

THE VOCATION OF THE THEOLOGIAN

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[Today theologians are as often lay as cleric. Vatican II reshaped the nature of this vocation as a charism located with the prophetic office of the people of God. Originally theologians were bishops, then monks, then Scholastic thinkers. Prior to Vatican II, changes in theology affected the theological vocation: a shift in the understanding of the magisterium, changes in methodology, and renewed attention to Pneumatology enabled the birth of the new cadre. However, the relation between the institutional Church and its lay theologians remains a work in progress.]

SOME TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO on a November evening a ceremony for the conferral of the doctorate in theology was underway.¹ The place was the University of St. Michael's College (Toronto). Most of the candidates for the degree were priests or religious, though there were some lay candidates, men and women. The ceremony was presided over by the chancellor of the university, the local archbishop. One by one the candidates for the doctorate knelt before the bishop, and they placed their hands between his. Then he admitted each candidate to the degree as the dean of the faculty adjusted the doctoral hood. After this the new doctor rose to accept the diploma. The ritual with the hands marks that ceremony as perhaps one of a kind. Borrowed from the medieval period, it symbolizes a pledge of fidelity made by the candidate to the Church in the person of the presiding archbishop. The symbolism suggests that participants were commissioned as Catholic theologians, with a serious responsibility toward the faith. Equally, with the hooding, the candidates were inducted into a new status in the academy. The entire ritual, taken as a whole, confirmed

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¹ This article is based on a talk delivered in the Catholic Women Theologians Lecture Series at Boston College, March 19, 2001.

one vocation with two clear sets of responsibilities—to the Church and to the academy. In fact, every Catholic theologian likewise has one vocation and two sets of different but related responsibilities.

It is important to clarify what vocation means in this context, and why the term is validly applied to the work of the theologian. Common parlance, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, understands “vocation” to be concerned with divine action.² A vocation is God’s call to a particular work that has a spiritual or religious dimension. Such a call often becomes manifest by a combination of attraction toward, and fitness for, the work. In fact, the dictionary locates vocation in the realm of faith. In practice, the truth of such a call is confirmed by the faith community. So the vocation to the religious life is confirmed in the ritual of profession; the vocation to the priesthood is confirmed in the ritual of ordination. What of the vocation to be a theologian? If theology is indeed, as Anselm of Canterbury taught, “faith seeking understanding,” then the vocation of the theologian clearly has a religious dimension and needs appropriate confirmation.³ Such confirmation has been given in various ways over time. But not every Catholic theologian today is trained in a Catholic institution, nor do many Catholic institutions carry out a ritual such as the one described here. Furthermore, as ever larger numbers of Catholic theologians are lay women and men, the separation of the vocation from that to the priesthood or to religious life becomes more distinct. Today in practice, confirmation of the theologian’s vocation, insofar as it is connected with the granting of the doctorate, is ordinarily restricted to academic qualification for the work.

It is this current situation which seems in part to be driving the implementation of the revised Code of Canon Law with respect to theologians. The work of the theologian is understood by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to be a vocation in service to the Word within the Church. The Congregation stated that the role of the theologian is “to pursue in a particular way an ever deeper understanding of the word of God found in the inspired Scriptures and handed on by the living tradition of the Church. [The theologian] does this in communion with the magisterium, which has been charged with the responsibility of preserving the

² The definition reads: “the action on the part of God calling a person to exercise some special function, especially of a spiritual nature, or to fill a certain position; divine influence or guidance towards a definite (esp. religious) career, the fact of being so called or directed towards a special work in life; natural tendency to, or fitness for, such work.”

