Continue the Conversation

Suggestions for theologians and bishops in search of common ground
Robert P. Imbelli | MAY 30, 2011

On June 9, the 66th annual convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America will open in San Jose, Calif. This year’s theme, “All the Saints,” will be explored in four major addresses and numerous seminar sessions, drawing upon diverse biblical, historical and systematic perspectives. A glance at the program conjures a Joycean sense of “here comes everybody!” Yet the striking pluralism is framed by two events that embody a union that is more than merely symbolic. The convention will open with a prayer service followed by a welcome and reflection by the diocesan bishop, and the high point of the last full day will be the celebration of the Eucharist. These traditional identity-markers will no doubt assume a new relevance and pose a new challenge this year, for they will be enacted in the wake of heightened concerns among theologians and bishops.

On March 24 the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee on Doctrine issued a critical statement concerning The Quest for the Living God, a book by a former president of the Catholic Theological Society, Elizabeth A. Johnson, C.S.J. Shortly after, on April 8, the board of the society responded with a statement of its own, lamenting among other things the shortcomings of the process by which the committee’s discernment was reached. This in turn evoked, 10 days later, a letter from Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington, chairman of the bishops’ Committee on Doctrine. The letter, “Bishop as Teacher,” spoke forcefully of the particular responsibilities of bishops in matters of doctrine and of the respective roles and responsibilities of bishops and theologians in the church.

Yet, despite apparent disagreements, there clearly exist shared understandings and commitments. Thus the C.T.S.A. statement asserts: “We are conscious of the complementary but distinct vocations of the theologian and the Magisterium and are open to further conversation with the Committee on Doctrine regarding the understanding of our theological task.” For his part, Cardinal Wuerl, while acknowledging perhaps inevitable tensions, insists: “Nevertheless, when good will is present on both sides, when both [bishops and theologians] are committed to the truth revealed in Jesus Christ, their relationship can be one of profound communion as together they seek to explore new implications of the deposit of faith.”

Three Topics for Discussion

In an effort to further this needed conversation I suggest three topics that merit the careful attention of bishops and theologians and that require discernment and dialogue.

The first is a renewed affirmation that theology is an ecclesial discipline and that the vocation of the theologian is a distinctively ecclesial one. Catholic theology’s prime locus is in the midst of the ecclesial assembly. In light of the words of the bishops and of theologians cited above, this should seem self-evident. But (to borrow Blessed John Henry Newman’s terms) it is one thing to affirm this “notionally” and another to “realize” fully its import and implications.
A crucial factor that complicates this realization is that the social location of theology in the United States has shifted noticeably since the Second Vatican Council, from seminaries to universities. Though this shift has brought undoubted gains, it has also brought accompanying losses. I think in particular of the loss of a shared liturgical context for the doing of theology. One creative initiative might be for the local bishop and area theologians to meet at least annually in the context of both liturgical celebration and theological dialogue. A distinguishing element of the Catholic Common Ground Initiative, launched by the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, was its insistence upon setting discussions within the common space of liturgical celebration.

A second potentially fruitful topic for bishops and theologians could be the intrinsic connection among three crucial dimensions of the church’s mission: kerygma, catechesis and theology. After Vatican II the refrain has sometimes sounded, “We’re doing theology, not catechetics.” As an appeal to respect the integrity of the theological task, this can be understandable. But it suffers a twofold distancing from ecclesial reality. It can insinuate a divorce between theology and the proclamation of the Gospel. If theology, as most accept, is “faith seeking understanding,” then it can scarcely prescind from the content of that faith. In the First Letter of Peter (often cited by Pope Benedict), we read: “In your hearts reverence Christ as Lord and always be prepared…to give an account [logos] of the hope that is in you.” That account is always based upon the hope that is in Christ Jesus—the hope that is Christ Jesus.

Furthermore, the divorce of catechetics and theology appears in the present ecclesial reality to be hopelessly abstract. A spectrum of commentators from “traditionalist” to “progressive” concurs on the dire situation of biblical and theological illiteracy afflicting young Catholics. The common good of the community surely requires renewed collaboration between bishops and theologians to address the crisis. A chorus of lament or, worse, a defensive assigning of blame is hardly a promising response.

