

### MEDIEVAL THEOLOGY

- Topic: Vocation and Theology  
 Convener: Michael Gorman, The Catholic University of America  
 Moderator: David Williams, Belmont Abbey College  
 Presenters: Joan Mueller, Creighton University  
 Ralph Norman, Canterbury Christ Church University College

As has become customary for the group, the program was set on the basis of an open paper call with blind refereeing. Joan Mueller addressed the tension between vocation and authority found among early Franciscans, where a thirteenth-century women's movement flowered in the midst of rising papal power, continual feuding between communes, and the unrest of a better-educated laity. The movement was powered by what Clare of Assisi would call "the one thing necessary": the refusal to accept property with its accompanying privileges. While others, even religious persons, were plotting for money, land, and prestige, Clare's early Monastery of Poor Ladies formulated a sophisticated theology of vocation founded upon beatitudinal poverty.

The test of Clare's theology came to a head when Agnes of Prague, daughter of Bohemian King Otakar Pøemysl I, constructed a monastery and hospital and refused to endow the monastery. The Hospital of St. Francis, which Agnes had established as a charitable institution for the poor of Prague, was well endowed in order to bring stability to its ministry. Nervous about accepting an unendowed monastery of royal and noble women under Roman authority, Pope Gregory IX attempted to force Agnes to place her monastery juridically over the hospital, making her sisters heir to the royal resources of the hospital. Agnes's monastery was also to be free from any obligation for the paying of taxes and tithes.

Seeing her ability to live the essence of her Franciscan vocation slipping through her fingers, Agnes of Prague wrote to Clare for direction. Clare's response outlines her theology of vocational authority. According to Clare, one cannot go counter to one's vocational identity in an effort to be obedient. Clare distinguishes between respect and submission, and advises Agnes to be respectful, but not submissive to a papal order that would undermine her vocational path. Rather, Agnes is to follow the advice of Brother Elias, who is her true superior. Agnes conferred not only with Brother Elias but also with her brother, King Wenceslaus I. The royal Pøemyslid family understood and supported Agnes's Franciscan ambitions. Needing the support of the Kingdom of Bohemia, Gregory IX reluctantly agreed. He gave Agnes her "privilege of poverty."

This displays the tension that arises when vocational charisms encounter papal authority. Since Gregory IX's main agenda seems to have been protecting women from the dangers of poverty—pillage, rape, hunger, malnutrition—it is also a case study documenting the tension between the theologies of those called to a preferential option for the poor and those called to institutional benefaction.

Discussion of the paper turned around the contemporary implications and lessons to be drawn for those who wish to incarnate charism-focused vocations to particular forms of life into lasting structures in the world.

Ralph Norman's presentation centered around Abelard's role in setting the terms in which medieval theology understood itself. The definition of theology as faith seeking understanding, drawn from Anselm, is now so common as to be taken for granted. This is intriguing, because Anselm himself never used the word "theology" in any of his writings and was born a generation before the word came into use. It was Abelard who introduced the word to the Latin West and gave it a technical meaning. This, Norman argues, has caused some confusion for those who study medieval theology, and obscured the extent of Abelard's contribution to the discipline.

Augustine was fond of writing *crede ut intelligas*; but he also argued that reason was as important as authority when the question of who or what to believe is considered (De vera relig. xxiv, 45). Abelard also suggests as much in the *Sic et Non*. This does not make Abelard the sort of rationalist that he is sometimes suggested to be; it simply means that he recognised the problem of conflicts and contractions in the received faith. On the one hand this suggested that reason should be used to assist faith to best work out what is to be believed; on the other it meant a new openness to a mystery which is beyond understanding. This explains that sense of negative theology in Abelard's writings that fits ill with his reputation as a rationalist. He writes in the *Theologia Christiana*, "It should suffice for human reason to know that human intelligence cannot comprehend him who so far surpasses all things and completely exceeds the powers of human discussion and comprehension" (PL 178, 1124B).

After Abelard, disputation became the fundamental method pursued by medieval thinkers. So much is nothing new; but little attention has been paid by scholarship to the relationship between the method of disputation and the flowering of negative theology in the West. For just as Pseudo-Denys became one of the chief authorities, disputation became the dominant method. This led Norman to raise the following questions: does the "agnosticism" over authorities implied in disputation reflect that Christian "agnosticism" beloved by negative theologians? Can a case be made that the sense of uncertainty introduced by the uncovering of tensions/contradictions in the tradition reinforces negative theology? Might not Aquinas have felt that there was something fitting about the fact that tradition isn't neat and tidy but must be disputed because it is self-subverting, and that the simplest way of overcoming such disputes is to point towards the infinite unknowability of God? The very method of disputation would then become a form of mystical practice itself. Discussion of the presentation turned around potential linkages between Abelard and Aquinas, with particular attention to the nature of the *quaerens* involved in theology.

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