-making process cannot stop, because it must respond to cultural contexts so as to be intelligible in changing societies, and because contrast and plurality are needed if the process is not to become idolatrous.

This raises the interesting question concerning criteria for fidelity to gospel and tradition in the process of adapting the mythic foundations of theological discourse. There are of course guardians of orthodoxy, some of them self-appointed, who maintain that the words must always be the same. Probably without realizing it, they are insisting on the same mythic foundations that they heard in their own early formation, whether or not these foundations yield any intelligibility. This solution is simple but not helpful in fostering mature faith and life.

Yet once we admit that adaptation and development are inevitable, the question of criteria for fidelity remains. I would like to give an example. The sexual morality that has been endorsed by Roman authority in the last century or so seems to rest upon an implicit myth such as the following. God has created people according to a blueprint which is written in their bodies, in their anatomy; they are made to operate in a certain way, and when they operate in that way their mission and purpose is fulfilled, they return to the hands of the creator in peace and God is glorified. A quite different myth is gradually shifting into the place of the anatomical toy-maker myth. It goes as follows: God creates human persons in the

divine image by awakening them into freedom, self-determination, and creativity, in which they discover that they are essentially relational and that their humanity is realized in the ways they shape the earth, themselves, one another and their societies; in this they are fulfilling and realizing the creativity of God; when they shape communities which offer liberation, happiness and fulfilling relationships to all, they fulfill the purpose of creation. Then all creation is drawn into a great harmony and returns to the creator in peace, and God is glorified.

This is a shift away from a code written anatomically in the human body. It is at the same time a shift towards a call perceived as coming out of the freedom and creativity of God, summoning freedom and creativity in human creatures towards community and communion. The question therefore arises whether such a shift is in fidelity to the gospel and the tradition or is counter to them. It is not enough to ask whether authority in the church approves of it. It is part of the reflective and critical function of the theologian to consider what grounds might justify approval, and what grounds might constitute an obstacle to approval. It is part of the theologian's role in the formation of doctrine to become aware of such shifts in the mythic substructure, to make them to some degree explicit, and to testify to the reasons for acceptance or rejection.

The criteria for evaluating this must of course be drawn from the gospel, the tradition and the consciousness of believers. First and foremost we need to judge the appropriateness of shifts in the underlying myths in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ as it emerges from scripture. But there is, as it were, another dimension to the question, namely the historical development within the life of the community in the course of the centuries. Therefore we also have to judge by considering the long-term development of the mythic base of the tradition. In the case cited it might be appropriate to re-examine the imagery of Irenaeus, to look at the rejected elements in Origen's grand panorama which the community judged in retrospect to be a blind alley, to consider the complex vision of Augustine, and so forth. This is important but again not enough because another dimension is the consciousness of the community of believers and the practical and theoretical roles which particular mythic elements play in their lives. On all of these grounds it is my conviction that the shift mentioned above is demonstrably faithful to gospel and tradition, though the demonstration must obviously be explicit and would take some time and space to develop.

The role of the theologian as myth-maker is necessary and consequential, yet theologians cannot afford to be too conspicuous in this role. Today we readily admit the immense influence Teilhard de Chardin has had in shaping Christian imagination and thought. In his own time Teilhard was severely held in check. It is true he was a scientist rather than a theologian by profession, but theologians who leaped to his defense and explained the aptness of his mythic imagery fared little better than Teilhard himself. It is not difficult to see that Paul Tillich would have been in considerable difficulties had he been a Catholic theologian. Our great mystics, even those most theologically sophisticated, had a hard time of it. As a church we do not like to acknowledge the myth-maker role.

#### THE THEOLOGIAN AS FOOL

If the theologian functions sometimes as myth-maker, it is also true that the task is often one of myth-breaking, and that this is never popular. The theologian is called upon, therefore, to play the role of the fool, the court jester, who must

find a way to challenge prejudices and ill-considered assumptions in a manner that entertains or attracts before it offends. In theological context that means a strong measure of compassion with those whose myths are being challenged, weakened, broken. It also means that the challenge must be more than iconoclastic; it must offer new insight and inspiration to piety, and a redemptive way of life. The task of the fool is more difficult by far than the task of the wise man. None knew it better than Paul who with his talk of folly for Christ's sake was challenging and breaking both pagan and Hebrew myths in the minds of his converts—the myth that sanctioned the Law with all its ritual prescriptions, the myth that tended to distance the messianic times as well as the pagan myths that made human life the sport of the gods.

