

RESPONSE TO JOHN E. THIEL

We owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Thiel for providing an intellectually stimulating beginning for our work together during this conference. He has offered us a telling criticism of theories of tradition which adopt a stance of "naive or uncritical retrospection in which the observer flees the conditions of historicity for the sake of a divine, though only imagined, perspective." He has given us much to consider with his thoughtful exposition of an alternative, retrospective conception of tradition which describes more clearly the process by which the community of Catholic believers configures tradition standing squarely in a particular time, in a particular place, and in a particular set of circumstances.

I am going to pay Dr. Thiel the high compliment of taking his work very seriously, pressing it at a few points which I think would benefit from further discussion. I have three points which I will state briefly as indications of matters that we might want to discuss together during the next three days. First, I will raise a disturbing question about continuity in error or evil as an aspect of the church's experience. Second, I will press the question of the role of ordinary believers in the formation of tradition. And third, since I am a moral theologian, I will draw our attention briefly to some moral virtues central to the vocation of theologians as we strive to sustain and to enrich the tradition.

In his opening remarks Dr. Thiel acknowledged that when we speak of the development of doctrine, the word "development" may be a euphemism for "change." I want to probe a bit further and suggest that both "development" and "change" may be euphemisms for the repudiation of error. Sometimes the church comes to understand that a belief or norm proclaimed by an earlier generation was, from perspective of a later generation, wrong or even pernicious. Some of those beliefs and norms—now recognized as erroneous—served, in their own time, to legitimate the oppression, persecution, torture or murder of others. In other words, some long established practices of the church are actually enduring patterns of sin in our collective life.

Dr. Thiel challenges us to come to a deeper understanding of the process by which the church recognizes its own long-standing evils, although he does not use the word "error" in this paper. A willingness to admit long-standing error seems, to me, necessary for what Dr. Thiel has called "dramatic development." He describes "dramatic development" as the claim by "a smaller number of the faithful" that "a particular belief, doctrine, or practice is developing in such a way that its current authority as authentic teaching will be lost at some later moment in the life of the church."

Dr. Thiel's discussion of dramatic development seems to me to be problematic in two ways. First, he speaks of a doctrine or practice that is in the

process of losing its character as an "authentic teaching."¹ This wording indicates that the teaching was authentic—a correct reflection of God's saving truth—for some period, but now is coming to be viewed as no longer adequate. This description does not acknowledge that some beliefs were never saving truths, although they were accepted as the genuine teaching of the church for a significant period of the church's history. For example, in 1442, Pope Eugenius IV, acting with the clear approbation of the ecumenical Council of Florence, declared that the church

firmly believes, professes, and preaches that all those who are outside the catholic church, not only pagans but also Jews or heretics and schismatics, cannot share in eternal life and will go into the everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels, unless they are joined to the catholic church before the end of their lives.²

To my mind, the teaching that those who die as faithful Jews are destined for hell is not a teaching that is properly described as one that has "lost" its former authenticity. It *never was* an authentic expression of God's saving will for humankind. Moreover, I would remind us that only four decades after this papal bull, the Spanish Inquisition was reinstated with the approval of the Pope. Teachings such as this one from the Council of Florence, held as authoritative by many generations of believers, have had terrible human consequences.³

I am concerned that Dr. Thiel has given us an insufficient criterion for determining when a teaching under attack as nonauthentic should be reformed. He tells us "only time will tell whether any claim for dramatic development . . . will prove true or not." Despite our shared belief that the Spirit remains with the

¹During the discussion at the convention, Dr. Thiel clarified his use of the word "authentic" in his discussion of dramatic development. Thiel uses "authentic" here in a juridical sense. Hence, an authentic teaching is one that is clearly proclaimed by the hierarchical magisterium. My criticism is not pertinent given his juridical use of "authentic teaching." My remarks reflect my reading of the term "authentic" in its more general meaning as "genuine" or "true." The misunderstanding between Thiel and me reflects the ambiguity of the Roman Catholic, juridical term, an "authentic teaching."

²"Bull of Union with the Copts, Session 11 (4 February 1442)" in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1: *Nicaea I to Lateran V*, ed. Norman Tanner (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press and Sheed & Ward: 1990) 578.

