

Theology as a Sacrament of Hope*Margaret Blume**University of Notre Dame*

“You will do well to pay attention to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts” (2 Pt 1:19). The shining lamp that Peter lifts up for his listeners is the wondrous happening on Mount Tabor, just before Jesus’ death and resurrection. The event is also recounted in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Jesus takes Peter, James and John to the summit of a mountain where he is transfigured before them. Moses and Elijah appear with Christ, a cloud overshadows the disciples, and a voice from the cloud speaks, just as at Christ’s Baptism: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” The disciples fall to the ground in terror, but Jesus touches them, saying, “Rise, and have no fear.” When they raise their eyes, they see only Jesus, no longer in a state of glory. They return with him down the mountain towards Jerusalem, charged not to say anything until he has risen from the dead (Mt 17:1-9).

After the Resurrection, Peter recounts what he has seen on the mountain summit to the multitude, as a pledge of Jesus’ glory and Peter’s own authority. “Be prepared to make a defense for the hope that is in you” (1 Pt 3:15), Peter has earlier instructed his fellow Christians, and his own defense is that he has been a witness of Jesus’ glory on Mount Tabor. This vision of glory is intimately connected to the hope that is in him, as its substance and its surety, and Peter does not keep it to himself, but offers it to all Christians. The mystery of the Transfiguration is thus a source of Christian hope, a lamp shining in the darkness, a star rising from without until it rises from within each disciple in eternal life. The Transfiguration leads Christians towards salvation by the glory of the Lord that it both remembers and promises.

As the recent encyclical *Lumen Fidei* calls to mind, theology is also meant to be such a light for our Christian journey, a light that manifests hope's object and cultivates its habit of being.ⁱ In this paper, I would like to suggest that theology is a sacrament of hope insofar as it participates in the mystery of Christ's Transfiguration. Practically speaking, this participation can be strengthened by a closer relationship between theology and literature.

1. Christ's Transfiguration and the Virtue of Hope

The eastern Fathers of the Church emphasize that Christ's glory on Mount Tabor is a manifestation of His divinity, which divinizes those who behold it. The western Fathers, on the other hand, focus upon the link between the Transfiguration and Peter's ecclesial confession of faith. They also underscore that even on Mount Tabor, Christ's humanity is the veil through which the glory of His divinity is perceived.ⁱⁱ In his *Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas Aquinas synthesizes eastern and western interpretations of the Scriptural testimony. Significantly, St. Thomas' treatment of the Transfiguration is found in the Tertia Pars of the *Summa*, which considers "Christ, who, as man, is the way for us to strive for God." The mysteries of Christ's life, including the Transfiguration, are from the outset considered soteriologically. In light of the Transfiguration, moreover, the Church can perceive her salvation to be configuration to Christ's divine glory.

The splendor of Christ's body, St. Thomas explains, is the radiance of His divinity, communicated to his body by his glorified soul. On Mount Tabor, Christ shows Peter, James, and John what we are all meant to become, and will become as we contemplate the Lord. For St. Thomas, however, the place of the Transfiguration within Jesus' whole salvific work is crucial. It occurs *before* His Passion and Resurrection. "It is good for us to be here" (Mt 17:4), Peter tells Jesus, offering to build three tents, but Peter is not allowed to remain on the mountain summit.

The manifestation of Jesus' glory lasts only a moment. On Mount Tabor, St. Thomas explains, the apostles see the glory of Christ's soul and body that Christ intends to communicate to all human beings, but this can only occur through His Passion. The Transfiguration is thus a hortatory and dynamic sign that impels the apostles towards the Cross, as the means to the end that Christ may give them His glory for all eternity. Mount Tabor and Calvary are inseparably joined. The glorious vision disappears, but the memory of Christ's transfigured radiance will strengthen the apostles for the journey still ahead, and bestow trust in the divine power of the Trinity as it has been revealed on the mountain.ⁱⁱⁱ

Both aspects of the Transfiguration, the eternal glory that it manifests, and its temporal place within Christ's salvific work, intimately connect it to the virtue of hope. According to St. Thomas, hope puts us into relation with God as our ultimate good, directing our wills to union with Him as something possible but difficult to attain. Hope inspires our confident longing for beatitude. Hope also disposes our will to rely on God's help in order to attain the object of our hope, which as yet we do not fully possess. Hope, therefore, is the virtue that makes human beings trusting wayfarers towards eternal life. Hence, according to St. Thomas, "the Apostle says pointedly (Heb 6:19) that hope 'enters in, even within the veil,' because that which we hope for is as yet veiled, so to speak." Like Peter at the Transfiguration, one who has hope longs to remain on the mountain with the glorified Lord. He knows, however, that this can only come about if he continues with Christ on his journey towards the Passion and Resurrection, and relies on God's omnipotent mercy as it has appeared on Mount Tabor.^{iv}

