

## Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

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Volume 5

Article 3

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4-1-1994

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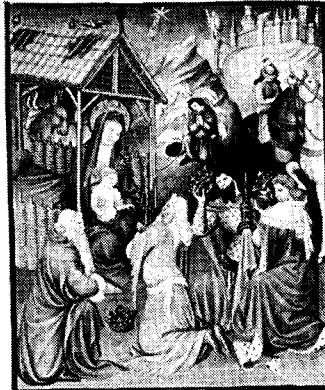
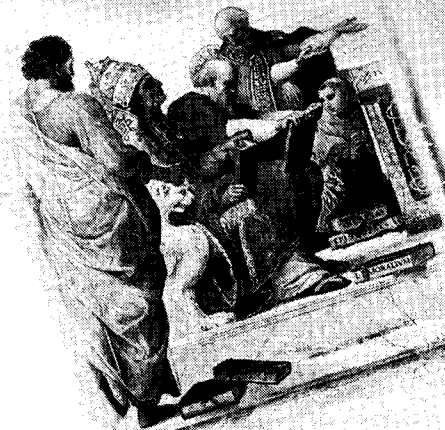
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### Recommended Citation

Haughey, John C. (1994) "Theology and the Mission of the Jesuit College and University," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 5, Article 3.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol5/iss1/3>



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# Theology and the Mission of the Jesuit College and University

John C. Haughey SJ

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**Y**ou would think, wouldn't you, after all these centuries, that it would be clear what role theology should play in a Jesuit college or university? The fact is it has never been so discussed and controverted as it is now. The most immediate cause of discussion and controversy is the question of how the church document on Catholic universities and colleges ought to be implemented in those institutions.<sup>1</sup> This article will not be about that effort since at the time of this writing the discussion among bishops and institutions and between them continues to go on.

But those circumstance provide a good occasion to examine anew theology's role in a Jesuit college or university.<sup>2</sup> In this article, after a brief historical overview of where theology has come from, we will cite some of the things that make the present conditions of university theology so different from past ones. From there we will take a look at five authors who have very different perspectives on the issue. Sparked by their ideas, I will conclude with a description of what I think theology's role in a Jesuit university should be.

## *Some History, Some Comments*

Two years before it opened its doors in 1789, Georgetown College, the first Catholic academy in North America, announced its two objectives: "to unite the means of communicating 'Science' [the academic program] with an effectual provision for guarding and im-

proving the Morals of Youth [the religious program]."<sup>3</sup> Student morals were to be improved by attendance at Mass and religious devotions as well as "catechism at 4PM" on Saturdays. On Sunday mornings there was also an hour long moral exhortation.<sup>4</sup> Notice that the religious program was extracurricular and concerned with the formation and cultivation of moral affections. It was not part of the curricular, academic fare dubbed "science."

By 1868 catechism had migrated to the weekdays. No longer left till one-half hour before sundown on Saturday, religious instruction became curricular. It was also more apologetically oriented. The objective was that students be equipped with a "rational defense of the Christian faith." This was achieved by their mastering the contents of a 400 page catechism with its question/answer format. The hoped for result: "a perfectly instructed Christian," who was able to defend his faith and his church.<sup>5</sup>

The next major change in this evolution took place in 1940 at the recommendation of John Courtney Murray SJ. His far-sighted vision for a lay theology for collegians

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was rooted in his conviction that the laity had their own specific role to play and that role was “in the world.” To this end students were to become versed in Scripture instead of watered-down treatises of scholastic theology. With a theology faculty that was almost exclusively Jesuit, students were to be taught how “to effectively collaborate with the hierarchy in accomplishing the renewal and reconstruction of the whole of modern social life.”<sup>6</sup>

This Murray vision would have been implemented had Jesuit teachers themselves been students of Scripture and the world. At that time they were not notable for expertise in either.

The American Catholic Church of the 40s and 50s was still largely marginal to the culture of the country, which explains why its institutions, more specifically, Catholic colleges and universities, were still in a custodial mode of operation. The faculty and student body were mostly Catholic. Philosophy was taught with a view to making students effective apologists of the faith. Morality was largely of an individualistic, “save one’s soul” character. Religious education was to mature a presumed faith.

The mid-sixties became a heady time for the Catholic community because the Second Vatican Council generated much interest in things theological. Some of the categories that excited laity and clergy alike at that time were ecumenism, freedom of conscience, scripture study, living room dialogues, social action, civil rights, the ministry of the laity, the lay apostolate, liturgical renewal, lay spirituality, the church in the world, and world religions.

In Jesuit colleges and universities a greater differentiation of specializations began to develop after the Council. The pastoral functions long associated with theology departments began to be taken over by people trained to serve the students’ pastoral needs in newly constituted campus ministry teams. One of the immediate consequences of this development was that the theology department was free to aim at attaining academic parity with the other disciplines.

A growing number of well-trained lay theologians added a new found clarity to the theology departments. In fact, most Jesuit institutions began hiring people trained outside of Catholic doctoral programs, non-Catholics and even non-Christian specialists in the the-

ology department. The discipline began to develop its own critical institutions and its members also joined already existing organizations such as the Catholic Theological Society of America, the Society of Christian Ethics, the Society of Biblical Literature, the College Theology Society and the American Academy of Religion. If one adds to these drastic changes the fact that an increasing number of students at various Jesuit colleges and

universities were not Catholic, one can sympathize with an older generation of Catholics who wondered whether “Jesuit” and “Catholic” were becoming historical memories rather than constitutive characteristics of these institutions. As someone who has taught in three different theology departments in Jesuit universities since 1963, I can safely say that no other department has undergone so great a degree of change.

