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# College Theology

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RICHARD CRONIN, S.J.

**A**T present a large number of Philippine Catholic colleges for men and women teach theology as an important part of their curriculum. The present interest in college theology seems premised on the belief that the student who is intellectually capable of a pre-medical or a pre-engineering course is also capable of something more than the catechism. Yet anyone who has taught such a program is well aware of the great difficulties involved. What curriculum should be followed? What textbooks should be used? What training is required for the teacher of such a course? These are only a few of the questions that arise.

The present article makes no pretense of answering these very real difficulties. What is proposed is to discuss in non-technical language what theology itself is and what is its value for the Philippine Catholic liberal-arts college. It is hoped that such a discussion may clarify how theology in college may be as stimulating and thought-provoking as the other subjects in the curriculum. For convenience, the following remarks can be divided into two sections; first, what is theology; and, second, what is the value of theology for the liberal-arts college.

## THEOLOGY

To begin with a working definition: theology is thinking systematically about revelation in meaningful terms. Since even this loose description is hardly self-evident, three elements merit further comment.

First, theology is *systematic* thinking about revelation. All this says is that theology, like any other science, tries to present the truths of revelation (theology's proper subject matter) in a structured and intelligible unity.

That a man nailed to a tree for three hours in a remote province of the Roman Empire potentially earned unending life for every single human being that ever lived, cave man or astronaut, is an incredible claim if we do not simultaneously realize that this man, Jesus Christ, was the very God who gave men life in the first place and who could guarantee it beyond the bonds of death and the claims of sin. To understand the redemption, in other words, one must understand the incarnation and—at least inchoatively—the trinity. That the water in baptism which is poured over a baby's head washes him clean, not of dirt on his forehead, but of original sin on his soul would seem the crudest magic if one does not understand the sin of Adam that this innocent-looking child has inherited and the Holy Spirit whose creative presence elevates the material water to a wondrous new spiritual efficacy.

This stress on the order and the interrelationship of the truths of revelation, therefore, distinguishes theology from Graham Greene's *THE HEART OF THE MATTER*, or Evelyn's Waugh's *BRIDESHEAD REVISITED*, or the poetry of Peguy, or the plays of Claudel. All these writers are aware of Christian revelation; they reflect on its workings in human life; but they make no attempt to present revelation systematically. Where the theologian tries to see the large structure of revelation, the Catholic artist tries to give revelation a local habitation and a name in the concrete symbolism of a novel, a poem, or a play.

Second, theology is thinking *about revelation*. Where the philosopher and the artist begin with their own experience, the theologian begins with revelation. The theologian's own experience may pose the question that he sets out to clarify, but his own experience is not the basis on which he builds his solution.

Revelation is the act by which God, over and above his creation of the world, tells us about himself and his plans

for men. Revelation is an offer by God, partially but profoundly to share with us his own knowledge of reality, the same reality that we grasp more dimly with our own native but limited intelligence. Through revelation we see to some extent as God sees. Revelation does not distort or contradict what we know by ourselves, it deepens and completes the knowledge that we already have. The philosopher through his own reflection argues for the immortality of the soul. From revelation, however, we know beyond the wildest dreams of the philosopher that there is a resurrection of the body.

Gerard Manly Hopkins expressed this difference of viewpoint in a graphic image—"To see the world in a drop of water, and to see the world in a drop of Christ's blood." To see the world in a drop of Christ's blood does not distort what we naturally see in the drop of water. It adds a deeper dimension. Where to many modern existentialists, life viewed naturally—in a drop of water—seems absurd, with death the last and final absurdity, life viewed in a drop of Christ's blood is redeemed from absurdity. It has a high meaning and involves both challenge and risk. In Christ, death is a difficult door to a fuller life. Revelation is often caricatured as a ball and chain of obligations with which Catholics are shackled. More truly considered, it is, as St. John describes it, a light in the darkness. Revelation is a penetrating glimpse of reality, a constant source of wonder, the beginning of wisdom, a maker of men. It should be an aid, not a roadblock to life.

God has given men his revelation through his acts more than by words or ideas. This is a point frequently obscured because we learn God's revelation principally from books, the Scriptures and the written traditions of the Church. These books record what God did in history. Revelation is not some celestial geometry which parachutes down to us directly from heaven. Revelation is an evolving manifestation of God's plan for men in history and through history.

God elected Abraham to be the father of all believers, he raised up Moses to lead his people out of bondage, he chose David and Solomon to be kings of Israel, he inspired

the prophets to speak the Word of the Lord, and in the fullness of time God entered history even more definitively. Sent by the Father, the eternal Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit, became an infant in the womb of the Virgin Mary, bone of her bone and flesh of her flesh. The poet's phrase is literal: the milk of Mary became the blood of God. God's full and complete revelation is historical. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

Yet, although God revealed himself to us in history, principally and completely in his incarnate Son, we were not witnesses of these events. We learn of God's historical revelation through the Scriptures and the traditions of the Church as the Church presents them to us. We learn of God's historical revelation through texts. Theology, therefore, is a science of texts, sacred texts.