2. Christ's Transfiguration and Theology

The Gospel narratives of the Transfiguration are short, but in all three accounts there is a vision and a voice. The apostles behold Christ in his radiance, accompanied by Moses and Elijah,

and they hear the Father's voice speaking from Heaven. But they cannot bear this for long. They also see Christ returned to his unglorified bodily state, and hear his voice telling them to rise, and not be afraid. The distance between the two visions and voices lays out the journey from the human being's present condition of "not yet," to his future state of glory with God. The apostles' pilgrimage to the heavenly Jerusalem is set in motion by the one, changing vision and voice on Mount Tabor. From the beginning of the *Summa*, St. Thomas makes clear that sacred doctrine is also indispensable for setting human beings on their journey to eternal life, and moving them forward on the way. Sacred doctrine, or God teaching about Himself, is thus intimately connected to the mystery of Christ's Transfiguration. According to St. Thomas, God teaches about Himself through human study and education, and so sacred doctrine includes the discipline of theology.^v

Theology, therefore, meditates upon and hands down the changing divine vision and voice as it revealed itself to the apostles on Mount Tabor. Theology, too, is a hortatory and dynamic sign of the Lord's glory that leads human beings to salvation. It participates in the mystery of Christ's Transfiguration, offering a glimpse of Christ's glory and impelling Christians towards His Cross as the means by which we may see His glory permanently. Both aspects of the mystery are essential. Theological words and visions must both direct the human desire for transcendence towards its true end in God, and set us on pilgrimage by disrupting our expectations of the transcendent. They must offer a veiled vision of eternal life, while also impressing that there is still a distance to be traveled. Theology must simultaneously give a mountaintop experience of the heavenly Jerusalem while sending us down from the mountain towards our own broken Jerusalem, the city that cries out for redemption.

Like the Transfiguration, then, theology is meant to be a sacrament of hope, giving a sign of future glory and effecting what it signifies by simultaneously satisfying and disorienting Christians, setting them on a strange journey towards their own fulfillment. Theology must not only point out the destination, which is nothing less than God's own glory; it must also cultivate the habit of patiently living in a state of "not yet," faring forward toward whatever may come, relying entirely on the Lord's merciful power.

3. Concluding Suggestion: Theology and Literature

In order to be a hortatory and effective sign of the Lord's glory, the discipline of theology can learn from the discipline of literature, which focuses upon the power of words to mediate visions and voices. Indeed, in Canto 32 of the *Purgatorio*, Dante explicitly connects his role as poet-theologian to the mystery of Christ's Transfiguration. Immediately before Beatrice tells Dante, "what you see write down when you go back,"^{vi} Dante has compared himself to Peter, James, and John, overcome by heavenly visions on Mount Tabor. Dante has just seen a vision of the Gryphon, the two-natured beast which symbolizes Christ according to the hypostatic union. Like the apostles, the poet is charged to communicate the glory of the Lord to all those who have not accompanied him on his visionary journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, in order that those who hear Dante's words may also undertake his pilgrimage.

I would also like to suggest Shakespeare's *The Tempest* as a model for theologians who wish to write in a way that participates in the mystery of the Transfiguration. The central event of the play is "a sea change into something rich and strange,"^{vii} and *The Tempest* presents multiple transfigurations of characters in order to effect a transfiguration in the audience as they watch. Some transfigurations break into the narrative in single visionary moments, as when the lovers Ferdinand and Miranda first see one another, and "change eyes."^{viii} Moreover, just as the

characters learn to respond to initially confusing revelations with wonder and patience, the very form of the play cultivates in the audience the same habit of being “not yet.” *The Tempest* begins with a stormy interruption into a sea journey, and it closes with Prospero’s disturbing fragility as he surrenders his magical powers, and asks the audience to set him free to journey home. The play leaves us in motion, on the way. But *The Tempest*’s strange beauty also refreshes the imagination, and Prospero’s example of dependence sets us free to fare forward with him in hope, sailing towards the destination that the island’s magic dimly signifies.

Both the *Divine Comedy* and *The Tempest* can be models for theologians who want to join Peter in lifting up Christianity as a light in a dark place, which both gives a glimpse of our destiny, and impels us onward. Then the Transfiguration is not only a single event, but the whole proclamation of the Gospel. “We have seen his glory” (Jn 1:14), the Prologue of John’s Gospel testifies, and meditating upon this glory in a way that inspires both vision and deed kindles the beginning flame of our eternal life. The Lord’s glory should be the morning star that leads us forward even to the Cross, full of trust and longing, until the journey is done, and the same star rises eternally in our hearts. Theological work that manifests such glory, inspired by Scripture and so in union with the Transfiguration, will be a true sacrament of hope.

ⁱ Cf. Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, sec. 7, 36, accessed January 23, 2015,

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20130629_enciclica-lumen-fidei.html.

ⁱⁱ Cf. Aaron Canty, *Light and Glory: The Transfiguration of Christ in Early Franciscan and Dominican Theology* (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2011).

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *ST III Q. 45*.

^{iv} Cf. *ST II-II Q. 17*.

^v Cf. *ST I I Q. 1*.

^{vi} Dante, *Purgatorio*, trans. Robin Kirkpatrick (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2007), 32.105.

^{vii} Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1999), 1.2.401-2.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, 1.2.441-2.