In these few historical vignettes we can see how the objectives have changed from moral and religious formation through catechetics and apologetics to religious education to preparation for the lay apostolate to developing a critical

capacity to reflect on faith. The constant that runs through all these years seems to have been a personal appropriation of the Catholic faith.

But a subtle change seems also to have taken place. It is not as clear that it is the faith of the Church that is being taught now as it is the faith of the teacher. Hence, it may or may not be the Catholic faith that the teacher is reflecting on and teaching. Or it may be a version of Catholic faith that is questionably Catholic to other members of the department whose faith is of a more supposedly orthodox character.

Before leaving this section of my essay, I would like to make two comments. First, I think that “taught theology” lives off of lived faith; that faith is still what gives theology its life. A theology that exists solely in the mind of the theologian, something that has life only in his or her intellectual categories, does not have a future beyond the speaking of it. It is disconnected from any community seeking to live by faith. Granted, there is a wholly different way of viewing this matter, the religious studies way. Religious studies as a discipline weighs religious

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behavior after the manner of science, seeing faith data as phenomena to be described, analyzed and categorized without any commitment to the data conveyed by the teacher.<sup>7</sup>

A second comment is about the relatively recent division of labor between the pastoring function of campus ministry and the critical reflection on faith function of the theology department. I think that that division promises more clarity than it delivers because, of its very nature, teaching must retain a pastoral side to it—and all the more so if the subject matter is faith and reflection thereon. By pastoral here I mean personalized guidance, caring for, leading the individuals in one's care beyond religious credulity into critical reflection on a faith that is not snuffed out by the teacher's rationalism or agnosticism or ignorance or bitterness, etc. So, while the division of responsibilities between campus ministry and theology has been a good thing, it becomes undesirable if teachers, theologians in particular, eschew the pastoring responsibilities endemic to their profession both as theologians and as teachers. This is all the more necessary with undergraduates. They need teachers who can weave together a growth in the students' critical capacities with an awareness of the treasures of the religious tradition being taught. How would inculcating a critical capacity in a religious illiterate serve the Jesuit university's mission?

### *The New Context*

The most radical change in the theology or religious studies offerings has been in the religious composition of the theology departments themselves. They are pluralistic in the sense that many of the faculty members may not be Catholic but also that the Catholicism of those who are Catholic is here liberal, there conservative—not to mention feminist, integralist, charismatic, liberationist, practical, speculative, pastoral, etc. Add to this that the specializations of the faculty member are multidisciplinary: e.g., exegesis, history, systematics, ethics, ecumenism, catechesis, philosophical theology, non-Christian religions.

Not only are we not of one faith; even those members of the theology department who profess the Catholic faith offer a veritable explosion of interpretations of their faith. These interpretations can be contradictory, even destructive of peace. Although bewildering at times, this explosive pluralism tends to be increasingly enriching if it is driven by competence. Such at least is my own experience.

Hannah Arendt was prophetic when she predicted a number of years ago that "plurality" would soon become

"the law of the earth."<sup>8</sup> We know some of the larger, long term causes of this plurality: e.g., the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the French and American revolutions, psychotherapy, secularization, industrialization and existentialism, not to mention the intellectual progenitors behind these phenomena. All of this helped to generate the torrential plurality we now experience in political, economic, social and religious life.

But two proximate causes merit special mention as having affected academic theology towards this pluralism of interpretation. One of these causes has affected our whole intellectual culture, namely postmodernism. The other influence is more structural, the laicization and democratization of theology. A word about each.

Postmodernism, even though its meaning is difficult to pin down and its complexities too vast for so brief an essay as this, would certainly include a passion for decoding and deconstructing received meanings while expecting and promoting the development of ever new meanings. With postmodernism, objectivity is out, hermeneutics is in. Truth is neither sought for nor expected since it smacks of dogmatism or group-think.

A second proximate cause of this hermeneutical explosion at least in theology is the laicization and democratization of the discipline. In the 60s no fewer than four Catholic universities in the United States began doctoral programs in theology, adding them to the few already in existence. And since that time as many lay Catholics have sought degrees in non-Catholic universities as in Catholic universities. If social location means anything, it means that theologians theologize within their situations. Consequently, lay Catholics tend to approach theology from a different angle of vision than their clerical counterparts since the laity's social location gives its members a different relationship to the Church and the world than their clergy colleagues. The vocation of the laity is very much in the world or in the temporal order, as Church documents like to call it. Furthermore, lay theologians will speak for themselves and not for or as the Church. Experiencing church in a different way than clergy do, lay theologians are likely to claim more for experience than the clergy who are held to more of the discipline required for those whose training has them act in the name of the Church.

A further way of understanding why there is such variation in theologies today is to appreciate the many texts that are not faith texts which theologians are using to understand faith.<sup>9</sup> By faith texts here, I mean the Scriptures, the councils, the classical theological works that effectively embody the Christian tradition, the lives of our holy or intellectual giants, symbols, rituals and the observable praxis that flows directly from faith convic-

tions. These texts are part of our Christian story and, hence, will be part of the theological conversation. They are not the whole story, which is why there is more than one set of texts in play at any one moment.

