

BOOK DISCUSSION

Franz Josef van Breeck, *God Encountered: A Contemporary Catholic Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, *Understanding the Catholic Faith*

Robert Imbelli of Boston College convened and moderated the workshop which discussed the first volume of the important new Catholic systematic theology, *God Encountered*, being written by Frans Jozef van Breeck, S.J., of Loyola University of Chicago. This volume entitled *Understanding the Christian Faith*, the first of three volumes due to appear during the next few years, has already been recognized as a major and significant contribution to Catholic theology. Imbelli hailed it as a "Babette's Feast" of a book.

Distinctive to van Breeck's approach is the identification of liturgy as the privileged source of the theological enterprise, the place of encounter with God through the Risen Lord, Jesus Christ. Hence worship or cult is the matrix of creed and conduct; but these, in turn, verify the authenticity of the witness offered by believers.

Professor Lawrence Cunningham of the Department of Theology of the University of Notre Dame initiated the discussion with some appreciative comments. He remarked upon the "classic" nature of van Breeck's approach to the theological task as "faith seeking understanding," a faith which received concrete expression in the community's worship. Moreover, Cunningham suggested that beginning with the de facto worshipping community, in addition to its theological strengths, was also a fine pedagogical move: in effect inviting students to "look and see." By contrast, a more "transcendental" approach (in the Rahnerian mode) offers a starting point too abstract and analytical for most undergraduates.

Cunningham adverted to the fact that van Breeck's discussion of the centrality of liturgy for Christian experience and reflection begins with an extended discussion of Pliny's famous letter to Trajan. He thought it might have been better to discuss directly the New Testament evidence, which shows that, within a generation of Jesus, Christians affirmed a christology high enough to justify cult.

Professor Margaret Mary Kelleher of the Department of Religion and Religious Education of the Catholic University of America raised a number of issues, both appreciative and critical. She wondered whether the explicit focus on resurrection threatened to leave the memory of cross and suffering in the shadows. She also asked whether the treatment of liturgy risked abstracting a "pure essence" from the concrete experience of liturgy and its particular social embodiments. Methodologically, she found that a hermeneutics of trust in "the great tradition" did not sufficiently take into account the valid need for a hermeneutics of suspicion, since every tradition bears elements of the inauthentic. In particular

she discerned a lack of explicit dialogue with issues raised by the feminist critique of theology and liturgy.

In his response to these observations, van Beeck conceded the importance and validity of a number of them; but to adhere to them would, in effect, have meant a different book from the one he felt compelled to write. Thus, the integrity of the paschal mystery is to be honored; but the centrality of resurrection and the living presence of the Lord is intrinsic to his vision of Catholic faith and liturgy, and, hence, of theology. Further, faith in the Lord's presence undergirds a fundamental hermeneutics of trust in the tradition, one that is, however, not uncritical.

In the course of the general discussion that followed, a number of insightful comments were made. One participant remarked that van Beeck, unlike "correlationists" who seem to put more stress on a hermeneutics of suspicion, proceeds more by "asymmetry," in which the Christian tradition is accorded a clear primacy. This option entails significant (and positive) consequences for teaching. Another commented upon the influence of the Epistle to the Hebrews upon van Beeck's sense of the church's liturgy. If asked, "whose worship is being discussed," the response, in the first instance, is: "Christ's!"

The session concluded with a short presentation by van Beeck by way of anticipation of volume two. In it he outlined his approach to "fundamental theology." In contrast to some fundamental theologians whose methodological stance abstracts from ecclesial commitments; van Beeck's approach favors an ecclesial and historical bias and finds that the warrant for fundamental theology comes from the church's creed itself. He holds that a "separate" fundamental theology tends to make the human spirit an independent tribunal which, in effect, ratifies the gap between religion and culture, reinforcing the separation between God and the world. Van Beeck's view is that positive faith is needed before critical reason; that appreciative participation must precede criticism. With this foretaste of volume two a most stimulating and convivial symposium came to a close.

ROBERT P. IMBELL
Boston College