

Essays in Systematic Theology 50: The Renewal of Theology¹

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Your Eminence Cardinal Collins, President Anderson, honored guests, colleagues, friends, and graduates:

It is a distinct honor and privilege to be invited to address this convocation. And I want to thank University of St. Michael's College for the honor bestowed on me today. The older we get, I find, the more aware we become of how much we have been given and how deeply our work is indebted to others who have preceded and accompanied us. In particular I am aware that so much of what Darren mentioned in his gracious citation really honors a number of people who have worked with me and continue to work with me, without whom my work could never have been done. Some of these appear on the list of honorary doctorands from St. Michael's: Bernard Lonergan first of all, and Frederick Crowe, Ronald Martin Schoeffel, with whom I worked for thirty years in his capacity as Editor in Chief at University of Toronto Press, and Aloysius Cardinal Ambrozic, who was a great friend of the Lonergan Research Institute during my years as Director. And some of you are here, and you know who you are.

This is a wonderful time in the life of the Church to offer encouragement to a group of people graduating with degrees in theology. Not only do I congratulate today's graduates. I'm also going to go out on a limb a bit here and speculate about the possibilities and responsibilities that await today's graduates as the Church is renewed by the Holy Spirit and in the spirit of Pope Francis. For I believe that we are about to be part of the emergence of a theological atmosphere in the Church that can and will be similar to that which was experienced by people of my generation in the wake of the Second Vatican Council.

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I started the formal study of theology in 1966, ten years after my entry into the Society of Jesus. For the greater part of that decade, and so even before my formal studies in theology, I experienced and lived through one of the most engaging, exciting, and hopeful periods in the history of the Church. It is a period whose history is still being written, whose effective history is still going on, and so whose history will continue to be written for some time to come. But that history, I trust, will continue to acknowledge that the central ecclesial event during that decade was the Second Vatican Council. And even though my formal studies in theology did not begin until after the Council, theological questions, views, opinions, and the names and works of the leading theologians were part of the air we breathed for the better part of that decade. For many of us the lure of theology in that atmosphere was irresistible.

I would not be surprised if we are about to witness something similar. At least there are signs that point in that direction, theological signs of the times. I will mention only three of them.

The first has to do with unfinished business from the last fifty years of theology. One could argue that three of the most significant Catholic theological developments of the fifty years since the Council were not even represented in any significant way at the Council, and so that something new has already begun to happen in theology since the Council. But the three developments that I have in mind stand in urgent need of integration with one another. They and their representative spokespersons have been living for some time in an uneasy truce. This integration, I believe, represents one of the first tasks in front of our discipline. I am speaking of the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar, who was not at the Council at all, of the work of Bernard Lonergan, who was named as a *peritus* by the Canadian bishops late in the Council but was prevented from doing much at the Council due to problems of health, and of the theology of liberation, particularly as represented in the work of Gustavo Gutierrez.

Shortly after the Council, von Balthasar and Lonergan were named by Pope Paul VI as original members of the International Theological Commission. While their work was certainly well known before the Council, their popularity and influence took exponential leaps in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Gutierrez, like von Balthasar, was not at the Council at all but, unlike von

Balthasar, he has only been very recently officially acknowledged and his work approved by the teaching authority of the Church, and in fact by no less an authority than the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

How does our discipline integrate Balthasar's restoration of beauty as a transcendental and as the way in which the truth and goodness of God are disclosed to us, with Lonergan's openness to modern science, modern critical-historical scholarship, modern philosophy, and the post-modern welcome of the religious "other"? That in itself is a tall order. But then there is the further and larger task of implementing that integrated intellectual vision in the service of the Church's preferential option for the poor. Without that implementation, it may be said, the integration of the work of two intellectual giants or even of a hundred intellectual giants runs the risk of remaining fruitless.

A second task, and one that will help us bring this integration forward, is the theology of the Holy Spirit, which I believe will be a major development in this twenty-first century. The need for a developed pneumatology is present already in the insistence of Vatican II and of Pope John Paul II that the gift of the Holy Spirit is present and active beyond the explicit boundaries of Christian belief. Those affirmations of the Council and of the Pope are doctrinal statements. Theology has yet to explain how this can be and to unravel the implications of these statements for the whole of Christian comportment in the contemporary world, and especially to integrate these statements with the insistence of 'Dominus Iesus' on the the unique role of the incarnate Word of God in our salvation. Explaining how these statements can be true, how they are to be understood, and how they are to be integrated with fidelity to the Christological tradition of the Church and of theology will result, I believe, in significant developments in our understanding of the Holy Spirit and also of what we may call the invisible mission of the divine Word, the Word who enlightens every human being who comes into the world.

This leads me right into the third of the theological signs of the times. I take my cue here from Fr Adolfo Nicolàs, Superior General of the Society of Jesus, in words that he repeated a

number of times in the message he conveyed to several groups of American Jesuits within the past month.

There is need, Fr Nicolàs repeated, for our theology to become a theology of *mission*, and especially a theology of *missio Dei*, of divine mission as grounding all ecclesial mission. The mission of the Church participates in and carries forward the missions of the Holy Spirit and the Son. Every theological topic – God, Trinity, the Holy Spirit, the Incarnation, grace, revelation, creation, anthropology, original sin, personal and social sin, redemption, sacraments, church, social grace, praxis, resurrection, eternal life – has to be integrated into a theology of divine mission and of ecclesial mission as a participant in the missions of the Holy Spirit and of the Son. “As the Father has sent me,” says Jesus, “so I send you.” To quote Lonergan, “A theology mediates between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of a religion in that matrix.” The significance and role of Christian faith in any cultural matrix is fueled by the grace given to the Church to participate in and carry forward in history the missions of the Holy Spirit and of the divine Word become incarnate.

Pope Francis has already indicated some emphases that must be reflected in this theology of mission. He prays as universal Pastor in his reflections on the Church on June 12 of this year, “May the church be the place of God’s mercy and love, where everyone can feel themselves welcomed, loved, forgiven, and encouraged to live according to the good life of the Gospel. And in order to make others feel welcomed, loved, forgiven, and encouraged, the church must have open doors so that all might enter. And we must go out of those doors and proclaim the Gospel.”

And from a more systematic point of view, it is harmonious with the Pope’s emphases to say that the mission of the Church must be mediating what we can call social grace, that is, grace whose effects heal the effects of social sin in human situations. The Pope has called attention in particular to the social sins structured into the global economic system and the machines of war. A theology that would mediate the significance and role of the gospel in our respective cultural matrices in a way that would contribute to the emergence of a grace that heals the effects of social sin must collaborate with committed experts in other disciplines to construct viable alternatives to

the destructive paths down which the growing disparity between rich and poor, the exploits of warring nations, and religious hostilities are taking us.

To conclude: Integration of the most profound theological achievements so that they are fruitful in the service of the poor, discernment of the mysterious and unexpected workings of the Holy Spirit everywhere and at all times, and an overall orientation to mission are three of the tasks that define the renewal of Catholic theology that not only is possible in our time but that almost seems to be begging to be allowed to happen. But none of this can be done by individuals working in isolation. Theology is a communal task. It is the *community* of theologians that has a *collective* responsibility to make sure that something like this happens. Each of us individually has a very limited role to play. We are, some of us, exegetes, others historians, others systematicians, others theologically informed pastors and ministers of the Word. But I would hope that these three themes – intellectual integration in the service of the poor, discernment of the Spirit, and divine mission – will inform the work we all do, each in her or his own specialty and all of us working together, under the grace and guidance of the good God who sends the Holy Spirit to renew our discipline and enable us to make our small contributions to the renewal of the entire People of God in history.