

Appendix A

ADDRESS OF WELCOME

Thank you for this kind introduction. I am delighted to welcome you to St. Louis, a city which has known significant moments within the history of Catholic theology in the United States.

Usually on an occasion like this the bishop of the local church speaks of the importance of theology, the work of your society, or the proud story written by the church in his city. Here he might also invite you to visit the Arch, the cathedral mosaics, and Anheiser-Busch. The remarks are often brief, predictable essays in good will and good fellowship, expected, welcomed, and forgotten.

Because of the present situation in the church in this country, however, I should like to depart from that format. There is one issue I want to address, one which I think demands to be addressed. With your indulgence I shall use these minutes to reflect upon it.

Very bluntly: I think the church in the United States suffers from too many anxious, warning voices that would divide the bishops against theologians. There are too many sweeping accusations leveled at the theological soundness and creedal fidelity of the theologians. There are too many vague but insistent attacks, telling bishops that the theologians will supplant them in their teaching office or ignore their pastoral guidance or lead the people of God into antagonism, division, and virtual schism.

Usually these charges are as sweeping as they are indistinct. It is breathtaking to read, for example, that sundry modern theologians undermine the authentic demands of Catholic orthodoxy by their disbelief in the resurrection or that modernist theologians are winning the day. The theologians are not named, their works are not cited, the offending passages are not quoted. Nothing makes concrete the accusations dropped so casually about this denial of Catholic faith by those dedicated to reflect upon it. To assess these warnings and general threats is like attempting to pin down allegations that flourished and destroyed so many during the McCarthy period.

Even more intimidating are the warnings that theologians as a group either directly or indirectly are assuming the position of the magisterium. Bishops are urged to take care lest their own teaching function be undermined or subsumed by theologians who would remove from the episcopal office its teaching authority and reduce it to coordinating pastoral activities.

I want to say very clearly that this has not been our experience in the United States. Whatever one may say about this or that theologian or this or that bishop, our experience in this country in general has not been one either of heterodoxy or of effective schism. On the contrary, theologians have given great emphasis to

cooperation with bishops in the doctrinal and in the more obviously pastoral ministries of the church.

Repeatedly the Catholic Theological Society of America has invited the bishops to explore with theologians ways in which "episcopal responsibility and academic competence can best work in harmony, for the enrichment of both theological inquiry, teaching and publication, and effective pastoral leadership."¹ Bishop after bishop could tell of the collaboration he has received from men and women theologians as members of diocesan theological boards, faculty for his seminary, conciliar and curial experts, instructors in continuing education of the clergy and religious, and those involved in adult education, advisers and even vicars for theological affairs, and as dogmatic, scriptural, or moral consultants—to say nothing of their work in the theological instruction and research that goes on in his diocese, the work of mediating between the Gospel and national culture to which the Second Vatican Council invited theologians (*Gaudium et Spes*, 44, 62).

To speak of the American episcopate in general, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops numbers consulting theologians on almost all of its staff, distinguished men and women who have given long hours freely and willingly to enhance the effectiveness of the pastoral leadership of the bishops of the United States. The Committee on Doctrine alone counts some fifteen theologians assisting the major committee and its various subcommittees. The recent and influential pastoral letters on peace and the American economy would have been impossible without the dedicated and exacting work of the many theologians associated with the committees responsible for drafting these documents.

Undoubtedly there are moments of tension between a bishop and a theologian, sometimes healthy, sometimes detrimental. But this has always been true of the church. History, even recent history, demonstrates that similar tensions can exist together with great mutual good will even between bishop and bishop—as the recent public controversy about the AIDS document proved once more. Such tensions are part of life and often make for growth. In any event, tensions, and even serious problems on occasion, constitute an inevitable dimension of the human element in the church.

But it is one thing to experience and recognize inevitable tensions and problems. It is quite another thing to stigmatize theologians as a group who menace the episcopal office or sound belief.

The effect of such wanton accusations upon theologians has been a growing fear. These attacks themselves come out of fear and they engender an atmosphere of greater fear. A climate of suspicion so harmful to the church as a whole is fed by casual remarks about the fidelity of others, by ungrounded accusations and by warnings whose urgency is sometimes, perhaps often, in inverse proportion to their authors' command of hard facts. Singular problems are exaggerated into symptoms of the pathological state of theology in general. All of this threatens to form a cloud of fear that would poison the air in which we do our work.