³The relationship between the teaching that Jews (as those who remain outside the church) cannot be saved and the horrors of the Spanish Inquisition is much more complex than this brief allusion can adequately capture. A primary target of the Spanish Inquisition was not Jews, but rather converts from Judaism to Roman Catholicism who were suspected of having lapsed from Catholicism as the true faith. Many of these conversions from Judaism to Catholicism had, in turn, occurred under severe governmental and social coercion. A thorough discussion of the relationship between the Spanish Inquisition and Roman Catholic Church teachings and practices with regard to the Jews is far beyond the scope of this response.

church guiding its destiny throughout history, we cannot settle for a view of church history in which "tomorrow's" understanding of belief, doctrine, and practice will always be superior to "today's." So one urgent question before us in this conference is what criteria allow us to discern whether new trends in theology or church practice represent a form of authentic development of doctrine that ought to be embraced for the good of the whole church.

In another section of this rich paper, Dr. Thiel speaks of the process of tradition as "faith's yearning for its communal heritage." I want to ask more specifically, *whose* yearnings of faith are reflected in what we normally think of as tradition. This question relates to something that disturbed me during repeated readings of Dr. Thiel's essay. His paper has a heavily abstract tone. While metaphors of vision and perspective are central to this paper, the observer or observers surveying the scope of church history are curiously shadowy figures. I contend that, in his retrospective conception of tradition, Thiel has offered us the generic believer⁴ looking backward across the span of Christian history.

I assert that we need to ask ourselves more carefully who specifically is permitted to participate in the process of discerning the tradition. Frequently, we attempt to answer the question of what "the tradition" teaches on a specific theological issue by surveying the statements of church councils, popes, and famous theologians. Thus it is not surprising or too unusual that Thiel's examples are the Council of Nicea and Trent or Thomas Aquinas and Peter Olivi. Too often, the material for an analysis of tradition is drawn from the writings of educated males, in our church until very recently, educated clerics. Nearly all women and most men—men lacking in formal theological education—have rarely had the opportunities to be active participants at the center of the process of defining the tradition. In this conference, I propose that we need to give closer attention to the role of ordinary believers, especially those without formal education and others with less social power, in the determination of authentic tradition.

Jaroslav Pelikan, in a marvelous small book titled *The Vindication of Tradition*, criticizes the great historian Adolph van Harnack for writing a history of the church "without referring very often to how the church had prayed, sung, and celebrated."⁵ An adequate view of the development of doctrine would pay close attention to how doctrine is shaped by the prayers, the celebrations, and the daily embodiment of the faith in the lives of those ordinary believers who make up Thiel's regional church. Such careful attention to the daily lives of faithful Christians is consistent with Thiel's insistence that "the faith even of the whole

⁴This phrase was suggested to me as a variation on philosopher Seyla Benhabib's "the generalized other." "The Generalized and the Concrete Other" in *Feminism: A Critique*, ed. Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) 77-95.

⁵Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984) 17.

church always is experienced in a determinate way with the passing of each moment.”

As a society of theologians with different forms of expertise, we jointly could pursue effectively the work of returning the whole community of believers to the center of the process of the development of doctrine. In particular, we need the help of the historians among us who are pursuing social histories of the church in which the experiences and practices of diverse, ordinary believers are understood as crucial to an adequate description of the life of the church in past centuries. Members of the CTSA should work together to recover and reinterpret the faith experiences of those generations of “ordinary” women and men who have handed on the faith throughout the centuries.

Tradition is a form of continuity wrested from history for each new generation of believers. The process of discerning the living tradition is not always a smooth one; often it is hotly contested by believers for whom the stakes are high—even salvation itself. Therefore, as an ethicist, I suggest that we ought to consider those virtues that theologians need as we play our limited role in this struggle of giving voice to the living tradition of the Holy Catholic Church. In closing, I will mention four virtues briefly: honesty, prudence, collegial correction, and hope.

Truthfulness is a central virtue for a theologian. We are called to express the truth of our community’s encounter with God as frankly and fully as we can. This is an era in which truthfulness is not an easy virtue, because the penalties for expressing honestly held views that are threatening to officials in the Vatican are (again) severe. How many of us could say something similar to Bernard Haring’s statement about his work before Vatican II?

I wrote nothing in *The Law of Christ* that I believed to be false. But, on the other hand, I passed over in silence many points that I thought were true, because they would have been just too much to ask of influential church leaders. An unconscious self-censorship also played a role here. I did not yet have the courage to look all these questions in the eye and give them an unflinching answer.⁶

If as forthright and courageous a thinker as Haring could probe his conscience in such a manner, all of us here could benefit from interrogating ourselves. What are the theological questions from which we draw back flinching? What are the truths we knowingly pass over in silence?