Since we discover divine revelation through texts (always under the guiding supervision of the Church), this implies positive historical research by the theologian before he can begin to think about—for example—whether a Christian Humanism is not a contradiction in terms. First, the theologian must determine what the revelation is before he can proceed to what it means. This is not always easy. When St. Matthew, for instance, talks about the Kingdom, we must remember that he is a Jewish author of nineteen centuries ago and he is using a term which has a history of a thousand years before his own time. The Kingdom is not quite the same thing as the British Empire. The theologian has to do considerable digging to unearth its original meaning before he can draw out its implications for the problem he is considering.

Lastly, theology is thinking about revelation in *meaningful terms*. Each new age faces new problems. Because of these problems each new age poses new questions for revelation. Witness in our own time the growth of Communism, the advance of modern science into the space age, the birth of psychiatry, the increase of mass atheism, a philosophy like existentialism, the phenomenon of urban living, the birth of new nations in Africa and Asia. All these developments pose innumerable theological questions. How does one reconcile

the scientific and theological view of man? Is Catholicism so much a European thing that it has nothing to say to Asia or Africa, or nothing to say until it undergoes a radical change? Has not Freud demonstrated that the traditional Catholic stand on sexual morals is outdated? Or conversely, has not psychiatry given a new relevance to chastity? And so on.

These are new questions that perturb men of our time. No answer from the 4th, 13th, or 18th centuries will adequately respond to all the facets of a modern question. Moreover, the terminology in which the modern theologian gives his answer must be intelligible to a modern audience. St. Paul said Christ is the second Adam, and the Council of Trent says the sacraments work *ex opere operato*. What do these terms mean? They do have a meaning, a very rich meaning; but they have to be meaningfully translated or that meaning will be lost to our contemporaries. The theologian has to talk in meaningful terms at the risk of talking to no one but himself.

Aside from the problem of sheer communication, there is another reason for meaningful terms in theology. If theology is not meaningful, it will never affect us personally—and it should. Theology is a science where men by their Faith and their reason encounter God. God takes the initiative in this encounter. He chose first to reveal himself to men. In theology men meet God in his revelation of himself. God does not simply reveal to us a group of abstract truths about himself. He also invites us through revelation to share in his own divine life; he offers to free us from sin; he promises us the strength to take the first halting steps on the upward path that leads to himself. In revelation, God does not simply point out a vision of reality, but he beckons us to a new way of life. Besides being the Truth, Our Lord says, he is also the Way and the Life.

Revelation, therefore, since it is an invitation by God both to a new way of seeing in Faith and also to a new way of living in grace, implies a response on our part. Belief in Christ is not quite the same thing as belief in the existence of the Empire State building, or the Eiffel Tower, or Mala-

cañan Palace. It is not static, a judgment of the mind suspended in a vacuum, made once and never acted on. Belief in Christ and the theology which studies the implications of that belief implies a personal decision on our part for or against this attractive and unsettling Christ; it implies a commitment for or against God's offered plan of salvation. Either you are for me or against me, says Christ, and if you be lukewarm I will vomit you from my mouth. Theology must be done in meaningful terms or this whole personal dimension will be lost. It risks becoming a sterile juggling of syllogisms. They may all be true—but so what?

#### THEOLOGY IN THE LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE

Christopher Hollis has said that the Church is faced with something entirely new; it is faced with an educated laity. Without playing on words, it could be added that the Church will soon be faced with *catholically* educated laity—or it can be. Whether the words "catholically educated" will mean that the layman receives his education in a school merely directed by the Church or receives his education in a school where religion is an integral and intellectual part of the curriculum is precisely the challenge which confronts college theology.

When Newman described theology as the central and essential science of a Catholic university, he was not only restating a truism accepted and practised by the great Catholic medieval universities. He was speaking in the new context of the 19th-century university whose students were laymen, not clerics. Yet Newman only envisioned a professional faculty of theology whose influence on the whole university would be felt indirectly by its mere presence. Accepting Newman's idea of the importance of theology for a christian vision of life, the college theology course goes beyond what Newman desired inasmuch as it can be a formative influence on all the students no matter what their field of concentration, and not just a speciality for the few. Another major difference between Newman's projected Dublin University and our Philippine colleges is that while Newman's university never got past the planning stage, in the Philippines today the buildings, the faculty, the

students, and the willingness to learn exist to give Newman's vision reality.