In retrospect, perhaps there was something of this communicated by the recent meeting between the American archbishops and the Holy See. A recent article in

¹So said a resolution in your 1988 convention in Toronto regarding cooperation between bishops and theologians, *CTSA Proceedings* 43 (June 15-18, 1988) 196.

Commonweal noted the warnings about theologians during that meeting and commented that "no one came to the defense of theologians in general." The article continued, "In the mind of theologians, the Rome meeting can only be the latest Vatican and episcopal vote of no confidence in their scholarship."²

This impression, if given, is false. The fact is that the discussion of last March became quickly focused on general problems of culture, the theme of the meeting. I suspect that the reason no one pursued this issue in defense of the theologians in the United States is that the soundness of our relationship with you seemed so obvious, so taken for granted, so unquestionable among us.

For example, the Catholic bishops have recently established, with the Joint Committee of Catholic Learned Societies and Scholars, a commission of bishops and scholars, in an effort to promote regional colloquiums that bring bishops and scholars together. Over the past three years, the bishops either in committee or in full assembly have been working on a document whose origins lie with a joint committee of the CTSA and the Canon Law Society of America, "Doctrinal Responsibilities." The whole purpose of this document is to foster collaboration and to provide a patterned approach to resolve any misunderstandings that will arise. This document will be given final consideration at the Seton Hall meeting of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. When I spoke to the conference of bishops last November, I said, "Within a context of *developing cooperation among bishops and theologians and recognizing both the teaching authority of bishops and the indispensable service of theologians*, this document offers responsible ways for handling misunderstandings, while preserving the rights and responsibilities of all parties concerned."³ If any impression was taken from the Roman meeting of general distrust or suspicion, then let me say as clearly as possible that such an impression would be wide of the mark. The real situation, in the experience of the vast majority of the bishops, is as I described it last November: one of a healthy, sound, "developing cooperation."

I stress this fact because I think there is too much fear in the church today. Nameless accusations and ungrounded suspicions threaten to divide bishops from theologians and theologians from bishops, debilitating our attempts to support one another in our specific ministries for the good of the church. This climate of fear could come to stifle our collaborative initiatives under a pall of anxiety that will not dissipate—unless we determine that we have had enough of it. I believe we have. American bishops in general further recognize the truth of your society's statement of last year concerning the growing urgency of "the problems confronting theologians as they seek to pursue appropriate Catholic theological inquiry."⁴

And so, this evening I stress how imperative it is for you to realize that you have the strong and grateful support of us bishops for your work in dealing with problems of enormous complexity and difficulty—problems which bear crucially upon the belief and the practice of the church. You have assisted us so continually and in so many ways over the years. You must be able to count on our understand-

²Joseph McNeal, "Audition for Tragedy," *Commonweal* 116/8 (April 21, 1989) 229-30.

³*Origins* 18/27 (November 25, 1988) 384; italics added.

⁴*CTSA Proceedings* 43, 186.

ing, support, and encouragement for your own inquiry, debates, research, and explorations. Pope John Paul II has taught that theologians "perform an inestimable service to the church," and during his 1987 visit to this country he explicitly expressed his "support for the humble, generous, and patient work of theological research and education."⁵ I am sure I speak with my brother bishops in offering you support, conscious as we are of the debt in which the whole church stands for your labors—and also keenly aware of the attacks to which you are exposed and the efforts being made to divide theologians from bishops and bishops from theologians.

We must not let these attacks destroy the *communio* in which we live nor allow ungrounded and ungovernable suspicions to descend like a fog over the church in the United States. In spite of all this negativity and prophecies of gloom, we together must "make every effort to preserve the unity which has the Spirit as its origin and peace as its binding force" (Eph. 4:3). In this way, and only in this way, can we build up the church together in love and theological wisdom for the glory of God.

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⁵John Paul II to the leadership of Catholic higher education, Xavier University, September 12, 1987, as in *Unity in the Work of Service* (Washington DC: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1987) 73-74.