Our history is full of this myth-breaking activity. Irenaeus breaks the myth of the Gnostics which carried such high credibility in his time. Augustine breaks the myth of Pelagius which seemed somehow particularly moral and dedicated. Leo's Tome and Chalcedon break the myth underlying the Monophysite christology, which represented a venerable church tradition and which must have seemed at the time to some of the churches to be a far more reverent attitude to Christ. It was discerned a necessary myth-breaking though it caused a bitter schism in the church. Thomas Aquinas' theology certainly broke the myth underlying platonically based theology and pseudo-dionysian spirituality, though it raised posthumous fury in Paris and Oxford.

Though we have depended on it heavily in the formation of doctrine, the myth-breaking process has never been welcomed too heartily in its own time, and there is both among the Christian people and in the hierarchy of the institutional church a persistence of wishful thinking that would put the process in the past, so that the myths of the present are safe from challenge. One might, nevertheless, suggest that there are myths underlying our institutional ecclesiology that should be examined and challenged in the name of the gospel, of the tradition, and of the consciousness of believers. There is, for instance, a myth that goes something as follows. In the beginning God produced a creation that was properly organized: God ruled all; through laws of nature God ruled the material universe as he continues to do; through moral laws God ruled men who in turn ruled women and (according to their various places in the scheme of things) the social affairs of the human community; women according to their place in the scheme of things ruled minor affairs of the household. But human sin intervened and the order was disturbed. God responded in various ways, and finally sent his son, Jesus, with the blueprint for the reconstruction. This blueprint was passed on to specially selected men of every generation, who guard it and insist on its implementation. Every detail of the social reconstruction within the community of believers is important, permanent and beyond discussion or challenge.

Obviously, in the consciousness of the worldwide community of believers there is increasing discomfort with this mythic base because it does not offer intelligibility to human existence. Yet the myth has such hold on the loyalty and obedience of many that they choose to exclude themselves from the community of Catholic tradition rather than suppose that this view of reality might not be the only or the best perspective on the Catholic tradition. Moreover it has such a hold on the loyalty of others that they see their own role within the Catholic community

as passive, bearing no responsibility for the structures of the world that cause crushing suffering to many people, or for the conduct of public affairs which shape the conditions of life for this and future generations.

Clearly there cannot be silence in such matters. Moreover, it has long been evident to theologians that there are myths underlying our eschatology, indeed expressing our eschatology, which are demonstrably counter to the sweep and thrust of scripture, which play a problematic role in the history of our tradition, and which have become a scandal in the consciousness of believers and of wistful would-be believers. There is not doubt that, no matter how fondly various elements of such myths are reiterated and reinforced by voices of authority, theologians would not be faithful to their calling if they did not bring such elements into question. Yet it is the task of the myth-breaker, the delicate and dangerous task of the fool. We should not really expect to be thanked for it.

#### THE THEOLOGIAN AS COMFORTER

Perhaps the most appreciated role of the theologian is the pastoral role when the tradition and its reflective formulation are applied in ways that are non-controversial and also happen to be helpful to people in interpreting the meaning of their lives, in resolving doubts and problems, and in coming to practical decisions. This function is certainly not to be deprecated, but neither can it be taken for the whole calling of the theologian as though the controversial issues had all been resolved long ago, and as though prophetic challenge and rocking of becalmed boats were not also part of the task.

Yet it is perhaps important to look at the way the role of comforter is to be played in times of rapid changes in culture and awareness when theologians tend to be involved in tense debate and issues become sharply polarized. The spontaneous trend is to align with one side and provide comfort to those who range themselves with that side of the issue. There is a temptation to deny precisely that which is implied in the designation "Catholic", namely a concern for all, a concern for the whole, a concern for the unity and solidarity of the people of God. This can happen in two ways. The concern for peace, edification and community support can be seen as identified with institutional solidarity to such an extent that those who do not conform to official institutional policy are also thrust outside the range of comfort, that is outside the conversation, the pastoral concern, the community support, and most of all outside of earshot. But it can also happen in another way. The hearing of the distressed, the marginated, and those whose situation does not fit into the expectations of the institutional church, can somehow distract the theologian into regarding the institutional church and those who adhere to it closely as the enemy.

