

## SEMINAR ON THE NATURE AND METHOD OF THEOLOGY

### THEOLOGICAL METHOD, LANGUAGE, AND THE DEFINITION OF CHALCEDON

In the regretted absence of Ronald Chochol, the moderator of the seminar, some two dozen participants led by William Loewe addressed the theme. The historical setting of the definition, its force in the life of Christians of the time, and a proposal for its proper understanding in terms of genre and rhetoric, were set forth on the first day by Gerard Sloyan of Temple University. General discussion by all the participants followed immediately; then, on the second day, Romanus Cessario of the Dominican House of Studies, Washington, D.C., started the seminar off afresh with a formal prepared response to Sloyan.

Sloyan's care in setting the historical scene of the Chalcedonian definition was helpful to the seminar participants. In addition to refreshing memories, it played a major role in justifying his reading of the definition as primarily a rhetorical composition by which the council fathers tried to address the faith which was being expressed in such contrasting terms by bishops from churches of Syria and Egypt in particular. The definition affirmed that faith and those terms, while excluding the more extreme expressions of each tendency. Was it possible to exclude the extremes without injuring the central vision of the truth of faith held by the churches in each region? About 150 bishops, nearly a third of the council, were so dissatisfied that they refused to subscribe on behalf of their churches, and heirs to their protests remain today. For the rest of Christianity, the definition not only summarized the faith which the church had held in the past, but also set the terms for the future.

Borrowing categories from F. van Beeck, Sloyan noted that language such as that employed rhetorically by the council is not to be judged as a thing-in-itself but as it expresses a conviction which transcends the bounds of language, a belief in the person and the deeds and the experience of salvation which have found expression in the words. If language does not reflect and summon one to such a conviction it does not embody revelation but stands in its way; the reader must enter into the context and become a hearer of the rhetoric to plumb the meaning of the definition.

So what is the rhetorical flavor of the Chalcedonian definition? It is neither a theological statement in a reflective mode—the council fathers in their debates do not speculate concerning the Logos/mediator—nor the rhetoric of public prayer, which of necessity must fit the faith of learned and unlearned alike. Rather it is ordinary cultured speech, employed to engage the assent of all right-minded par-

ties, "a compelling interpersonal communication among bishops and people recalling a common faith," and avoiding to the degree possible adding new burdens of technical language or philosophical refinement. The definition is foundational for Christian theology (unlike the post-Chalcedonian theory that the one hypostasis of Jesus Christ is the divine Logos), but it is most fully honored when theologians are similarly careful in their rhetoric and restrain themselves from burdening their contemporaries with problems of culture and language which they cannot bear.

Cessario added several observations concerning both linguistics and metaphysics as they bear on the problem. On the one hand, the role of language is understated when it is claimed that words are not the object of faith. The capacity of language to slip in meaning does not obviate the fact that change in expression often does entail change of content. On the other hand, linguistics often treats language impersonally, writing off the historical and social fact that real people were saying *something* in these words. If theology fails to mediate that fact, it loses its sapiential function. As for the metaphysics of the person of Jesus Christ, it may not be reduced to a kind of eventual precipitate of soteriology. It, and the terms and concepts it employs, maintain soteriology because the metaphysical reality of Jesus Christ makes salvation possible and defense of the expression of this reality defends the salvation he brings.

Discussion on the two days ranged over questions and observations such as the following: Is the post-Chalcedonian theory that the one hypostasis of Jesus Christ is identical with the Logos really less binding than the Chalcedonian definition? Problems with "person" may be alleviated by recourse to the emphasis on freedom in empirical psychology—a concern shared by Greek philosophy. The drift of eastern Christian christology is shown by the way Gregory Nazianzen's language is altered when it is taken up into the liturgy of St. John Damascene. An emphasis on John rather than the synoptics in choosing lectionary readings tends toward an excessively "high" christology. In dialogue with Judaism and Islam, such a high christology is seen as threatening true monotheism.

How can one map the passage from rhetoric of faith to reflective discourse? Is reflective discourse a "fall" from rhetorical innocence? Are not councils, precisely when they deal with controverted questions, necessarily reflective and explanatory as well as rhetorical? To retrieve Chalcedon as rhetoric rather than metaphysics may become a subtle anti-metaphysical argument. While the words we employ are important and do embody in their fashion God's address to us, they are only one form of our language; we need to pay attention to what is said in all the various forms, and reevaluate exactly what we mean by the words we use.

The seminar was both substantive and irenic, and I hope that is conveyed by the above summary.

MICHAEL SLUSSER  
*Duquesne University*