

THE CHANGING VOCATIONS OF THEOLOGIAN

- Topic: From Cleric to Laity: Redefining the Vocation to Theology
Convener: Thomas M. Kelly, Creighton University
Presenters: Florence Bourg, Mount St. Joseph College
Anna Moreland, Boston College
Thomas Kelly, Creighton University
Respondents: Michael Himes, Boston College
Thomas Rausch, Loyola Marymount University

However much the vocation of the theologian has changed over the past 1,500 years in the Western Church, the past four decades have witnessed an unprecedented development in the history of this profession. Broadly speaking, the theologian usually had been someone who saw the pursuit and study of theology as an extension of their vocation to clerical or religious life. One's vocation to clerical or religious life was lived out through a pursuit of theology. Grounded in the spirituality and community of one's diocese, order or monastery, the theologian was nearly always anchored to a community living out the Christian faith in a particular way.

The past four decades following the Second Vatican Council have seen a radical change in the character of the theologian. Now, single and married lay women and men bring their life experience, their intellectual training and their own lived faith to the pursuit of theology. These theologians have as their main form of professional community, the university or college where their inquiry begins and continues throughout their career. Their particular faith communities and commitments are diverse.

The questions for theologians are these: what is the promise of this change? What are some benefits as well as some problems with the emergence of an independent lay theological profession? How do lay theologians understand themselves, their vocations, and their commitments in the context of Church? What might be the role of female theologians in the ongoing development of ministry in the Church?

Florence Bourg's talk titled "Family Economics and the Lay Theologian" specifically addressed the challenge of being a lay theologian from the perspective of one who is married and has parenting responsibilities. She summarized a survey sent out by her in the previous month to get a sense of how lay theologians feel challenged by their choice of profession. Time, support, money, and work-family balance were all issues that Bourg addressed and commented on. Her conclusion was that due to family responsibilities both economic and in terms of time, the profession has to shift and change its means of support and its expectations for lay theologians who lack the time and support generally enjoyed by ordained or vowed religious. She concluded by calling for the CTSA to focus on this issue in a serious way.

Anna Bonta's talk titled "Theology in the Contemporary University: Contextualized Theology in the 21st Century" addressed the challenge of teaching theology today. It was determined early on in the presentation that the majority of Catholic students attend public, secular universities. Bonta argued that theology must move out into the public sphere in a way that not only challenges students but the general populations of public universities. Drawing on John Henry Newman and his lectures on the University, Bonta argued that the ghettoization of Catholic theology at Catholic universities is both bad for theology and Catholicism in general.

Kelly's paper addressed the shift from cleric to lay theologians as the majority in Catholic universities and colleges. One area of concern centered on the lack of spirituality specific to lay theologians as they progressed through doctoral programs and engaged in theology as a vocation. What is the relationship of the lay theologian to the Church they serve? This relationship, or lack thereof, will have concrete consequences for any theology that is specifically "lay." Kelly concluded his talk with a demonstration of how to draw on married life and love to critically analyze the Church's approach to a sacramentology of marriage and the social mission of the family.

Michael Himes and Thomas Rausch responded to a number of points including the following: first, by questioning, in Bourg's analysis, whether the discipline of theology was any different than other disciplines in terms of the challenges young lay people face in the academy. From Bonta's paper they acknowledged the deep need to move into the public sphere, but questioned whether Newman was the theologian to use. Finally, they registered concern for Kelly's point that lay theologians seem to lack the spiritual development proper to their discipline.

Discussion was animated following all the presentations, and responses were varied and lively. The challenge of family/work, especially for women, the place of theology in a public university, and the distinct methods that might emerge from a class of theologians deeply immersed in the rhythms of marriage and family life were some of the issues discussed.

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