We cannot depend on any voice of authority to tell us whether we are faithful as Catholic theologians in discharging the theological task of comforter. Nor, when authority tells us we are doing this in disloyalty to the Catholic tradition, is it necessarily true. There is an inescapable discernment process in which we ourselves are involved, and the elements to consider are many. There is the question of truth—the truth of the situations on which we are called to reflect and comment, the truth of revelation and of the channels that purport to convey and interpret revelation,

and the truth of the relationship of specific beliefs and actions to their goals. By this last I mean that we need to discern in each case how beliefs and practices and their immediate goals relate to the welcoming of the Reign of God in human society as a whole. And most particularly, I think we need to ask whether we are sowing "seeds of unity, hope and salvation for all" (*Lumen Gentium* 9).

The task of comforter for the theologian is one of reconciliation in the broadest sense, that is of bringing opposites into constructive, creative relationship with each other. Within the Catholic ambit this seems to demand that we mature into a new acceptance of plurality and a new tolerance of ambiguity and conflict. This is not always evident among liberal and progressive theologians, just as it is not easily found among the conservative. However, it is easier to understand why there should be a certain dogmatism and intolerance among conservative groups, because they are defending an established way of thinking and acting which is certainly threatened by new questions and by the very suggestion of plurality in formerly uniform matters. It is always less easy to understand why groups of liberal or progressive persuasion, who are searching for new answers, new insights, new syntheses, should be intolerant of conservative voices even in situations in which these latter do not have the power to impose uniform solutions but have come out into the forum of discussion and experimentation.

#### THE THEOLOGIAN AS BUILDER

Another of the roles of the theologian is that of builder. It is necessary again and again to construct a systematic interpretation of the vision and convictions of our faith in such a way as to offer both credibility and intelligibility to that faith. Here again, the task is not always appreciated by the guardians of orthodoxy, whether official or self-appointed. The problem of verbal orthodoxy remains, and will remain, to torment and tease us, if only because the criteria for such verbal orthodoxy are so deceptively clear and give an illusion of security.

Whatever the distrust and condemnations evoked, however, constructive theology cannot be a shuffling of the same words and phrases and definitions into somewhat different combinations. It necessarily involves discernment and scrutiny of the shifting underlying myths, a study of the metaphors and analogies in use of the existing formulations, research into the historical and cultural context that produced these figures of speech, sensitivity to the secular paradigms of our own times, and above all a testing in prayer and praxis of the reliability of the understanding and the expression of that understanding.

The rewards of doing such constructive theology usually come very slowly, because such theologizing can only be really fruitful as a dialogic community project. It is tried in the exchange between believers before anyone can know whether it is viable. But it must, of course, be enunciated in print or oral presentation before there can even be such trial of viability for the community. It is not surprising that there are always those whose fear of the risks makes them attempt to protect the community from hearing anything new, and makes them identify the innovators as irresponsible scandalizers of the faithful. This cannot, I think, be wholly avoided. It can be reduced if constructive theologians have the patience to

build bridges as well as towers, and to lead tours as well as forging ahead breathlessly into the future of their own making.

### THE THEOLOGIAN AS ARCHIVIST

There is no doubt that the Catholic tradition is as rich and alive as it is today because the theologians of earlier ages and generations were great archivists. It has been a characteristic of Catholic life in general and Catholic theology in particular to reverence and treasure the cumulative wisdom of the past. This guarding and preserving of the treasure is something we cannot afford to neglect or forget. However, the past can be with us in two ways; it can be a solid structure on which we stand in order to build further, or it can be a heavy mass on top of us to weigh us down with restraints and burdens alien to our present situation and calling.

The theologian as archivist has generally been approved and held in esteem in the institutional church, though only if the task was done in the style of a *catena* or *florilegium*, seldom if it contained the challenge of a *Sic et Non* presentation such as Abelard's. We want our history, but we want to see it as non-conflictual, as unanimous, as wholly edifying, as rather ethereal or unearthly. There is a strong tendency to want our theologians to be wholly uncritical archivists, claiming unanimity and continuity where these are not really to be found, and throwing the accepted formulations and expectations of our own day like a cloak over texts and testimonies of the past.