A third topic, the most crucial, follows from the first two. The outstanding theologians who collaborated closely with the bishops in producing the wonderful documents of Vatican II affirmed with one accord the unique revelation of God to which the Bible bears witness. Hence, the council affirms that “the study of sacred Scripture” should be “the soul of all theology.” And though the direct reference is to priestly formation, the new social situation of theology, referred to above, only gives wider relevance to the following declaration of the council: “Under the light of faith and with the guidance of the Church’s teaching authority, theology should be taught in such a way that students will accurately draw Catholic doctrine from divine revelation, understand that doctrine profoundly, nourish their own spiritual lives with it…” (“Optatam Totius,” No. 16).

The council’s clarion call to place the study of Scripture at the heart of the theological task is compromised, however, if study of the Bible ceases in fact to be a wrestling with Scripture as privileged witness to divine revelation. Unhappily, one observes a tendency in some circles for biblical study to become the dissecting of a fascinating and influential ancient text that is no longer sacra pagina but, rather, pagina ordinaria. In such a situation theology inevitably morphs into religious studies, and burdens are heaped on the few courses in systematic theology that they are unable to bear.

To press the issue further: this trend threatens the Christological substance of the faith that seeks fuller understanding—understanding, not relativizing, much less superseding.

The eminent New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson does not recoil from warning of “Christological collapse” in contemporary Catholicism. He has called both bishops and theologians to account—the former for pastoral negligence, the latter for cultural capitulation. Clearly this is not meant to be an across-the-board indictment. But it is a cri de coeur that both groups do well to heed. (See Johnson’s essay “On Taking the Creed Seriously,” in Handing on the Faith: The Church’s Mission and Challenge, edited by Robert P. Imbelli, 2006.)

Johnson offers a salient recommendation. He insists: “Theologians must be willing to read Scripture in ways other than historically.” (I take it that among theologians he would include Catholic scholars of sacred Scripture.) This appeal resembles the attempt of Pope Benedict XVI in the two volumes of Jesus of Nazareth to promote a “Christological hermeneutic.” The aims and implications of such a hermeneutic—reading all of sacred Scripture in the light of its fulfillment in the risen Christ—could serve as a prime topic for discernment when bishops and theologians meet.
Beyond Polarization

Toward the end of its statement, the board of the Catholic Theological Society quotes cogently from Vatican II’s “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.” The passage reads, in part: “It is for God’s people as a whole, with the help of the Holy Spirit, and especially for pastors and theologians, to listen to the voices of our day, discerning them and interpreting them, and to evaluate them in the light of the divine Word, so that the revealed truth can be increasingly appropriated, better understood and more suitably expressed” (No. 44). This is a fine expression of the common though differentiated task of bishops and theologians.

But the constitution goes on in its very next paragraph, the conclusion and summation of the entire first part, to give a precise Christological specification of that “divine Word” and “revealed truth”: “For the Word of God, through whom all things were made, was made flesh so that as perfectly human he would save all human beings and sum up all things” (No. 45).

The recent beatification of John Henry Newman may spur a providential renewal of serious exchange between bishops and theologians. Three aspects of Newman’s theological-pastoral program are propitious in this regard. First is his great reverence for the episcopal office. Those who know Newman’s writings realize that such reverence does not proceed from uncritical adulation, but from theological conviction.

Second is Newman’s appreciation for the indispensable place of theology within the complex and creative triangle of tensions that constitutes the one church of Christ. The devotional, intellectual and institutional dimensions of church invariably support, challenge and complement one another. Each, if it becomes hegemonic, only diminishes the mystery of the church.

Finally, from the time of his initial conversion to faith at age 15 to the end of his long life, Newman insisted upon the primacy of “the dogmatic principle” in the life of the church, not as proposition but as person. He writes, “It is the Incarnation of the Son of God rather than any doctrine drawn from a partial view of Scripture (however true and momentous it may be) which is the article of a standing or falling Church.” For Newman, as for Vatican II, of which he was a precursor and inspiration, this affirmation of Christ-centered faith and identity is the compelling condition for authentic Catholic inclusiveness.

Fifteen years ago, conscious of a growing and debilitating polarization in the church in the United States, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin inaugurated the Catholic Common Ground Initiative. The initiative’s founding document, “Called to Be Catholic: Church in a Time of Peril,” trenchantly analyzed the pastoral situation and offered hopeful principles and guidelines for moving forward. Foremost among them was the following: “Jesus Christ, present in Scripture and sacrament, is central to all that we do; he must always be the measure and not what is measured.” Jesus Christ remains always the one foundation upon which theologians and bishops can securely stand.

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