The other set of texts, of a non-faith character whether contemporary or classical, enables theologians to give our respective situations a better, deeper reading. One is attracted to certain texts by reason of one's responsibilities, training, needs and familiarities. Lay theologians are attracted to certain texts because they speak to their experiences as people who are in the everyday world of work and taxes, babies and neighborhood associations, car pools and aging in-laws. The use of non-faith texts to elucidate theology could hardly mean a dilution of theology since nothing human is alien to faith.

Undoubtedly, clergy theologians also use many non-faith texts but they have often been suspect or chided for doing so. The Church Fathers used the pagan texts of their day. Aristotle was Aquinas' vade mecum before he himself became the norm of orthodoxy; John Courtney Murray read the classic texts of our country's political self-understanding and then changed the Church's self-understanding in the matter of religious freedom. Texts include, of course much more than the printed word. Teilhard's texts were the rocks and wonders of nature whence he read God's designs. Or a Richard McCormick and a Charles Curran insist on reading modern embryology to understand in a new light what the Church has taught.

Social location makes certain texts attractive; it also makes some loyalties more likely than others. Loyalties profoundly affect our interpretations. Our loyalties do not necessarily preclude a critical reading of a text but they definitely give it a presumption in favor of the loyalty. Of course, I am referring to loyalty in the sense that Josiah Royce employs in his philosophical works. In this connection, I think that one of the more interesting research projects that need to be undertaken is a study of the loyalties of the lay faculty members of Catholic theology departments. This study would seek to ascertain the loyalty of the Catholic members of our departments to the church, including the local church. Such a study would likewise seek to measure their loyalty to their own particular specialization and those colleagues who ply their trade in the same area of endeavor. Since their loyalty to their particular department or university varies widely, it seems, this would also have to be part of the study. Another item in the loyalty chart that is susceptible of measurement is the Jesuit thing, presumably with some faculty strongly identifying with it, others only slightly and still others at odds with how it functions either locally or at large.

### *Five Directions*

So far this essay has been largely descriptive of where Jesuit theology departments have come from and where they are now. We will now take account of five very different directions theology might in the future take in a Catholic, Jesuit university. Each of these directions enables the reader to appreciate the diverse tensions relating to doing theology at one of our colleges or universities. Wrestling with each of these directions should help one to form a clearer idea of what our departments might become. Each propounds a position that must be dealt with, though not all five had Jesuit theology departments in mind when they were articulated.

# 1

## *Theology as Part of the Mission of the Church*

The first direction is prescriptive. It comes from Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* published in 1990 after a long period of gestation. The initial draft, done in 1985, evoked 650 formal, full responses from bishops and Catholic universities around the world. Because of these responses the text was drastically revised. The final product met with little comment, at least at first. I say at first because the slight attention it received when it saw the light of day has been superseded by considerable attention because of proposed ordinances for its implementation.

Needless to say, the overall tone of this Apostolic Constitution is ecclesiocentric as the following excerpts indicate. It calls Catholic universities to a "fidelity to the Christian message as it comes to us through the Church" as well as "an institutional commitment to the service of the people of God and the human family."<sup>10</sup> Each Catholic university "participates in and contributes to the life and mission of the universal church, assuming consequently a special bond with the Holy See by reason of the service to unity which it is called to render to the whole church. One consequence of [this special bond] is that the institutional fidelity of the university to the Christian message includes a recognition of and adherence to the teaching authority of the church in matters of faith and morals."<sup>11</sup>

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Further, "it is intrinsic to the principles and methods of their research and teaching in their academic discipline that theologians respect the authority of the bishops and assent to Catholic doctrine according to the degree of authority with which it is taught."<sup>12</sup> "By its very nature, each Catholic university makes an important contribution to the Church's work of evangelization. ... Moreover, all the basic academic activities of a Catholic university are connected with and in harmony with the evangelizing mission of the church."<sup>13</sup>

These few excerpts should serve to indicate the great distance there is between what the Vatican would like to find a Catholic university doing and what at least American Jesuit embodiments, their theology departments in particular, actually see themselves doing. I do not wish to argue for or against the apostolic constitution's positions but only to state that they simply do not describe even the aspirations of the majority of theology department members whom I know. For example, seeing themselves as functioning in terms of "the evangelizing mission of the church" would not describe what most such theologians think they are doing.

This having been said, however, it should be noted that the overall tone of the constitution is not anywhere as alienating or authoritarian as the first draft. Institutional autonomy and academic freedom are given more than a nod. Its stress on dialogue is refreshing. It calls for "dialogue between bishops and theologians." And, under the general rubric of a dialogue between faith and reason, it recommends that theology must continually take initiatives that would seek to have "the various disciplines... brought into dialogue for their mutual enhancement." Such dialogue will enrich theology and make it "more relevant to current needs."<sup>14</sup> Dialogue widens in the document to include a dialogue between "the Gospel and culture" as also with "cultures of the world of today" not to mention with "various cultural traditions existing within the Church."<sup>15</sup>

One of the more reflective and concrete responses to this apostolic constitution came from Cardinal James Hickey, the Ordinary of the Catholic Archdiocese of Washington, D.C. He reminded his readers that "authentic Catholic theology takes its origin and derives its mission from the teaching and mission of the Church." But "Catholic theological inquiry as a whole has reached a crossroads, a critical point, which cannot be passed without a careful examination of conscience on some fundamental points."<sup>16</sup> The three questions it must ask itself are: "Is theological inquiry today truly receptive and accepting of this message of Christ as it comes to us through the Church? Is theology engaged in the tasks of explaining, preserving and expanding the Church's faith; or is it contributing to a spirit of doubt, skepticism and dissent? Is theology absorbed in helping to mend the Christian fabric of the ecclesial community—a task so essential to re-evangelization—or is it further weakening that fabric?"<sup>17</sup>

