

THEOLOGICAL NOTES OR HIERARCHY OF TRUTHS?

Far more people wished to participate in this workshop than had been anticipated. As a result proceedings began with a corporate move to a larger room. This change effected, the moderator introduced Avery Dulles, S.J., Professor at The Catholic University of America, and Robert Jenson, Professor at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Gettysburg.

Dulles spoke first and made a brief presentation of the theme. He recalled the useful purpose that theological notes had been intended to serve; namely, to help differentiate between church teaching with a claim to assent and freely debated theological positions. To a particular proposition a note was assigned; this would be one out of many such notes, each indicating a degree of certitude or probability that theologians might assign to a teaching (e.g., *De Fide Definita*) or the degree of rejection they thought it deserved (e.g., *Heretica*). By the mid-twentieth century an elaborate system of such notes had resulted for the certification of doctrine and theology. But by that time as well the system in question was being subjected to severe criticism. It was regarded as being misleading by giving the impression that faith is primarily and essentially an assent to propositions. Frequently as well a theological note was established for a thesis by recourse to texts that were interpreted without an understanding of their biblical, patristic, or conciliar context. Finally, theological notes were judged as attributing more importance to the authority proposing a teaching than to the teaching that was being proposed.

For its part the Second Vatican Council introduced correctives when it described faith (*Dei Verbum* 5) as the free commitment of one's whole self to God revealing as well as free assent to the revelation divinely given. The emphasis was on faith as a personal relationship, a free relating of the whole person to God. What is more, the council distinguished between Catholic faith and the way or type of language in which it is expressed (*Unitatis redintegratio* 6; *Gaudium et spes* 62). Finally it spoke of an order or hierarchy in the truths of Catholic teaching. The reason given for that order or hierarchy is the diversity in the relationship those truths have to the foundation of Christian faith. It then went on to indicate what it seems to have thought that foundation includes; it spoke of faith in the true God and in the Incarnation of God's Son, who is our Redeemer and Lord (*Unitatis redintegratio* 11, 12).

Thus Vatican II encouraged Catholic theologians to search for other criteria (in addition to extrinsic authority) in the light of which doctrinal priorities might be assigned. Various ways of doing theology have over the centuries manifested how such criteria work. Lutherans with their *pro-nobis* concern have an existential order of priorities in their theology; Thomists look to the ontological, the *priora*

quoad se, in an ordering that is sapiential. Kerygmatic theology stressed the story or narrative of God's great deeds; liturgical theology does the same with worship as a source; liberation theology emphasizes social action on behalf of the poor. It is very difficult to say why at a particular time one criterion emerges and another recedes. It does seem however that in certain periods some doctrines lie fallow and others come to the fore in the church.

To the question posed as a theme for this workshop (Theological Notes or Hierarchy of Truths?) Dulles replied by asking another question: "Why not both?" He regards them as complementary. It is still important: a) to be aware of the formal authority with which a teaching is presented for acceptance; b) to determine the intrinsic nexus that teaching has with the central Christian message; and c) to relate it as well to the way believers here and now respond to the Gospel. Therefore not theological notes to the exclusion of hierarchy of truths or *vice versa*; but rather both.

Robert Jenson began his presentation by saying that the phrase "theological notes" is not in common use by Lutherans, but that they too, willy-nilly, have the practice. Indeed, the assigning of notes appears to be intrinsic to the theological enterprise, which is itself the first decisive point.

A first difficulty about theological notes is that they specify degrees of *assent to propositions*. It is the circumstance that faith is a personal relationship—a position which Jenson shares with Dulles—that has made the role of propositions in faith problematic. But a Lord about whom no propositions could be asserted would be a Lord Jenson would flee as from Satan himself. Propositions are needed to identify the one in whom we trust and to whom we pray. Hegel was right: to an unidentified person I can relate only as to slave or master. The classical theology of the Reformation rightly analyzed faith as *notitia*, *assentia* and *fiducia*.

A second problem is that theological notes specify *different degrees* of assent. If our assent is to God, why should we not demand full assent in all cases? In general, the church lacks a satisfactory account of its inevitable practice. Jenson does not think the idea of an "hierarchy of truths," if the phrase is taken in any but the most general sense, well fits the character of theology. Christian truth can be discerned as a coherent whole, but not as a deductive system with identifiable axioms. Precisely theological notes' messiness is appropriate to the historical determination of Christian truth's coherence.

