

## THEOLOGY AS CONVERSATION: *SENSUS FIDELIUM* AND DOING THEOLOGY ON/FROM THE MARGINS

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### *Introduction*

First of all, I would like to thank Brad for inviting me to be one of the panelists for this session. In the brief for the presentation Brad asked the panelists to talk about how our approach to being a theologian is challenged and informed by the *sensus fidelium* in the local and global communities. My short general response is this: *Sensus fidelium* in the local and global communities has challenged and informed me in the way I understand and do theology. I have structured the explanation for my response into three parts: (1) Sources: Theology from the Heart of the People; (2) Method: Theology as Dialogue and; (3) Vision: Theology as a Hermeneutic of Hope.

### *Sources: Theology from the Heart of the People*

When I went to the Netherlands to do my doctoral studies, I went with all the passion and idealism of a young budding theologian and put forward an ambitious topic, only to be brought down to earth by my supervisor who asked me to think if I really want to write about the topic or whether I could narrow it down. Fortunately, shortly after I arrived in Nijmegen and long before the proposal defense, I got invited to a conference in Thailand and took the opportunity to go home to the Philippines for a visit. I took the taxi from the airport. The taxi driver and I got talking during the ride and, at some point in the conversation, he shared how overseas migration has broken his marriage and family and how, despite all that had happened, he is planning to work overseas, too. The introduction of my dissertation actually begins with this story of encounter, with this taxi driver, as that conversation planted the seed for my research interest in migration.

Looking back on this experience and on my various encounters with other migrants from around the world, I believe a theology on/from the margins, challenged and informed by *sensus fidelium*, involves in some way, shape, or form—despite limitations—the stories or voices of the faithful themselves. As Ormond Rush contends:

Listening to the varied *sensus laicorum* within a local community is an essential task for a theologian. This fundamental source, capturing contemporary experiences of salvation, constitutes the lens through which the theologian, in a hermeneutical circle of inquiry, can interpret Scripture and the tradition's interpretation of God's salvific work through Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup>

Cardinal Antonio Tagle further illustrates the point in a recent speech at Catholic Theological Union when he said he has “seen many worlds,” from dehumanizing poverty, the havoc left by corruption and injustice, trafficking of women and children as slaves, and the horrible typhoons in the Philippines and Asia. “As I enter these

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<sup>1</sup> Ormond Rush, *The Eyes of Faith: The Sense of the Faithful and the Church's Reception of Revelation* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 265.

worlds,” Cardinal Tagle shared, “theology happens, theology beckons.”<sup>2</sup> Paying attention, indeed, leads to noticing; noticing leads to recognition; recognition leads to disclosure.

Doing theology that is informed by encounters with people is a recognition of the fact that theological ideas have real roots and consequences in the lives of ordinary, even illiterate Christians.<sup>3</sup> This fact has implications for our theological sources and how we engage our sources. This does not simply mean doing interviews and all forms of research that directly engage people but, more importantly, not forgetting that the texts we work with in our theologizing, whether it’s the Bible, the classics, or the work of our contemporaries, are not abstract materials but the work of real faithful people or communities in conversation with the faith of a particular people/community in a particular time and place. For those who do theology on/from the margins, where theology or power may be expressed orally or in creative, unconventional ways it also means engaging the arts or everyday forms of resistance and digging deep into popular piety as a possible theological source.<sup>4</sup>

Christians are people born into a community, that is, the family and brought into a community, that is, the church, by a God of community, that is, the Trinity. It makes sense, therefore, that theology is done in and with a community. In practical forms community involves relationships—connecting with others, learning from others, sharing with others, rejoicing with others, and struggling with others. Through community hermeneutics, we seek a growing understanding, if not agreement, on key theological issues that can help us test our theologies and our practices.<sup>5</sup> Hence, whether it is done in the comfort of our homes or offices or in the midst of the forgotten people and places in our struggling communities, the idea of theology as a conversation among God’s people across generations foregrounds the theological process.

### ***Method: Theology as Dialogue***

When I began writing my dissertation, a Dutch sociology professor asked me what I was writing on. When I said “migration” he replied with raised eyebrows, “migration? In Theology? Isn’t that under the social sciences?” His reply was one of the reasons my theological method took on an interdisciplinary character.

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<sup>2</sup> Grace Garcia, “Cardinal Tagle gets Chicago Theological Union doctorate,” <http://globalnation.inquirer.net/123591/cardinal-tagle-gets-chicago-theological-union-honorary-doctorate>, (accessed on May 28, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Roger Bergman, *Catholic Social Learning: Educating the Faith That Does Justice* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 61.