These are serious questions. They invite Catholic theologians first of all to examine their own and their department's relationship to the church. I would ask the question this way: Can one claim to be a Christian theologian, meaning a follower of Christ, if the Christ he or she believes in is bodyless? Catholic Christianity professes that the Christ has a body, a concretely accessible body! If the kind of Christianity a department taught was abstract, abstracted from flesh and blood, an intellectual product, only a production of thought and memory of him who is said to have ascended but has left no empirical trace, could such a department be Christian? The cardinal's questions also afford an occasion to ask both him and Rome whether the objectives implied in the three questions are objectives that are appropriate for theology, if theology is seen as a critical inquiry into faith. About this, more later.

# 2

## Theology in Service to the Church

The second direction for theology comes from Fordham University's Rev. Avery Dulles SJ, who adds two important considerations to our subject. The first of these is that theology is done in service

to the Church. This is not one of his *obiter dicta* but one of his deep convictions with much theology and history to back it up. This conviction is that the inquiry involved in doing theology should be undertaken from within a religious commitment. The faith reflected on is the faith of the Church. The source of the faith which theology reflects on is the Church. The understanding being sought is learned not just from other theologians but from one's familiarity with the faith as that develops within a community of faith. "Through indwelling in the community of faith one acquires a kind of connaturality or

connoisseurship that enables one to judge what is or is not consonant with revelation."<sup>18</sup>

Dulles' position on the relationship between theology and the Church is of a piece both with his hermeneutics of trust (versus a hermeneutics of suspicion) and with his advocacy of a "postcritical" theology. This notion of a postcritical theology is an important contribution to our inquiry. For Dulles, a postcritical theology begins with "a presupposition or prejudice in favor of faith."<sup>19</sup> It would, therefore, differentiate itself from "the critical program" that subjects all belief, commitment, conviction to doubt. As Dulles points out, critical theology either has not doubted or cannot doubt its own doubt and, notwithstanding the good intentions of many of its proponents, has helped to promote positivism, relativism and scientific humanism. Critical theology, he claims, has

been unwilling to admit its own tacit presupposition, namely, that no knowing is presuppositionless.

While I resonate with Dulles' positions, a niggling fact seems to spoil their immediate relevance for Jesuit college and university theology departments. That fact is that the theologians in these departments are members of many different churches as well as faiths and hence would not see themselves as serving the faith or the Church. Howsoever desirable these intentionalities might be, they speak to a situation that no longer exists. In the abstract, Dulles expresses exactly what I believe. In the concrete, our theology faculties will never again be simply Roman Catholic, and it is with this reality that we have to work to forge the needed clarity about future theology offerings in our schools. The constitution of these departments is in large part due to our schools heeding the directions laid out by Vatican II that brought the Church out of its ghetto into the modern world.

Dulles' ideas force us to distinguish what should have been distinguished all along, namely, the difference between undergraduate theology offerings and graduate theology offerings. In teaching undergraduates, a postcritical way of presenting theology would be clearly superior to a critical theology since it is difficult to see how you can invite young people to reflect critically on a faith they either do not have or, having, do not know if they want to commit to. The majority of undergraduates are still "shoppin' around." Since they are, a postcritical theology would seem to be both pedagogically and pastorally a better way to proceed with them because it begins with a presumption in favor of faith. Furthermore, before a given faculty member could entertain the ideas of serving either the faith or the Church, his or her primary concern must necessarily be the service of the students who tend to be all over the place in this matter of faith. Given this noncommittal context of the ordinary undergraduate, the pedagogical responsibilities of a faculty member would force him or her to function more like a religious educator than a theologian. As Dulles wisely observes, "pluralism consists in the coexistence of several living faiths, no one of which can well be understood except from within its own framework."<sup>20</sup>

But, moving on to graduate theology, I wonder how many of the graduate faculties of our departments would concur with Dulles' prescription of a postcritical theology. He would include in his list of what a postcritical theologian must accept such things as acknowledging "the reliable transmission of the gospel through Scripture and the Church."<sup>21</sup> In addition, "Catholic theology is predicated upon the validity of the Catholic tradition and upon the guidance offered by the hierarchical magisterium." Maybe the majority could accept these

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two items but how many would go this extra mile? "The Catholic theologian is bound to accept the definitive ("irreformable") teaching of the magisterium and must be favorably disposed to accept whatever the magisterium puts forth as obligatory doctrine."<sup>22</sup> Dulles' list of postcritical "musts" begins to sound uncritical.

It needs to be said, too, that maintaining a favorable disposition toward what the magisterium puts forward as "obligatory doctrine" is particularly difficult when the closest representative of the magisterium, in the person of the local bishop, has often shown himself either theologically incompetent or indifferent to theology or prepared to use his position to exercise control or conformity over the faithful, in particular the faithful more competent in theology than he is.

