

## PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

In years past, the Presidential Address to this Society has usually taken one of three forms—a lengthy position paper on the subject dearest to the heart of the man giving it, since this is a truly unique opportunity not repeated in the same lifetime—or else a business report on the progress and the future of the society—or finally a comment on the state of theology or of theologians in general, here in our country. I have no pet topic that I've been longing to present to this audience—and the business report will come soon enough, but I would like to comment on one of the critical problems facing Catholic theologians in our own day.

The talk could be summed up in two sentences: There's a real possibility that we are becoming irrelevant to most Catholics and to the world in general. And—there are a number of things that we can do about the situation.

We are in an age of tremendous change which is described by various people as a crisis, a transition or a time of great promise. What is certain is that the Church is facing a *new* set of problems with theological bases or profound theological implications and most of them center on change or lead to it. I can think of a *half-dozen* immediately, although any man sitting in this hall could double or triple the figure with no effort. Here's my list: First, we are faced with the problem of reformulation of dogma, or of how much, if anything, is of perennial worth, in the tradition (the *paradosis*) that has been handed down to us. An era of stress on return to a Hebraic outlook (visible in some convention talks of the middle 1950's) (which one Scripture scholar described as "the shortest Biblical revival on record") has quickly been succeeded by a desire to de-Semiticize as well as de-Hellenize the Christian message to make it more meaningful to our day. Secondly, we have a new theological factor to cope with in concentration on the prophetic role of the laity—and consequently of theologians. If we are not merely spokesmen for the hierarchy, but possessed of a positive charismatic function of our own in the process of the Church's self-realization, then

the whole question of the relation of theology to faith, of theologians to teaching office takes on a new dimension. Third, the relevance of a theology rooted in a revelation and a redemption accomplished *once and for all in a past age*, to a secular world in the age of technology has been seriously questioned. Fourth, the relevance of our current theology and that which immediately preceded it to *Christian spirituality* has been challenged, because it seems unsuccessful in providing a clear-cut rationale for many things that have loomed large in practice and in the attitude and approach to spirituality in the past: a life based on vows—of poverty, chastity and obedience—celibacy in the priesthood—prayer, and especially prayer of petition—daily Mass—obedience to authority—the communion of the Saints and devotion to Mary—mortification. All of these have been questioned, and the answers that have come back have often been weak enough to aggravate the problems instead of settling them. Along with this, efforts at producing a *new spirituality* better suited to our own time have shown little visible results so far. Fifth, the Church has entered into a vast re-examination of the rationale underlying most of her structures,—from why she uses bread and wine in the Eucharist and why she hasn't ordained women to where a Council like Vatican II or Constance gets its power. Finally,—and my list is short and arbitrary—the Church is facing a danger of polarization between traditionalists and revisionists. (I hate all 3 terms—polarization—traditionalists—revisionist—and I find them insulting to the theologians involved, but they represent an over-simplification of a real-life difficulty that has been with us for several years now—that has improved in some areas—but is like a smoldering fire ready to break out in others at any moment.)

Every one of these questions can be fitted in with an overall query that you can hear on the lips of the Catholic laity, of priests, of theologians more and more nowadays:—How much of what we have regarded as Catholic in the past can change and should change—in the areas of doctrine, of morals, of Church structure? And it's a question to which no one can claim to provide a simple answer because the problem itself is complicated. Let's take 2 examples: structures and dogma.

The heart of the difficulty in dealing with change in structures—

and the possibility and need for them—is that much of our theology on what they should be has come out of the life of the Church;—it has been a rationalization and a defense of what was actually being done and what had been done in the past. Much has been written recently of how this applies to the ecclesiology developed after Trent, but the same thing can be said of the sacramental theology developed from law and liturgical practice in the Middle Ages, of the theology of religious life and the eschatology that emerged (from community practice and prayer life) from the Patristic period, of the role of the bishop in the early Church. If the Spirit still lives in the Church, this process of growth in self-awareness is both legitimate and vital, but in our day, it has raised the serious question of how much is the result of sociological conditions that have seen their day? Why should Apostolic Succession be important in the ministry, when it is lacking—as we understand it—in Christian communities and Churches where the Spirit is at work? How much of our practice on auricular confession, on anointing the sick, on dissolution of marriage is God's law and how much the reflection of an age gone by?—The problem points to vast areas of Christian life that have been virtually unexplored up till now.