Another motive for stressing college theology that has arisen since Newman's time is the recent papal statements on the increasingly important role of the layman in the Church and in society. It is possible of course to discuss the role of the layman in the Church without presupposing a course in college theology. But the reverse would not be true. It would seem hasty, to say the least, to outline what a theology course for layman should be without considering what the Church has recently proposed as the Catholic ideal of the layman. The modern layman has been called by the Church to a new task. Simply stated—but not so simply accomplished—it is to christianize modern society. If the job of the priest is to bring Christ to the modern layman; the job of the layman is to bring Christ to the modern world. A cursory look at a newspaper indicates that the job will not be completed before the present classes graduate from our Manila colleges.

If the layman has a new task, he needs a new training for that task. Theology must play a part in that training because enthusiasm is not enough. It must be informed enthusiasm. As the line from James Jones' *FROM HERE TO ETERNITY* puts it, "A guy has to do what he is." If the Catholic layman is going to have any effect on the world, he has to know what a Catholic is. To know what he is as a Catholic, he must know the Catholic tradition which alone will reveal to him his true identity. To recover the tradition that stands behind him so he can face the task in front of him is the service that college theology is designed to provide. Both the tradition and the task are equally essential. Theology should treat of both of them. This in no way intends to reduce theology to a mere means of developing Catholic Actionists. The study of the Catholic tradition of revelation is undertaken for its own sake. The college course, however, should maintain both the speculative and the practical aspects of theology by at least bringing the student up to the task the hierarchy has outlined for him in the real world in which he lives.



But these remarks merely point to the opportunity and need for college theology. What value does theology offer to the liberal arts college itself?

A liberal education aims at the harmonious development of the whole man. It tries to balance faith and reason, intellect and will, science and art, creative writing and scientific research, broad sympathy with firm principle. In the process of a liberal education theology maintains and creates a salutary tension. Theology states large truths, such as that Christ died for all men. Literature speaks through concrete imagery. It doesn't talk about "all men". It talks about a king named Lear, Farrell's Studs Lonigan, Tolstoy's Natasha, Salinger's fascinating children. These are two valid ways of approaching reality and they complement each other. Theology adds a large framework to life; it helps to avoid myopia. Literature adds the flesh and blood, the color and the bounce; it helps to avoid the ivory tower. One way to realize the meaning of Christ's death on the Cross is to read *STUDS LONIGAN* or *LORD JIM*—they are credible models of the men for whom Christ died; and, conversely, for a full appreciation of the drama and the tragedy of Lonigan and Lord Jim you must know that Christ died for them—they are marked with the blood of Christ. As Mauriac put it, the cross of Christ casts a shadow over all our lives. It can convert pettiness into grandeur. There is an irreducible tension between our Faith and our experience, between the grandeur of our ideals as Catholics and the pettiness of our practice. It is a healthy tension; it promotes growth. A perfectly balanced person may be sound asleep.

All this is another way of describing the difference between a problem and a mystery. How much is two and two? That is a problem. The answer to a problem does not involve us personally and once the mind has solved a problem it loses interest, it is at rest. Two plus two equals four. The problem is solved. That's that. Anyone for tennis?

A detective story is a problem. When the murderer is finally unmasked by Philo Vance, Nero Wolfe, or Perry Mason because of the cigarette left in the ash tray next to the mur-

dered butler or because of the bloodstains on a discarded raincoat, we close the book satisfied. The problem is solved. No one reads a detective story twice. We "know the plot." That is because there is no real mystery in mystery stories. There is only a problem.

A true mystery, whether natural or supernatural, is never solved once and for all. We cannot view a mystery coldly from the outside because a mystery affects us personally. We are involved in it. The full meaning of a human life is a mystery whether it be our life or somebody else's.

But did not St. Ignatius say the meaning of a human life was to praise, reverence, and serve God and thereby to save our souls? Yes, he did, but his answer is a formula of words. The reality behind that formula is still a mystery. How can one *serve* God? Who is the "I" who must save my soul and who ponders the words of St. Ignatius? Most of all, who or what is God?

But isn't God an *ens a se*? *Ipsum esse subsistens*? He certainly is, and both these terms say something true about God, but the person who thinks that they end the question of God with the same conclusiveness that we close a detective story is either a moron or a blind man.

There is need of a sense of mystery in a liberal education. To reduce education exclusively to solving problems and to clear and distinct ideas is like reducing philosophy exclusively to logic or literature exclusively to grammar. To lose a sense of mystery is to stifle life. To keep a sense of mystery alive is not the least contribution of theology to a liberal education.

#### CONCLUSION

Chesterton has said a thing worth doing is worth doing badly. It is hoped that for those engaged in teaching college theology in the Philippines this brief article may have in some way strengthened their conviction that college theology is worth doing. It would be foolish to hope for the ideal college theology course. Each school and each region of the Philip-

pires differs so widely that no one course can possibly suit all the needs perfectly. At least, a better course, a better curriculum, and better text books are goals that can be looked forward to and worked for. In the meantime, the remark of a certain old priest remains true — we will get somewhere in college theology only when we know where we are going. To ask ourselves what theology is and what it means for the liberal arts college may serve as a small beginning to knowing "where we are going."