# 3

## *Theology as a Principle of Order*

A third font for conceiving the role of theology in a Jesuit college or university comes from the director of Boston College's Jesuit Institute, Rev. Michael Buckley SJ. His angle of vision is on the role of theology in bringing about the integration of knowledge. He claims that theology's role in a college or university should aspire to be "architectonic." That is, theology should supply "the knowledge that brings order into the vast assemblage of human sciences and disciplines, subject-matters and activities." Theology is more than a science among sciences; it is a source of order which effects a synthesis that can incorporate the conclusions of the sciences. Using a different figure of speech, he imagines theology in a university as able to "draw into itself—as the apex of a cone draws the lines of a cone—all those studies which we designate as liberal or scientific or philosophic." He would go so far as to say that "it is theology which specifies the curriculum."<sup>23</sup> In his most recent article about all this, the assertion that was implicit in the above images becomes explicit. "Any movement toward meaning and truth is inchoatively religious."<sup>24</sup> The academic is vectored inherently toward faith and vice versa. "The native dynamism of intellect" is toward ultimacy.

I believe this, but it is very optimistic. What is it about academics that has their vector toward ultimacy seem to



abort short of the goal more often than not? Furthermore, one person's ultimacy is another's proximacy. And, even if the optimism is warranted, what should we do while we wait for academe to head toward ultimacy and the desired unity?

While Buckley's architectonic, unitary vision is appealing to any who would like to see the Queen of the Sciences brought back from exile to bring some order into the chaos of interpretations, this may be looking for a solution in the wrong place. Given the ultimacy or the unity he and we are looking for, insofar as these are noetic—that is, of a formally intellectual order—it seems closer to the task of philosophy than theology. Is it not peculiar to philosophy to pursue an "inquiry into the transcendental principles justifying all systematic method and explanation"?<sup>25</sup>

But unity and ultimacy are achieved by and in persons with the help of the Holy Spirit, not in institutions. If this is true, it would be fair to ask on whom the task rests to assist this unity in a person. It rests first and foremost on the person, obviously. And for the young, it rests also on parents, parish, church, the immediate religious culture of the person, the overall culture of the Jesuit university centered in the campus ministry initiatives, not to mention Jesuits and those versed in the Spiritual Exercises and, only then, on the theology department.

# 4

## *Theology as a Conversation about a Text*

The fourth font for reconceiving theology's relationship to the mission of the Jesuit university comes from someone who neither is a Jesuit nor teaches in a Jesuit University nor thinks of himself as having addressed the issue we are dealing with here.

Nonetheless, David Tracy has spelled out a way of seeing theology vis-a-vis the rest of the academy as well as the larger culture that, I think, makes his insights important both for teachers and departments of theology. His insight can be understood in terms of an analogy to a conversation. Theology is the conversation that follows from reflection on a text, a religious classic. If these texts are ignored, a discontinuity develops between the past and the present. Without such conversations the future will become memoryless and cacophonous.

The conversation begins between a text and a reader and goes from there to people talking to one another. A conversation is only as good as the ability of both parties to hear one another. One has to listen well to the classical texts to have them speak. If one does not, the conversation breaks down and a unilateral monologue ensues, or some degree of domination

of the otherness of the text takes place. As Tracy notes, there can be no such thing as "a purely autonomous text... and no passive reader. There is only that interaction named conversation"<sup>26</sup> in which the text addresses and interrogates and, in turn, the interpreter questions and answers.

According to Tracy the core activity of a conversation is interpretation. Interpretation is not a peripheral activity. "To experience... is to interpret; to be human is to be a skilled interpreter."<sup>27</sup> The encounter of interpreter with text requires an exquisite courtesy. For Tracy, the conversation makes it possible for the rage against order that characterizes modernity to become a blessed rage for order once the classic text discloses the order that has been lost.

Argument is not only inevitable because there are conflicts over interpretations but is desirable because it enables the conversation to go forward. Arguments can be intrasubjective, intersubjective, communal or public. Argument will ruin the conversation only if, because of argument, listening ceases and an effort at domination begins. The Reformation was an argument that went bad in the course of a conversation. It turned polemical and listening stopped.

Theological creativity springs from genuine conversation occasioned by dialogue with religious classics. It can also be occasioned by liturgy, personal prayer experiences and dialogue with the other disciplines, all of which are texts each in its own way. Conversation is the paradigm that overcomes the distance between theology and culture, the theology department and the other departments, the university and the city, the Gospel and the world.

Conversation for Tracy touches on the style of the theological enterprise but is no less concerned with content and with outcomes. How does his idea of theology done after the manner of conversation differ from the dialogic ideal mentioned above in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*? A key difference, it seems to me, is the role that the experience of the conversationalist plays in each of these two models. For Tracy's conversationalist, experience is open, going in and coming out. As far as the Vatican is concerned, for the Catholic in dialogue, experience is open going in but the final shape is not wholly unknown; the outcome is not wholly open. For example, from the above mentioned apostolic constitution we read: "One consequence of the university's essential relationship to the church is that the institutional fidelity of the university to the Christian message includes a recognition of and adherence to the teaching authority of the church in faith and morals. Catholic members of the university community are also called to a personal fidelity to the church with all that this implies."<sup>28</sup> Concretely, what would the experience of a lesbian who claimed to be a faithful Catholic while being committed to one partner, what would her experience count for in a theological dialogue on the subject of Christian sexuality?

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# 5

## Theology In Dialogue with a Human Text

There is an entirely different kind of text than the printed text that occasions an entirely different kind of prescription for the role of theology in a Jesuit university. That text is the poor person. Reading this wholly other kind of text has led some Jesuits in El Salvador to radically reimagine their Jesuit university's mission. The Rector-President of the Universidad Centro Americana, Rev. Ignacio Ellacuría SJ, and his companions were murdered by those who were threatened by this new conception of the Jesuit university's mission in El Salvador.