<sup>4</sup> See International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, § 82, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20140610\\_sens-us-fidei\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sens-us-fidei_en.html) (accessed May 20, 2015). See also Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 125–126 [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html) (accessed May 20, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Paul Hiebert, “The Gospel in Human Contexts: Changing Perceptions of Contextualization,” in *Missionshift: Global Mission Issues in the Third Millennium*, ed. David Hesselgrave (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2010), 82–102, at 96.

Within the works of Newman,<sup>6</sup> Rahner,<sup>7</sup> and the Vatican II Fathers one can see the idea that a theology challenged and informed by *sensus fidelium* in the local and global communities involves dialogue with history, cultures, and contexts. One way to do this is by engaging in dialogue with disciplines outside of and within theology itself. Theology encompasses a broad range of interrelated disciplines but we sometimes fall into the trap of exclusively working within the confines and comfort of our areas of specialization when the divisions of the various areas are not always precise. Moral theology, for example, needs both the breadth of systematic theology and the sensitivity of the pastoral or practical theologian. Moreover, systematic theology, as constructive theology, often examines a given issue in terms of its biblical foundations, historical development, expression in the teaching of the magisterium, and in the views of contemporary theologians. Hence, John Paul II encourages theologians in *Fides et Ratio* “to be sure to reflect in their work all the speculative and practical breadth of the science of theology.”<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, it is good for theology to engage other academic disciplines. While a theological statement cannot necessarily be proved according to the methods of the physical or social sciences good theology should be at least consistent with what is known from other sources of knowledge. In talking about some of the more urgent duties of Christians with regard to culture, for example, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 62 points out that, while harmonizing culture with Christian thought can be difficult, far from harming the faith, the difficulties “stimulate a more precise and deeper understanding of that faith.” The text also notes that research and discoveries in various disciplines “bring up new problems which have an important bearing on life itself and demand new scrutiny by theologians.” In pastoral care, for example, theologians are asked to make use not only of theological principles but also of the findings of secular sciences, especially psychology and sociology, to assist others to come to a more mature faith life. All of this calls for collaboration with experts in many fields.<sup>9</sup>

The Christian tradition is a living faith that is rooted in history which, ever interpreted and understood anew, extends into mystery. Theology, therefore, needs to be done squarely in the midst of inescapable human contexts and time’s transience. Indeed, while it must safeguard God’s self-revelation in Jesus, theology must at the same time help ensure that the language used by the Church to proclaim such revelation remains intelligible in different cultures and new historical contexts. As indicated in *Mysterium Ecclesiae*, every expression of revelation is historically conditioned and, consequently, limited.<sup>10</sup> One of the tasks of a theologian, therefore,

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<sup>6</sup> See John Henry Newman, *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961).

<sup>7</sup> See Karl Rahner, “Theological Investigations Vol. 22: What the Church Officially Teaches and What the People Actually Believe,” in *Theological Investigations*, 23 vols. (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1961–1992): 140–147.

<sup>8</sup> John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, no. 105, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_14091998\\_fides-et-ratio.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html) (accessed May 27, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Mary Ann Donovan, “The Vocation of the Theologian,” *Theological Studies* 65 (2004): 3–22, at 11.

<sup>10</sup> See Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Mysterium Ecclesiae*, no. 5. *Mysterium Ecclesiae* noted four ways in which expressions of revelation can be limited: (1) by

is to help make the Church's language and proclamation up-to-date by making them intelligible in new historical contexts and re-examining the Church's tradition to enable it to shed its light on new questions.

These days, however, at least based on my experience, navigating contemporary language alone could be tricky. Take, for example, the list of 6,500 new words that Collins Dictionary has added to the word game Scrabble. The list, which Collins Dictionary said "was influenced by all parts of life including social media, slang, technology and food, plus English from around the world" would probably render some of us here puzzled at best and clueless at worst! There's *cakehole* (synonym for mouth), *sexting* (the act of sending sexually explicit messages, primarily between mobile phones), *twerking* (as in Miley Cyrus' sexually provocative dance), *bezzz* (for best friends), *emoji* (for expressive digital icons), *ridic* (short for ridiculous), and *lolz*. I thought I was already cool for knowing what *lol* stands for, at least as compared to my husband who's even more clueless about these things than I am. So I thought to myself, "what does *lolz* mean? Laugh out loud what?" Apparently *lolz* is not just laughing out loud, it means laughing out loud like a maniac, something like the plural of *lol*.<sup>11</sup>

As a theologian who does some work on the idea of laughter and dance as everyday forms of resistance, I wonder how contemporary language such as *lolz* and *twerking* could figure in my work or in theology in general. Pushing the envelope further, how might theologians, for example, make sense of sexting and twerking in a contemporary theology of sex or sexuality? Imagine a book title with *Toward a Theology of Bezzz* instead of *Toward a Theology of Friendship*? Isn't that *ridic*? Seriously though, I think that theology should neither underestimate nor ignore social media. It seems to me that it is a new frontier for a theology challenged and informed by the *sensus fidelium* because, in some ways, it has (1) "globalized" *lo cotidiano* and the quest for well-being, peace, and social justice by, and on behalf of, individuals and local communities worldwide; (2) transformed human relationships and; (3) become an important means and battleground for the expression, propagation, and transmission of the Christian faith.

