

2-9-1968

Presidential Address

William G. Most

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Most, William G. (1968) "Presidential Address," *Marian Studies*: Vol. 19, Article 5, Pages 20-26.

Available at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies/vol19/iss1/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Marian Library Publications at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Marian Studies by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlangen1@udayton.edu.

MARIOLOGY AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Presidential Address

by

THE REV. WILLIAM G. MOST

A year ago, at our convention in North Palm Beach, your president presumed to report that the state of the union was closer to disunion, and that we could not say with the angels of Zacharia: "See, the whole earth is tranquil and at rest."¹ Regretfully, this year it is necessary to report that there is even less union than a year ago, not only in Mariology, but in theology in general. Many indications could be cited. For example, the noted Methodist ecumenist, Dr. Albert Outler, not long ago said in a speech that "the crisis among Roman Catholic theologians has reached a major level of befuddlement."² Still another noted Protestant, Dr. F. Sontag, in an article in *America*, put his finger on the most critical spot when he observed that neither the apostate Father Davis, in his self-defense, nor Father Gregory Baum, in his attempted reply to Father Davis, was really following Catholic theological principles. Their method, he said, was definitely a Protestant one: "The issue is the importance of a particular historical institution and its teaching authority as it has developed. If your basis is biblical [i.e., Scriptural study done on the Protestant basis of private interpretation] then you may feel free to break from one institution and to join or form another. . . ."³ Appropriately, the title of Dr. Sontag's article was: *Are You a Catholic?* For the principle he gives is the touchstone that shows whether one is really following Catholic or Protestant principles.

¹ *Zach.* 1: 11.

² Cited from *National Catholic Reporter*, Nov. 15, 1967, p. 9.

³ *Are You a Catholic?*, in *America*, Nov. 4, 1967, p. 504.

A particular facet, and a most critical one, of this situation was crystallized for us the past summer in the Land O'Lakes declaration of the International Federation of Catholic Universities (July 21-23, 1967). It said, in part: "... the Catholic university must have a true autonomy and academic freedom in the face of authority of whatever kind, lay or clerical, external to the academic community itself." Since the Magisterium of the Church is external to the individual universities, the declaration is—and the context supports this understanding of it—a declaration of the independence of theology professors, Mariologists included, from the Magisterium of the Church, in the name of academic freedom.

Quite predictably, reactions to the Land O'Lakes declaration of independence have been varied—so far as our "liberal" journals have been willing to print both sides, a scant willingness indeed. Yet Dr. Sontag did succeed, without speaking explicitly of that declaration, in registering a dissent in principle. For if "The issue is the importance of a particular historical institution and its teaching authority" in the case of Fathers Davis and Baum, it is clearly the same issue in the case of Mariologists and theologians in general.

Obviously, we cannot simply ignore this problem. Honesty demands that we face it, for the sake of our future work in Mariology and in theology in general. Have we, then, had a new 1776 that frees us, as academicians, from the Magisterium, or is the Protestant Dr. Sontag more right in appraising Catholic principles than are so many distinguished Catholic educators?

There are at least two lines of approach to the question of academic freedom versus the Magisterium.

We could begin the first approach by observing the imperious nature of the demands of the intellect for truth. Our will can, of course, be commanded by a duly constituted authority—though we note in passing that some, such as Brother Gabriel Moran, seem to deny the Bishops of the Church any authority to command anyone. "It simply is not true," says Brother Ga-

briel, "that in Christianity some people have the power to issue commands, and other people are called simply to obey commands."⁴ But we cannot stop to examine that contention other than to note that it asks us to believe that all Popes, Bishops and Councils, past and present, of the entire history of the Church, have been usurpers of power. But we want to notice instead the sharp difference in the way of working of the mind and the will. The will, as we said, at least can be commanded, if there be any authority that has a right to command. But the mind is more comparable to a meter that must register the characteristics of an electrical circuit fed into it. The meter, obviously, should simply register what is there, and do it precisely. There is no question of supposing that the meter should conform itself to the orders of anyone, be he a hierarch or even a scientist.

As a result, it seems inescapably true to say that our minds must be endowed with fullest openness, so as to be free to seek the truth, wherever it may be, to follow the argument where-soever it may lead us, according to the classic Greek idea.

Yet, we need to beware here, as in so many things, of being simplistic. For there are still some questions to be answered, namely: before the circuit reaches the meter, how is it to be set up so that it will provide accurate data to the meter on the problem under study.

To put it a different way, we have to return again to a question on which we touched at our Palm Beach convention: the question of method. We noted there that every field of knowledge has its proper method. We pondered the object lesson provided by the natural sciences, in which centuries of false method had fed into the mental meter far more fiction than fact, which the meter duly, though not happily, registered as fact. To continue our simile, the circuits leading to the meter were not well set up. The meter did what it could, it did not falsify anything. The trouble was in the earlier stages of the circuit.

Dr. Sontag, as we noted earlier, put his finger on a very sore spot. He asked the critical question which determines one's answer to his title question: *Are You a Catholic?* He pointed out the difference between Protestant and Catholic method in theology: the Protestant method is basically one of individual study of Scripture—although, to be accurate, we must note that there is a tendency in not a few Protestant circles today to feel the need of checking with Tradition, and even some indications seem to point to a sort of desire for an authority. The Catholic method is quite other. It was attested to by Dr. Sontag when he wrote that, "The issue is the importance of a particular historical institution and its reaching authority. . . ." It was attested to with even greater clarity by the Second Vatican Council when it made two observations: First, the Council pointed out that in dogmatic theology, "the biblical themes" should be "presented first."⁵ After which, "Students should be shown what the Fathers of the Eastern and Western Church contributed to the fruitful transmission and illumination of the individual truths of revelation. . . ."⁶ But the second statement of the Council is more critically decisive. For at least some Protestants could agree to studying not only the biblical themes, but also the way in which the early Fathers understood those themes. The Council added the point that decisively separates Protestant from Catholic method; "The task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted *exclusively* to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ."⁷

⁴ Gabriel Moran and Sister Maria Harris, *Revelation and Religious*, in *National Catholic Reporter*, Nov. 22, 1967, p. 6. Cf. John L. McKenzie, S.J., *Authority and Power in the New Testament*, in *CBQ* 26 (October, 1964) 413-22, esp. 418: "The power base of authority in the NT is love, not the power to command or the power to coerce."