Ellacuría contends that "the mission of the university should be shaped in accordance with the situation of the human rights of the poor majorities and in accordance with the stage or phase in which those poor majorities find themselves and out of which they are advancing."<sup>29</sup> Ellacuría was of the opinion that if this is not the university's focus, then it runs the risk of being used by students seeking "to secure a dominant and profitable place in an unjustly structured society."<sup>30</sup> By acquiescing in such undesirable student motivation, the university would be complicit in society's injustice rather than a leader in pursuing its elimination. He observed that "the struggle against injustice and the pursuit of truth cannot be separated nor can one work for them independently of each other."<sup>31</sup>

The effort to reconceive the UCA's mission was in part prompted by the Jesuits' response to the Thirty-second General Congregation of the Society of Jesus (1974-75) with its celebrated formula that henceforth Jesuit ministries should always be done as "the service of faith and the promotion of justice." From that time on Ellacuría and his Jesuit colleagues steered the UCA towards having "its center outside itself," i.e., in the social reality of a country that experienced extraordinary poverty. From then on, its chief goal was not in assisting in a general search for truth nor in the training of professionals in the abstract but rather in "the liberation of the poor majority of El Salvador" because their very existence "constitutes a dramatic negation of truth and reason."<sup>32</sup> Does this make its mission a political one? The university's answer to this is straightforward. It claims to have "confronted the reality [it finds itself in] with the proper style of a

university. It has clearly distinguished itself from those who mistakenly want to do political work without doing academic work, and also from those who want to do academic work without doing political work."<sup>33</sup>

How does it accomplish its mission? Through teaching, research and *proyección social*. It believes this third element of "social outreach" distinguishes it from its counterparts both in El Salvador and in the rest of the world. This component functions by projecting the university into the public life of the city and country. It trains "pastoral agents" for leadership in base communities, and as parish catechists. It publishes nine journals. It requires six hundred hours of community service of students before graduation. In all these ways, its professors and students serve the poor directly with their expertise. This is obviously an impressive, even a heroic response by the academy to a situation of dire poverty. What does it say to us in a situation both economically and politically quite different? More particularly, what does it say to the theology departments of North American Jesuit colleges and universities? It obviously puts the theological question of the option for the poor, something that is exercising the whole church, front and center. The UCA vision is to prepare students to be professionally competent while conscientizing them through direct contact with the poor, lest the net effect of their schooling be to prolong the ever widening divide between the opportunities of the haves and the powerlessness of the have nots.

The UCA's educational theory is that learning must go up from one's feet and in through one's hands to one's head. Praxis learning directly relates to the role theology plays in this Jesuit university's pursuit of its mission. Dean Brackley was one of a number of Jesuits to replace the murdered Jesuits; he notes that the first world has long had the luxury of a debate about the relation between faith and reason, while in the third world the debate must be about "the relationship between theory and praxis, between the truth and the option for the poor. [In fact] the option for the poor is essential to the search for truth and the unmasking of lies. In short, "amo ut intelligam," I love [the poor] that I may understand," both the faith and the system."<sup>34</sup>

What to make of this witness? The UCA experience obviously cannot simply be imported and made the para-

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*Some refer to the poor as the "third magisterium" that is needed to help the church know how to be church.*

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digm for our North American way of seeing the Jesuit college or university's mission or the theology department's method. For one thing, the poor here are both more diffuse and a more complex phenomenon than in the Latin American culture.

Furthermore, there is a big difference between conscientizing students and faculty and instrumentalizing a university to solve societal problems. Both the Gospel and the university are susceptible to manipulation by an ideological rendering of either. While guarding against reducing standards of academic competence, the UCA is sure that its students must receive some of their education from the poor. It is no less sure that one cannot be said to be educated either in the humanities or Christianity if one disavows or distances the school from the poor. It is, finally, sure that one is better educated, all things being equal, about the economic or political systems who has spent time viewing these from the angle of vision of those for whom these systems are wholly dysfunctional.

The witness of the Jesuit martyrs at the UCA and of many others who have chosen to go the route of the option for the poor without counting the cost has been creating a call in many circles for a new *Ratio Studiorum*. Given the Society of Jesus' new emphasis on the nexus between faith and justice, there is a growing feeling that a radical reconception needs to be undertaken lest our universities grow used to mouthing faith-and-justice-speak while acting another way. That status quo could surely guarantee that generation after generation of graduates of Jesuit schools were satisfying their desires for upward mobility without being confronted by a faith and justice vision tailored to their specialization or major. Meanwhile, in a number of places the poor are becoming increasingly appreciated as an important source of theological understanding. In fact some refer to them as "the third magisterium" that is needed to help the church know how to be church.

But a change in the self-understanding of Jesuits such as they underwent in their recent General Congregations does not immediately translate into a change in the self-understanding of a given Jesuit university. Each of the institutions has its own identity, only part of which is Jesuit. Jesuits are not in a position to dictate to the universities that bear their name. They can no longer change their universities' direction by mandate, but only by persuasion. I will attempt a little of that persuasion in what follows by highlighting the ingredients I find valuable in the above five prescriptions for what theology might become.

## A Composite Direction

In the course of elaborating the five visions of theology presented above, I have indicated that I think each of them has something to recommend it but also something that keeps it from being importable, *sine addito*, into a Jesuit college or university theology department. I will end this piece by putting together a composite which culls the particular values from each. In combination seven desiderata mark what theology is or ought to become in a Jesuit university, as I see it. A theology with these seven desirable characteristics is ecclesial, critical, dialogal, pluralist, service-centered, autonomous and constructive.