But while the general practice of theological notes is shared by Reformation theology, the actual system recently in use by Roman Catholic theology is harder to justify. Specifically the distinction between propositions that are irreformable and those which are not is dubious. It may be agreed that the church is indefectible; that it has and must have identifiable offices for ministering to this indefectibility; and that there are propositions (e.g., those of Chalcedon about Christ) that participate in this indefectibility, which once they have been asserted cannot be denied without denying the gospel. But it does not follow that theologians can sort through the church's teaching, labelling each proposition either reformable or irreformable. Deduction from irreformable propositions is not sufficient warranty to make the derived propositions irreformable. Nor, in the judgment of the Reformation, can we determine what is irreformable by juridical standards.

Jenson concluded by proposing the starting point of a theological explanation to cover both theological notes' general inevitability and the unsatisfactory character of the actual system recently in Roman Catholic use. The gospel is a missionary message. Therefore Christian teaching about God, the human situation, and the world is always interpretation of antecedent interpretation. And therefore Christian teaching is contingently determined. A system does arise in the course of the gospel's history. But this system does not simply unfold; it is actually being decided in the course of the church's life.

Each of the presenters then replied to the other. Dulles said Jenson and he agreed both on the primacy of the personal and on the inseparability of the personal and propositional in faith. He thinks that faith involves more imagination and perception than affirmation. He has some hesitation with Jenson's stance as to the identification of people by propositions. He shares Jenson's difficulty with the council's use of *hierarchy* instead of *hierarchies* of truth but would insist that systems fall short of expressing the full reality of faith. He noted that Jenson seems to agree that some propositions presented in the church's teaching cannot be reversed. As for Jenson's caution regarding recourse to the juridical in this context, he himself would think that denial of some propositions might have juridical sanctions as a result; namely, adverse implications regarding celebration and reception of the sacraments.

Jenson concentrated his reply on the role of propositions in faith and what he said earlier about propositions as being needed to identify persons. He again had recourse to Hegel and said he thought the latter was right in saying that in knowing I objectify and make you my object. This I do through propositions that identify you as distinct from me. I do so unavoidably. Still conversation can be freeing; it is so when each of the two participants allows himself or herself to be an *it* for the other. Free assent in propositional form is needed for identifying in whom I place my trust and to whom I relate as well as pray when I believe in faith.

There followed a period with questions from the floor. Only a few can be summarized here.

Peter Chirico of St. Patrick's Seminary, Menlo Park, said he was uneasy about recourse to the distinction between reformable and irreformable teaching and wondered whether one should not say why a teaching was irreformable. He thought the reason was not juridical but that it had to do with universality: a teaching is irreformable because it is or ought to be an aspect of faith everywhere. Jenson said this was part of his point; he regards the distinction in question as inappropriate for the structuring of theological notes. Dulles said that in a sense any truth is of its nature universal but irreformability refers to the certitude with which I can affirm this or that teaching. James Buckley of Loyola-Baltimore asked why, to use Jenson's language, there is need for an office to minister to the indefectibility of the church. Dulles said that it is for the sake of proclamation, which needs to be heard and must come through some office. Jenson said there is an intrinsic relation between the unity of the church and the assent of its members to its tradition. Church unity calls for this office.

Distinguishing between the formal certainty of truth and its content as well as ordering, William Henn of the Washington Theological Union asked whether it

is appropriate for Christian theologians to take an epistemological stance. Dulles replied that the truth of Christian revelation is *veritas salutaris*, a truth that has an intrinsic dynamism. Recognizing this involves a resurgence of a biblical notion of truth as something that happens. In answer to the question, this should be kept in mind. Jenson answered the question: "Yes." Then he added that he liked Dulles' description of *veritas salutaris* but noted that truth does the saving and that Luther had called this *assertiones*.

Henn then asked how much assent is enough and how one can differentiate between what we must accept and what we may refrain from accepting. Jenson said that juridical criteria should not be decisive. In the case of a church that insists on a teaching of which another church disapproves there may be a possibility of their living in closer unity with the objecting church expressing its disapproval without enforcing same. In the present ecumenical situation something has to happen. Maybe what is needed is a gift of grace to God's church to discern where it must stand firm and where there can be real unity among partner churches where one objects to another's teaching on a particular point without letting it lead to a split in the unity. Dulles said he had some years earlier proposed lifting some anathemas. Now not sure whether it was a practical proposal, he nevertheless wanted very much to have people begin to distinguish in a dogma between believed truth and the canonical effects of the non-acceptance of that dogma. Maybe there should be some discernment with regard to enforcement. *Perhaps, e.g.,* acceptance of the Assumption should not be made a condition for reunion, full communion. *Perhaps!* But one must also weight very carefully the effects of such a policy and the immense shock and scandal it might occasion for many.

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