⁵ *Decree on Priestly Formation*, 16; cited from W. M. Abbott, S.J., (ed.), *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York, 1966) 451-52.

⁶ *Ibid.* 452.

⁷ *On Divine Revelation*, 10; *ibid.*, 117-18, italics added.

Here then is the touchstone of Catholic theology: A theologian who pretends to be Catholic must check and conform his teaching with that of the Magisterium. Further, the Council added, he must do this not only in the case of solemn definitions, but even in regard to the non-infallible Ordinary Magisterium. For, speaking of the Ordinary Papal teaching, the Council said: "Religious submission of will and of mind must be shown in a special way to the authentic teaching authority of the Roman Pontiff even when he is not speaking *ex cathedra*. That is, it must be shown in such a way that . . . the judgments made by him are sincerely adhered to, according to his manifest mind and will."⁸

Is this a condemnation of academic freedom? Before attempting to answer this question, we cannot help noting that, whatever the answer, the Council has put down a peremptory demand: A Catholic theologian simply *must* conform to the teaching of the Magisterium, even the non-infallible Ordinary Magisterium. No one can invoke the support of Vatican II for any other position. Intellectual honesty, so highly, and so rightly prized, requires that if a man refuses to accept the Magisterium, he should frankly admit that he is rejecting Vatican II, that he is no longer functioning as a Catholic theologian. Nor does the Council say that he is excused if he happens to be assigned to teaching classes in a Catholic university.

But really, the Council is not only not condemning academic freedom, nor is it even making an exception to it. Rather, the Council is showing the *presupposition* of academic freedom by showing the *prime means of determining where truth lies in theology*. To see this fact, let us recall our electric meter simile. In the case of the natural sciences, the meter faithfully registered the data it received from the preliminary circuits, but, the trouble was this: the circuits leading to the meter were improperly set up for centuries. The perfect freedom of the meter did not save it from wholesale error and a high level of be-

⁸ *Constitution on the Church*, 25; *ibid.*, 48.

fuddlement, to paraphrase Dr. Outler. Briefly, the trouble was in the *method* of science. *Academic freedom does not forbid one to use the true method of his field of knowledge. Rather, it presupposes, in fact requires that he use it.* He who does not use it is a quack in his field. For example, what would happen to a self-proclaimed scientist who would insist today on using the methods of Pliny the Elder? He not only would not be assured a place on a science faculty; rather, he would be laughed out of the councils of the learned. *Similarly, a "theologian" who refuses to follow the method of theology cannot claim the protection of academic freedom. For that freedom both presupposes and requires that he use the proper method of theology.* For a Catholic, as both the Protestant Dr. Sontag and the Catholic Vatican II insist, that method includes as an inescapable element, submission of will and of mind to the Magisterium of the Church, to which is "entrusted exclusively. . . the task of authentically interpreting the word of God." *It is precisely by the use of this means that the Catholic theologian is certain of where theological truth lies. If he ignores the Magisterium, he has thrown away the very prime means of ascertaining theological truth. A plea that he must throw away the means of determining theological truth in order to find that truth is self-contradictory nonsense, a rejection of Vatican II, and an escalator to a major level of befuddlement.*

A second line of approach to the problem of academic freedom is simpler, but not the less true for that. We need to recall that there are no freedoms that do not have limitations. For example, we are assured freedom of speech by the Constitution of the United States: yet we may not use that freedom to slander anyone, or the courts will force us to pay damages. Nor may we use it for pornography. Again, the Vatican Council taught that all men have freedom of religion, in the sense that "no one is to be restrained from acting in accordance with his own beliefs. . . within due limits."⁹ That last phrase, "within

⁹ *Decree on Religious Freedom*, 2; *ibid.*, 679.

due limits," though not explained by the Council, obviously is meant to exclude such religious claims as that of some head-hunting tribes in the Philippines who used to say that their gods required them to go out and get heads. And we assume that the Council would be likely also to approve the U.S. civil law which forbids polygamy, even though more than one religion approves it. Similarly, we would have to assume there are limits to academic freedom. The nature of those limits, for those who follow Vatican II, is sufficiently clear from our first approach to the question, in which we saw that academic freedom presupposes that a man is following the method of his field. The Catholic theological method requires that he utilize the Magisterium of the Church to determine the correct sense of the sources of revelation.

With this approach, we find it fully possible to reconcile the Magisterium with academic freedom, both in Mariology, and in theology in general. Following this approach, this Magisterium, we are on the way to true theological renewal, as well as to the much desired aim of every University: a grand synthesis of all knowledge. That synthesis of course is foredoomed if one does not seek it through theology, for, as the atheistic wing of the Existentialists never weary of assuring us, without God, the universe simply does not make sense. To describe, however well, that which is senseless, can only yield a senseless result, not a grand synthesis.

On the other hand, failure to follow this approach has led not a few Catholic "theologians," as Dr. Sontag has so well observed, to follow a Protestant instead of a Catholic method in theology. And this in turn goes far toward explaining why, in the words of Dr. Outler, "the crisis among Roman Catholic theologians has reached a major level of befuddlement." Those who abandon the compass of true theological method have every right to be befuddled.