### ***Vision: Theology as a Hermeneutic of Hope***

As a theologian born and raised in the global South, who has done some volunteer work and overseas travel beyond touristic places, I have seen various forms and degrees of suffering in different cultures and contexts. These have influenced me in the way I understand and do theology, not only in terms of my research but also in my teaching. Last year, for example, I brought 16 Australian postgraduate Theology students on a study-trip to the Philippines, where stories of struggle and hope in a different culture and context came to life for them. At the heart of this endeavour is a

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the expressive power of the language of the times; (2) by the limited knowledge of the times; (3) by the specific concerns that motivated the definition or statement and; (4) by the changeable conceptualities (or thought categories) of the time.  
[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19730\\_705\\_mysterium-ecclesiae\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19730_705_mysterium-ecclesiae_en.html) (accessed May 25, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Faith Karimi, "Scrabble dictionary adds *ridic* list of new words,"  
<http://edition.cnn.com/2015/05/22/us/scrabble-new-words/> (accessed May 25, 2015).

hope for my students to experience and learn theology from the heart of the people with a view to expanding Anselm's classic definition of theology from "faith seeking understanding" to "faith seeking empowering understanding."

Such experiences are a reminder that theology is also about *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, insofar as it is about discovering a sense of the collective faith knowledge applied in the concrete realities of everyday life, bridging theory and praxis, doctrine and life. In this phronetic vision of theology the poor play a special role, for as Pope Francis says, "they have much to teach us."<sup>12</sup> This is true, in particular, among the "disposable poor" because, as Orlando Espín writes, it is a duty of Christian traditioning to keep alive the memory of those—including Jesus himself—whom the dominant regard as disposable, and whose lives and faith are deemed as unimportant and forgettable. Faithfulness to history and tradition is also faithfulness to the meanings and hope constructed by their victims. For Espín this subversive hope is the core and ground of revelation.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, a theology challenged and informed by *sensus fidelium*, particularly from the margins, cannot but be a hermeneutic of hope. In the First Letter of Peter, faith is presented as the reason for our hope. Consequently, "true theology," Gustavo Gutiérrez contends, "must interpret the reasons for hope in whatever way possible" and this locus of hope "must have the capacity, freedom, and commitment to pay attention to the smallest of things."<sup>14</sup> Thus, theology is about giving an account of that which and whom we hope for as a Christian community in a particular time and place.

### Conclusion

To conclude, a theology that is challenged and informed by the *sensus fidelium* from the margins of local and global communities drives home the point that theology is a vocation<sup>15</sup> and that theologians need a creative, dialogical, and prophetic imagination. This *sensus fidelium* is a reminder to us, as theologians, that because we are human beings, sinners and saints, our theologies are, ultimately and inescapably, contextual, perspectival, historically and culturally-bound, expressive of asymmetric power relations and, therefore, always provisional and incomplete. Our only hope is that our theology today would authoritatively speak to current and future generations, who themselves would come to understand the tradition within the horizons of their own particular experience. This is what theology as a conversation is all about. In the words of Bonaventure, it is about recognizing the inadequacy of "reading without repentance, knowledge without devotion, research without the impulse of wonder, prudence without the ability to surrender to joy, action divorced

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<sup>12</sup> Pope Francis, *The Church of Mercy: A Vision for the Church* (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2014), 24.

<sup>13</sup> Orlando Espín, *Idol and Grace: On Traditioning and Subversive Hope* (New York: Orbis, 2014), 9, 24, 43.

<sup>14</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Poverty, Migration and the Option for the Poor," in *A Promised Land, A Perilous Journey: Theological Perspectives on Migration*, eds. Daniel Groody and Giocchino Campese (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2008), 76–86, at 84.

<sup>15</sup> See Mary Ann Donovan, S.C. "The Vocation of the Theologian," *Theological Studies* 65 (2004): 3–22.

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from religion, learning sundered from love, intelligence without humility, study unsustained by divine grace, thought without the wisdom inspired by God.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> As quoted in John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, no. 105.