Theologians are called to an unflinching honesty. We must be unflinching particularly in self-criticism of our work. For example, many members of the Catholic Theological Society of America need to examine our work taking into account the criticism made by our more conservative colleagues. Have we succumbed to a fascination with the latest social and intellectual fashions—to the

⁶Bernard Haring, *My Hope for the Church: Critical Encouragement for the Twenty-First Century* (Liguori MO: Liguori/Triumph, 1999) 12-13.

detriment of our theological work? The temptation to embrace whatever intellectual theory is *au courant* in the academy is made the more enticing by the professional rewards available for those of us who can manipulate in dazzling ways the currently fashionable scholarly jargon. We need to strive to understand the shortcomings of the philosophic and cultural systems that we embrace, as well as their strengths. We need constantly to remember that no theological formulation of ours fully embraces the mystery of salvation toward which the Spirit is leading us.

Theology is a corporate enterprise. It requires that we respond honestly and constructively to work of others. However, under the current conditions, I would suggest that we have become reluctant to respond honestly to the work of colleagues, if we feel that our responses might be used to stigmatize the colleague as unorthodox. This is an unhealthy state of affairs, for which we are not responsible, but to which we must respond creatively.

This situation requires the interplay of two virtues: prudence and, what I will call collegial correction. We need to find ways to press serious scholarly disagreements that have implications for sound doctrine in a way that shows respect for the positive contributions of the theologian with whom we disagree. We need to do what my response to this talk gives me little opportunity to do, to make plain our respect for the strengths of a colleague's work, while also forthrightly expressing our concerns about what, from our perspectives, may be potentially undesirable implications contained in that work.

In the present situation in which serious penalties are imposed upon certain theologians whose work is deemed dangerous by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, we must make prudential judgments about how we might make criticisms of one another's work. We will have to judge whether in certain cases direct public criticism is likely to provoke negative consequences—life-diminishing consequences with which we cannot allow ourselves to be complicit.

Are there ways to discuss faith and morals that are reasonably accessible to colleagues in theology, but less public? Could we accomplish important work in theology on carefully moderated computer listservs, for example? Would such technology allow us to control the circle of conversation partners—creating a space which is both global and restricted to a circle of professional theologians? Concerns such as these are a part of what it means to struggle as theologians to contribute to the development of doctrine in the twenty-first century—guided by the Spirit who remains with us, but also very much part of a sinful church.

The close of the twentieth century is a disheartening moment in the history of the Catholic church. Groups of earnest believers with fundamentally differing visions of how we ought to be church—God's sacrament for the world—are struggling fiercely over the future of the church. Some of us are afraid that the tradition, understood as the deposit of faith given by Christ to the apostles for our salvation, is in imminent danger of being tarnished or even adulterated under the influence of a global culture of self-indulgence, greed, and death. Others of

us rejoice to see the Spirit at work in the world deepening our understanding of God's saving destiny for humanity and for the Earth. But we fear that the work of the Spirit in our day is being hampered by some within the church itself. In particular, we decry the ways in which the movements of the Spirit are being impeded by those intent on maintaining structures of ecclesiastical control and domination.

The end of the twentieth century seems an ominous moment for Roman Catholic theologians. Several developments call into question our ability to explore religious truth as honestly as we can. Particularly disturbing are the severe penalties imposed by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on many theologians. Of additional concern to some of us is Rome's insistence that juridical mechanisms must be developed as a key element in the implementation of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* in the United States context. As a committee of the CTSA has pointed out, the current ordinances proposed for the implementation of *Ex Corde* "whether intentionally or not . . . would tend to reverse the current atmosphere of trust, cooperation, and mutual respect" between Catholic theologians and the hierarchy.⁷

In this chilling historical moment, hope becomes a crucial, but demanding, virtue for theologians. We must preserve a deep-down trust in the direction of the future, because it is ultimately God's future. The gathering gloom of the present moment is not the final reality; although for many of us here, it may cast a dark shadow over the remainder of our professional service to the church.

Hope is necessary for survival and for struggle. African-American Catholics, Hispanic Catholics, and others, for whom the struggle for survival and for moments of celebration is an ever-present one, may find it a bit ironic that theologians from more privileged settings now appreciate more vividly the link between hope and strength for lifelong struggles. Hope is a crucial wellspring of reliable energy—energy for the process that is tradition, that is, the perpetual communal effort to give voice to the truth of our encounter with God as a witness to those who come after us.

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⁷"*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*: Report of CTSA Committee, January 15, 1999" at <<http://carver.holycross.edu/organizations/ctsa/ExCorde.htm>> (8 June 1999).