What this demands of theologians is fidelity to the truth of the past, and compassion with the fears and insecurity of the present in the way that the truth of the past is presented. But the task of the archivist also demands a constant process of sifting and discernment by the criteria of the gospel and of continuing Christian experience. The discernment is that of learning to see what is Tradition in the full sense, and what is useless accretion, or simply ephemeral and now outmoded expression.

Such discernment requires of theologians a well developed Catholic sensibility. It can only be derived from deep immersion in the worship and life and striving of the community of believers, kept constantly in dialogue with the findings of scholarly investigations. Moreover, such discernment always leads beyond to new creative efforts, and reaches towards new horizons. The demand that the theologian remain the uncritical archivist and take that as the whole task can only be accepted at the cost of infidelity to the gospel.

### THE THEOLOGIAN AS CRITIC

When we study the traditions and the cumulative wisdom of the past, it is with a view to evaluating how that past serves the needs of the present. That is Catholic fidelity, and that is the heart of the enterprise. It is more than a Christian task; it is the characteristically human intellectual activity to achieve psychological distance, to compare, to evaluate, to judge.

It is not only in the church, but it is perhaps in a special way in the church that the critical activity of experts is highly suspect by those in authority who often have most to lose by demonstrations of error or shifts in understanding and ex-



pectations. Yet much of the work of theologians is necessarily critical. On the other hand, to be critical is not the same as being simply destructive, and it may be that those who most bitterly and unjustly condemn theologians in our times are those who perceive the critical process of theology as destructive.

Theological fidelity cannot lie in abandoning the critical function, but it may lie in cultivating strong bonds of empathy with those who are threatened by the critique, so that the manner of the critical evaluation is much softened while the substance remains intact. Moreover, there may be times when more progressive theologians need to remember that the critical function is not the whole task of theology either, but has to be kept in balance with all the other functions.

#### THE THEOLOGIAN AS ARCHAEOLOGIST

Functioning as archaeologist, the theologian is not as easily or generally accepted as when functioning as archivist. The archaeologist makes new discoveries that may well upset old theories and old justifications for present practices. The more any of us have at stake in the present practices, organizational structures, and expectations, the more difficult it is to accept discoveries from the past that may undermine the historical justification of them. This is very evident, for instance, in the question of ordination and apostolic succession, but it applies also to many customs, liturgical and other observances, beliefs, moral teachings, and so forth on which many lay Catholics tend to rest their sense of security.

It is not surprising, therefore, that many new discoveries about the past, even about our own Christian past, arouse a sense of panic and resentment among some Catholics, and foster an atmosphere of condemnation. Catholic fidelity seems to require fidelity to truth but also fidelity to community solidarity. The discoveries of the past, and the discoveries of the natural and human sciences, cannot, of course, in conscience be falsified, but we can endeavor to set them in the context of the whole mystery of redemption, of the acknowledgement of sin but also of grace. We can endeavor to present and to interpret our findings with a certain intellectual humility and willingness to come into dialogue and be challenged.

#### THE THEOLOGIAN AS GHOST

It must finally be said that the theologian is most successful and most acceptable when no longer visible because the ideas have been assimilated so that they are no longer credited to a particular person. It may be a hard saying, but our destiny is to surrender what is intellectually our own, and to die and disappear.

In justice it must be said that our post-Tridentine predecessors, though not held in high regard in our times, seem to have been better at this. They tend to face us across history like a solid phalanx of the unnamed and unsung standing behind the manuals without laying claim to originality or creativity. We could not do this in our own days if we tried. The plurality of our institutions, the interest, speed and diffusion of the media, the prevalence of conferences, conventions and exchanges, not to mention mundane considerations like rank and tenure committees and their requirements—all these factors thrust us individually into the public eye,

and force us to stand clearly identified with our own words and works. It is both more seductive and more risky.

With rapid communication and rapid translation, the individual theologian enjoys and suffers wide exposure to the most diverse readers and listeners. It is almost tautologous, therefore, to say that it is our vocation to be in trouble, to be misunderstood, to be accused of scandal and error, and to be seen as a public danger. Those who went before us and are safely dead are now respectable and edifying, and those who are forgotten have probably succeeded most in what they set out to do—to provide viable interpretations and formulations which fit so well that they seem self-evident and their provenance can safely be forgotten. If it were not an impertinence, one might add one more paradoxical beatitude: blessed are the forgotten, for they have made their mark.

How acceptable and successful is the theologian as ghost, for that theologian beyond doubt is truly a Catholic theologian.

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