It seems clear that theology, at least Christian theology and all the more so Catholic theology, must be ecclesial. Much as a given faculty member might like to think he or she has grown beyond it, the fact is, Christian theology is still ecclesial. It is a discipline only because there has been and still are churches that mediate and celebrate faith in Christ. Faith remains the formal object of theology. No faith, no theology. No church, no faith, at least of a Christian character. No church, no job, at least for theologians!

This note of "ecclesial" speaks not only of theology's origin but also of its on-going life. The hierarchy's insistence on this cannot be dismissed as mere institutional self-maintenance. At the same time, two other ineradicable facts cannot be dismissed. The first of these is that this ecclesial character means something today considerably richer and more variegated than it did before Vatican II. "Ecclesial" no longer describes something simply isomorphic with the Roman Catholic Church. Since Vatican II Roman Catholicism has understood itself to be substantially related to forms of Christianity other than its own. It has even entered into a warm and understanding embrace with non-Christian faiths. The new depth and breadth of its self-understanding is reflected in most theology departments.

The second fact is that the overwhelming majority of Jesuit university theology faculty members see themselves as free standing, professional intellectuals who treat the Christian faith's manifestations and its institutionalizations neither hostilely nor agnostically but, nonetheless, critically. Those who are Roman Catholic would probably even argue that this critical way of doing theology is in fact their gift to the church. Hence, they speak and write with their own voices and in their own names, not in the name of the church, a circumstance that befits their academic self-understanding.

The second characteristic, therefore, of the theological endeavor is its need to be critical. This is a necessary contribution to the church because, if faith has any weakness, it is its penchant for a lazy, credulous, naive transcendence. Theology is always suspicious of too facile a transcendence; hence it is ever about the task of ferreting out the traditional from the tradition, the accidentals from the substantials, the taken-for-granted from the foundational, the assumed from the reasoned to. Good theology serves to deepen faith by lightening the load that an unreflective faith thinks it must bring into the next generation. With the lightening there is a growth in depth and relevance—or so theology hopes.

The third desired characteristic that should be added to this composite of theology in a Jesuit university is that it be dialogical in the sense of Tracy's conversational. The theology faculty are members in a conversation, and not a casual one, first of all with their texts. These, plus their idiosyncratic experiences of self, church and world, not to mention gender and generation, good and evil, equip them to carry on a dialogue with colleagues and students, with other disciplines, with their own and other cultures. The authority of their own experience up against the experience of the authority of the other are a difficult duo to bring to resolution. But that resolution is one of theology's tasks and, when done well, one of its glories.

A fourth quality that should characterize these theology departments is their pluralism. Since this describes what they already are, we need to be more precise. There is one kind of pluralism that generates a religious and theological fecundity and another kind of pluralism that generates indifference, confusion or impasse. The undesirable pluralism is bred from a lack of competence or a lack of conviction. It does not make for good conversation for one of the parties to be underinvested in or ignorant of his or her tradition. Furthermore, conversations are ruined by the absence of a common text or by those who read into the text what they want. It is easy for a thousand flowers to bloom where eisegesis is de rigueur but they soon give off an odor that makes real dialogue impossible.

A fifth characteristic that must be added to this composite is the aspiration to form "a man or woman for oth-

ers." This service-centered note is the one most frequently struck in the mission statements of U.S. Jesuit colleges and universities. If this is going to be anything more than an abstract ideal or velleity, then some serious attention should be given to the direction recommended by those educational theorists who believe we must not only think our way into a new way of acting but act our way into a new way of thinking.

The UCA's emphasis on praxis, and more generally, liberation theology's emphasis on the same must be given a thorough examination by those of us responsible for our educational institutions.

It is not that North American Jesuit schools are completely devoid of this service-centered praxis component of education but their ventures have often not been venturesome to date, being largely either of an extracurricular nature (usually under the sponsorship of the campus ministry team) or practicums for professional certification. Jesuit institutions have sensibilities to cultivate that are for more than

the true, the good and the beautiful. These will be more likely cultivated if they are curricular than extracurricular. Concretely, students will need to be confronted by and walked through struggles for justice. The poor are special texts where the presence and intentions of God, for those sensitive to them, are discernible. Reading those texts will involve the doing of theology more closely with and in communities of struggle which are either crying out for justice or struggling to act on behalf of justice.

Many of the university's disciplines, not just theology, have to be brought more directly into this "for others" intentionality. As much must be made of orthopraxy in the future as has been made of orthodoxy in the past. And who would say that a move from an authority-centered theology to a justice/suffering-centered theology would be a move away from the Gospels? I do not mean to play these antinomies off against one another. The fact is, orthodoxy and orthopraxy, like theologies that are authority-centered and justice-centered, need each other to avoid the extremes into which one without the other easily falls.

Another way of saying this is that third world theology is teaching us that there is another way of being literate. To be educated, one's moral sensibilities have to be cultivated by greater exposure to the dysfunctions of our

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*Theology in a Jesuit college or university ought to be ecclesial, critical, dialogal, pluralist, service-centered, autonomous and constructive.*

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political and economic systems. This calls for exposure not only to the macrosystems but also to the microsystems wherein one finds the victims of those dysfunctions. The result would be a wholly different way of developing a critical sense than the way in which heretofore theology has conceived itself doing this. Such a new way of being critical would not cancel but complement the usual way theologians and academics attempt to develop a critical capacity. If the text of the poor is not part of what we are versed in, we remain illiterates, at least as Christians.

