

THE CHURCH'S TEACHING MISSION AS A SOURCE FOR THEOLOGY

This workshop showed how theology arises from processes inherent in first-century Christian *paideia* and also in the contemporary catechumenate.

The major presentation by Marianne Sawicki was set into the context of John Meier's opening plenary address and the discussion which he provoked, at two points. First: Meier's assertion that the total reality of the Jesus of the first century is no longer accessible to us by scholarly means had evoked a proposal from the floor that, since there are other means of access to Jesus and other mediations of his reality besides historical-critical study of the Gospels, then theology must be a bringing of all these mediations into dialogue. Theology is about opening up and certifying access to Jesus. Second: if, as Meier showed, Juan Luis Segundo and Jon Sobrino ignore "the facts" about Jesus and remake the Jesus figure to serve community needs, then they are doing no more than following a precedent set by the gospel writers themselves. Mark's and Matthew's constructive theological work included revising the received historical Jesus material to fit the needs of their communities.

Chief among those needs was the need to teach. The "teaching" which one finds in the New Testament is not the conveying of "data." Teaching is not *ex post facto*; teaching actually constitutes data such as "resurrection" and "salvation." Research into Christian Origins has shown that it is impossible to detect a point at which the so-called data of revelation leave off and constructive theological work begins, for what the texts at first present as data invariably turn out to be the artifacts of reflection or proclamation. The "Big Bang" of God's original salvific act is itself a construct.

This is apparent in the contemporary discussion of theological method. There is growing consensus that theology is the ongoing reflective coordination of the tentative results of several cooperative programs of inquiry: investigation of the tradition, investigation of the criteria for true assertions in our own historical situation, and investigation of the relation between assertions and actions. These inquiries are at work in the on-going projects of contemporary foundational and constructive theology.

However, Sawicki proposed that they also account for the way in which theological work actually has been carried out from the dawn of Christianity. In the late first century, the third and fourth Christian generations were working theologically in the same three dimensions. First, they were investigating their memories and traditions. Second, they were observing certain rules in making assertions about Jesus and about the lives of their communities. These are of two kinds, one explicit and the other implicit. The explicit rules in many of the churches were

those of Hellenistic rhetoric and pedagogy. The implicit rules for assertions about Jesus took shape in those communities which had come to realize that Jesus is "risen." A risen person is one who keeps on talking after death. Therefore these churches had prophets who not only repeated the remembered sayings of Jesus, but also spoke new words for Jesus in the power of the Spirit. Third, late-first-century Christians acted according to their beliefs, but they also believed according to their actions, gleaning knowledge of God's ways from their experiences in living the common life.

Sawicki showed how in the first century the teaching praxis shaped the emerging understanding of the nature and being of Jesus Christ. Although one cannot reach back (historically) beyond the earliest Christian teaching to grasp him, one can learn the ways in which the early Christian generations knew him. To know Jesus, one must know how to know Jesus—a pedagogical problem. The canonical Gospels are designed to deliver the latter kind of knowledge as the gateway to the former. But they miss the gateway who demand that the texts deliver data about "the historical Jesus" and who therefore discard, as "non-data," those pedagogical, literary, or paranetic constructions of the generations that stand historically between Jesus and the gospel texts.

By way of illustration, Sawicki showed how a certain Jesus saying was reworked under the influence of the teaching praxis of several communities. The texts included GThom 22, "These infants being suckled are like those who enter the kingdom"; Mk 10:15, "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it"; and Jn 3:3, "Unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God." In the first fifty years after Calvary, God's kingdom was progressively redefined as *paideia*, and access to it became more and more difficult, so that eventually one needed to be taught in order to enter. The verb *gennaō* in Jn 3, usually translated as "to bear or beget," can also mean to influence as a teacher influences. In that light, the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus is seen to be a dialogue between teachers about the efficacy of a new kind of teaching.

Sawicki suggested that the RCIA is redefining both the place of theology in the church and the self-understanding of the theologian. Because initiation is never complete, theological reflection is seen to be a component of the ongoing, deepening initiation of every Christian. For catechumens and for those who work with them, theology appears in its essence as one of the motors of initiation into Jesus Christ, into the community that knows his Lordship, into eucharistic life, and into a future identified with the discernment of the reign of God. The community competent to initiate is one which is healthy and active, one which knows the Lord, one which knows itself to be commissioned to initiate (Mt 28:18-20), and one which knows how to know the Lord.

Sawicki said that the question of Christian Origins should be reconstrued by displacing the "Big Bang" from the Incarnation or the Resurrection and repositioning it at the Matthean Great Commission. The origin of Christian teaching is identical with the origin of Christian initiation (or baptism); and that is the origin of Christianity itself. Or, to look at things another way, the beginning of Christian faith in the life of an individual is quite similar to the beginning of the Lordship of Jesus in the life of the Christian churches. In both cases, no starting point is

perceptible, but the nurturance provided by a particular way of teaching is of foundational and definitive importance. Theology finds its identity and its place in the life of the church when it accesses this know-how by repossessing its hereditary function of teaching—teaching which conditions the possibility of Christian Origin.

Clarisse Croteau-Chonka responded by noting that the Big Bang theory no longer is operative in astrophysics. Rather than a single compact dense point of origin, physicists envision a boundary-less continuity in the universe. By analogy, Roman Catholic theology should seek its own source not in a distant point of sudden origin, but in a continuously renewed examination of Christianity's continual arising from a distinctive kind of teaching and learning. Theology, like physics, is working toward its own Unified Theory. Correlational or "two source" methods, and more recently the reflective methods which seek to coordinate the investigation of the past, of plausibility structures, and of praxis, all are moving toward that kind of theory.

While Croteau-Chonka affirmed that teaching is at the source of Christianity, she expanded the vision to include the learning process as well as the teaching process. For Croteau-Chonka, the three activities of teaching are: (1) information, the process through which one reconstructs the past, understood as "data"; this is the core of teaching, the engagement with transmission; (2) formation, the component of teaching that is engaged with the development of appropriate behaviors and lifestyles; (3) reformation, or teaching that is engaged with people's commitment level, and has to do with the emotional impact of formation and information. These three together constitute a fourth activity, transformation. In the words of the catechism, to know, love, and serve God brings about a condition of being happy with God. In order to understand the transformation which unfolds out of the teaching/learning process, it is not enough to look at the information function. Questions of behavior and commitment also must be considered.

Croteau-Chonka proposed that the learning process also has a threefold reflective structure that corresponds with the three teaching activities: (1) discovery, as a result of informational teaching; (2) discipline, as a personal response to experience; (3) recognition, because of being or curiosity. These three are reflectively involved with one another. Training, study, and piety bring about a condition of receptivity for God. This receptivity may be termed a *habitus*, that is, not just an activity but also an attitude.

Croteau-Chonka suggested that the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, while an evocative model, actually was flawed in current practice. In most catechumenes in her experience, the teaching activities of formation and information are neglected while emphasis is placed upon the reformation function, that is, the attempt to induce emotional response and personal decision. Therefore, transformation does not occur.

During discussion, the question was raised whether one could plausibly envision all Christians engaged in the learning processes at all times. If so, it becomes difficult to identify a special role for the Christian teacher—or theologian.

MARIANNE SAWICKI
Lexington Theological Seminary