Hans Küng has implied that the answer to what is essential is in what can lay claim to a Scriptural basis. This leaves some people cold as an adequate criterion: on the one hand, is everything that can be found in Scripture an acceptable model for later times?—on the other, is all that is essential—e.g. the sacraments—recognizable in the Scriptural data taken by itself? Isn't the positive activity of the Spirit in the life of the Church needed to provide a deeper understanding of the witness of apostolic revelation. In short, if Scripture alone is too little, the life of the Church—with no clear analysis of what goes to make it up—is too vague as a criterion of what is essential—and that's why we have the problems we do. (I might remark in passing that this is one of the main areas in which a collaborative effort between theologians, canonists and historians seems called for in the future.)

Something very similar could be said with regard to the whole matter of re-formulation of dogma and how far it can go. There are many factors that have contributed to this problem: First, questions on the nature of revelation itself: is it a set of propositions or a

contract with a living divine reality (Christ of the Spirit)? Is it ongoing? To what extent does it consist in interaction with the world of our times rather than commitment to the past? Next, the matter of the permanent value of any formulation of doctrine at all. From the time in the late 1940's when Henri Bouillard suggested that theologians of the 20th century might and should do what Thomas Aquinas did in the 13th:—re-state doctrine in terms of the philosophy of the day, the question of the validity and usefulness of formulas of the past and of prospective ones for the future has been a matter of growing importance. In an age when demythologizing has moved from the Old Testament to the New and on to Church documents—(with more stress on setting them in their historical context)—we have seen everything from the Virginal Conception to the notion that God is person brought into question and the field is just beginning to open up. Third, this whole matter has been complicated in turn by the epistemological problems that have plagued the whole of this century in the face of a *knowledge explosion* of unbelievable proportions which has left people suspicious of being tied down to narrow-minded judgments of the past, no matter how perennial they may claim to be. Along with this, if more were needed—we have a realization of the dynamic, evolutionary nature of human and cosmic history, so that things that were true in the past don't have to have the same degree of validity in our own day. For some, this has carried to the point of making God Himself a part of the process, moving toward goals that are not certain and clearly distinguishable. And finally, as we saw in the followup to *Humanae Vitae*, we have communications media that can carry any significant variation or nuance in the statements of theologians, bishops or Pope to every corner of the world instantaneously. None of what I have said up till now is new or surprising to anyone sitting here—but we have to live with its consequences.

One consequence of all this has been a fair amount of *confusion and uncertainty* as to how much can change, on the part of theologians. I don't mean that individual theologians have no strong ideas of their own as to what is of permanent value—I find that *most do*—but their ideas often don't coincide with those of the next theologian to come along.

A second result has been a clash between what I described above

as traditionalists and revisionists—those afraid that too much is being discarded and lost—and those who are afraid of being trapped in the narrow categories that have kept us from communicating effectively with the world in the past.

But there's a third result that *I think* I see much evidence of now, that concerns me more: it's that, more and more, theologians and what they have to say are in danger of becoming irrelevant to most Catholics. And the first reason for it—that flows from all that has come before—is that *we don't offer consistent answers* to questions they pose to us as vital. I know the answer that is made to this at times: that we have spoon-fed our people too much in the past, that we have led them to expect simple, pat answers to all problems and we have distorted the Christian message as a result, that we have discouraged their own growth in faith through exercise of their own prophetic role and their own search for the full implications of Christian redemption in their own lives, that we have idolized the Christian God of mystery, that we have developed what is called a Baltimore #2 mentality. There is a great deal of value in these criticisms, especially if we apply them to what we must do now and do not concentrate on condemning past generations for not doing what they couldn't have done with the insights available to them and for not doing things that might have been useless or even disastrous in their own historical situation. But we are still faced with the problem that many people who are not closed-minded or tied to the past or unable to grasp the need and the value of extensive change when it is explained to them, still want some clear answers from theologians on matters that vitally affect their faith and their lives. I find this among simple people (who are not stupid) who find themselves mystified by what their youngsters learn at school and get answers that seem to them to amount to little more than jargon and contradictory jargon at that, when they ask about it. I find this among educated people who find themselves faced with diametrically opposed opinions on what they thought were matters of faith—the reaction in some cases swiftly passes from bewilderment to doubt to a casual “Who cares, and why bother? There can't be anything very important at stake if even the experts disagree.” Within the past few months, I sat with four other theologians from

the Society, all of them highly qualified men, who represented a broad spectrum of moral positions, to offer advice to a group of professional people on some ethical matters of vital concern to them. On a number of key issues, the moralists were completely opposed to each other, and the professional people walked out obviously mystified at this performance. (I'm not singling out moralists—we could have mystified them more in *Dogma*, or *Systematics* if you prefer.) I'm not saying that we should provide simple answers where none exist, or encourage a mentality that demands them. But I am saying that we have to face the fact that more and more people will write us off as little more than a professional debating society, if all that comes through is our disagreement. They won't accept "mystery" as an adequate answer because the God of mystery has revealed Himself so that we may know Him—not completely, not as much as we would like, not even as well as we might think—but to know Him nevertheless. They won't accept the idea that we're on a "quest" as adequate either—if it means we should always be pressing forward to a deeper grasp on the meaning of human existence in the light of the Incarnation and Redemption, hooray! if it means that no one ever knows if He has found God or His message, they have better things to occupy their time than pursuit of the ephemeral.