A sixth desirable characteristic to be underscored is autonomy. Theology departments in Catholic universities must be autonomous vis-a-vis ecclesiastical authority. No less an authority than the present Pope stressed this early in his reign to a group of German theologians. "The Church desires an autonomous theology, which is distinct from the Church's magisterium, but knows itself to be bound in a common service to the truth of faith."<sup>35</sup> That same year (1980) he addressed a gathering of

theologians at Altotting in Germany to the same effect, expressly indicating that they must enjoy an "unrenounceable autonomy" since they, like the magisterium, "have a distinct task; neither can be reduced to the other."<sup>36</sup> The previously mentioned ordinances for the implementation of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* do not accord with this autonomy.

The seventh desired characteristic of the theology appropriate to a Jesuit college or university is that it be constructive. If faith seeks understanding and understanding is endlessly changing, then the task of theology must be to construct the nexus between the two. The endless hunt for intelligibility and understanding must be connected to faith otherwise all we have is *intellectus quaerens intellectum* rather than *fides quaerens intellectum*.<sup>37</sup> The academy is always seeking more understanding. Theology's role is to insure that its search is not interdicted by secularism, rationalism, relativism, the hermeneutical morass of perspectivalism, etc.

An extended metaphor should help to gather together

some of these seven strands. The metaphor would see theologians as ever about the task of writing the next chapter of the church's ever unfolding story. Clearly theologians do not ply their trade with the authority of office. Theirs is an authority of knowledge gained from critically poring over the past chapters of the story of faith with the aid of the ancillary fields of knowledge needed to give fresh insight into this still unfolding story.

Theologians know that their chapters are tentative and usually paradoxical to their readership. Tentative because theologians function more like ghostwriters than the actual authors of the story who are the faithful, the community of believers. Paradoxical because there will inevitably be some discontinuity between the theologians' versions of the projected chapters as well as the present and previous chapters and what the faithful believe these will be, are and have been. To change the metaphor, new wine is always being poured into new wineskins, or a new word is being spoken into ever changing flesh. Good theology will anticipate the new vintage, or the new word to be heard.

Theologians hand their chapters over to four different parties for their responses. The first of these is one's peers in the academy. The second is the community of believers. The third is the teaching church, which would include magisterium, pastors and religious educators. It is the collective responsibility of this teaching church to mediate formally the faith as purely as they are able to the next generation.

Theologians will almost certainly include in their work a critique of the present chapter of the faith as it is being lived out. They will almost certainly say one has it wrong or not wholly right as measured in terms of the previous chapters all the way back to the beginning. Since it is not easy to hear that the version of faith one has been operating on is not completely coherent with the longer, deeper version or is not *au courant* with contemporary scholarship, theologians will seldom get a sustained applause for their construals.

But theologians also think of themselves as having responsibility to a fourth population, the contemporary culture. If theology's only data were ecclesial, its products would be sectarian, thus doing a disservice to both church and world. The new chapters which they submit must put together the best that reason, culture and faith can produce. Theology must make faith intelligible to the contemporary culture as well as make the best that the culture has produced available to faith. This presumes that theology can be no less critical of culture than it is of itself and church. Theologians have a larger task than keeping a religious subculture on its toes, just as Vatican II was sure the church itself had. Remember, the real

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*Theologians are writing the next chapter of the church's ever unfolding story; they function like ghostwriters for the actual authors who are the community of believers.*

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co-authors of the next chapter of this unfolding narrative of Christ and his church are not the theologians but the People of God. (I say co-authors because the other writer is the Holy Spirit, or so we fondly hope.) The theologian's role, therefore, is a limited one. He or she functions somewhat preemptively, like a ghostwriter who submits a preliminary version of the next chapter to the several audiences already mentioned. It will strike them as having or lacking verisimilitude to the lived truth of their lived faith. It is for the people whose story it really is to use these versions as they see fit insofar as those versions witness to their faith or represent a misappropriation of it.

### *A Response to a Call*

We have come a long way since the baby faith of 1787 when the Jesuits saw themselves saving the souls of the young and guarding them from the hostile world of American Protestantism. But we have a long way to go before the soul of America will be saved from its self-destructive tendencies. Our Jesuit colleges and universities, and their theology departments in particular, could play no small part in assisting God in bringing this about if they continue in the direction they have taken in the years since the Council.

This direction should not be a reason for hand-wringing or suspicion. Rather, the opening out (in sev-

eral senses of the phrase) of theology in our American Catholic universities should be an occasion for some pride and much hope. These professional intellectuals, lay and clerical, are being taken more and more seriously in their universities and beyond. They are generating a dialogue between faith and reason, as they grow in competence at discerning the relationship between their culture and faith. They are beginning to mediate the world of academe to the church and the church to the world of academe and beyond.

And, on a closing note, it cannot be emphasized strongly enough that the developments within Jesuit, Catholic universities are precisely what Vatican II had called for in passages such as the following from *Gaudium et Spes*,<sup>38</sup> the Pastoral Constitution on Church in the Modern World: "It is hoped that many laity will receive appropriate formation in the sacred sciences and that some will develop and deepen these studies by their own labors. In order that such persons may fulfill their proper function, let it be recognized that all the faithful possess a lawful freedom of inquiry and of thought; and the freedom to express their mind humbly and courageously about those matters in which they enjoy competence."

*(The Endnotes for this article can be found on page 31.)*