There's a second problem that results. The doctrine we offer often seems to have little spiritual content. Part of the reason is that truths of faith have often remained divorced from life in a world of their own without seriously interacting with the life of our times, without growing with it and shedding new light on it—and this is nothing new. Part of the reason is that many of the notions that were axioms in our spiritual doctrine of the past had never been examined at all, or else only in shallow fashion, and now in the face of serious questioning, they seem to crumble. Part of the problem may be a tendency in the theology of our day to concentrate on questions of methodology rather than content—(so that we seem to spend all our time looking in a mirror) and this talk may itself be an example of this. But the end result is that theology often seems to be critical more than constructive, remote and abstract rather than vital—in any case not salvific in any recognizable way.

The hard, cold fact is that theology as a science divorced from salvation is irrelevant and esoteric to most people—and the more it has become so, the less people have listened to us. Some observers have suggested that Christians may retreat more and more in the direction of Pentecostalism or something akin to it out of disillusionment with an intellectual approach that provides a stone rather than bread. The fears are exaggerated, but the problem underlying them is real. The cure is not to make theology unscientific, but to realize that a Christian theology divorced from holiness and evangelization can look like a quaint castle or a large portion of cotton candy.

What's the solution to this problem of relevance? Is it a return to the past, to an era that paid less attention to change and that lived more on supposed certainties? I speak from a background that some would label "traditionalist" if we were to use the tags I mentioned before, and from that background I can say that an attempt to return to the past and a loss of the rich new insights of our own day would be a rejection of the salvation fitted to our times. To lose our new-found awareness of the historical dimension to revelation and the sense in which it can rightly be regarded as something ongoing, —to lose our fresh sense of the limitations on our knowledge of the God of mystery and of our need to grow in knowledge and to approach Him from a hundred new directions, to neglect our dawning realization of how the Spirit is alive and at work on all levels in the life of the Church transforming her as she moves toward the fullness of the kingdom—all of this would be disastrous. And useless too—because men cannot turn back the sociological factors that shape so many changes—but rather only become a fruitful part of them.

What can we do as theologians?—I have a number of suggestions to make briefly—none of them new, none of them complicated, none of them being tried very much right now—with the first of them far and away the most important. First, we can try to foster more real exchange between theologians with varying and even contradictory positions. It's probably true that there is more real fruitful exchange between Catholic and Lutheran theologians in our own country than between Catholic theologians of different shades of opinion—and this situation inhibits growth on both sides, and makes

all of us ineffective in proclaiming the many truths and values we have in common. Up till now, the serious contacts have been tenuous, perhaps as a result of many emotional issues centering on the question of freedom and authority in recent years, but we can't afford to leave them tenuous in a world that changes as rapidly as ours, and the very fact and makeup and progress of this convention is an indication that they don't have to remain tenuous.

Second, we can begin to lay more stress on the objective content of revelation and its application to human life than on methodology and critical apparatus as such. No age has had greater resources for reaching that content than our own,—and no age has had a more complex life-situation to apply it to—but it's too easy to lose the message in the method as well as the medium.

Third, we can make more serious efforts to develop a spiritual and pastoral theology—especially on matters touching on the foundations of man's personal and collective relationships to God—in the face of the searching questions posed by modern society. It's an indictment of the theology of the past more so than that of the present that the answers to why we live and pray as we have are so weak—it will be an indictment of us if we allow this to continue.

Fourth, in working to improve the Church, we can lay more stress on the goals to be achieved—the needs of the apostolate—the reasons for commitment—than on changes in structures and organization that are vitally needed and worth struggling for,—but that might leave us with a brand new car and nowhere to go—when the purposes for which these structures exist have become very shadowy or of questionable value in the minds of people on all levels.

Last, we can be more critical of catch-phrases which can cover a multitude of sins, whether they be “pluralism in theology” and “reformulation of doctrine”—or “revelation completed” and “unchanging deposit of faith.” Perhaps more of the contracts I mentioned earlier will help us to find the richer message underlying all of these phrases.

In short, nothing new, nothing complicated, but much that is vital that we're still not doing. The days ahead offer great promise for Christians and great threats in a world where the pace of change

is constantly accelerating. I hope that, with God's help, our role will be to change the promises to facts and the threats to cheerful memories.

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