³ Certainly the highest authorities in the Catholic Church think so. See Pope Paul VI, “The Theologian’s Vocation,” (Address to the International Theological Commission, October 11, 1973), *The Pope Speaks* 18 (1973) 271–74; and Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian,” *Origins* 20 (July 5, 1990) 117–26.

deposit of faith.”⁴ The fact that theologians are increasingly lay, that their preparation for their work is predominantly academic, and that theological work is increasingly done outside institutions which are juridically controlled by the Church: all this has apparently been seen as a potential threat to the faith. Concern for the teaching of the Church quite appropriately governs the approach in the Code. As canonist Sharon Euart notes in commenting on canon 812: “The canon and the notion of the mandate are innovations in the law of the church on catholic colleges and universities. The intent of the canon is to preserve the orthodoxy of catholic doctrine. The requirement of the mandate represents a juridical response to a potential danger to the faith and an effort to protect the rights of the faithful and the good of the church.”⁵ However, my article is not a study in the interpretation and implementation of canon 812. Rather, my intent is to examine the theological vocation as vocation. As a historical theologian myself, I think that perspective on the history of the vocation, and the impact on it of recent developments in theology, may shed light on the joy and hope (as well as on the grief and anguish!) to be found in following such a call. Today theologians are as often lay as clerics. Vatican II significantly reshaped their common theological vocation. I begin there. Further light comes from review of earlier periods in which the vocation underwent significant change, so I turn next to the earlier tradition. Finally, since later changes in theology itself have affected the vocation, I look to them before concluding.

A VOCATION ILLUMINED BY VATICAN II

It is necessary here to begin with the Church, and the role of the people of God with respect to the faith. As the understanding of the Church changes, so too does the understanding of what Thomas Aquinas called “holy teaching” (*sacra doctrina*) and what we call “theology.” What is noted first is that the role of all believers is at the core of the role of theologians; next what is considered are the few places where the council directly refers to the task of theologians.

⁴ “Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation” no. 6, 119.

⁵ Sharon A. Euart, R.S.M., “Title Three: Catholic Education [cc. 793–821],” in *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, commissioned by The Canon Law Society of America, ed. John P. Beal, James A. Coriden, and Thomas J. Green (New York: Paulist, 2000) 966. See also John P. Boyle, “Church Teaching Authority in the 1983 Code,” *The Jurist* 45 (1985) 169. Following John Alesandro, “The Rights and Responsibilities of Theologians: A Canonical Perspective” 108 in *Cooperation Between Theologians and the Ecclesiastical Magisterium*, ed. Leo J. O’Donovan (Washington: CLSA, 1982) Boyle remarks: “Alesandro is surely right in raising doubts about the wisdom of the pervasive shift in the new code from a system of negative vigilance to one of positive deputation.”

In the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, the council vastly enriched the teaching on the Church.⁶ It restored a patristic notion of the Church as *mysterion*, teaching that “the Church, in Christ, is a sacrament—a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race” (no. 1).⁷ As such, the Church came into being, lives and grows through the work of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (nos. 2–4). Rich biblical metaphors are piled one upon another to describe this marvelous *mysterion* (nos. 5–6) not the least the Pauline metaphor of the Body of Christ (no. 7). Here, as a corrective to earlier views, the role of the Holy Spirit is placed in sharp relief: “In order that we might be unceasingly renewed in [Christ] (see Eph 4:23), he has shared with us his Spirit who, being one and the same in head and members, gives life to, unifies and moves the whole body. Consequently, his work could be compared by the Fathers of the Church to the function that the principle of life, the soul, fulfills in the human body” (no. 7).⁸ Again, a patristic insight is reclaimed: the Holy Spirit animates the Church as a whole. The council did not shrink from drawing an analogy to the Incarnation: “As the assumed nature, inseparably united to him, serves the divine Word as a living instrument of salvation, so, in a somewhat similar fashion, does the social structure of the church serve the Spirit of Christ who vivifies it, in the building up of the body (see Eph. 4:16).”⁹ The intended implication, as Grillmeier has noted, is “a particular view of the activity of the Spirit in and through the social structure of the Church. The Spirit is the principle of growth in the Church and effects this growth *through* the Church, which, constituted by the salvific decree of the Father in the work of Christ and through the gift of the Spirit, is now itself actively bringing about the growth of the body.” It is the entire Church so understood, and not just the laity in distinction from the hierarchy, which the council then considers as community of salvation. Here its use of the phrase “People of God” (LG no. 9) reclaims yet another

⁶ Here I focus on material from Vatican II that, in my judgment, best illumines the vocation of the theologian, and not on the complete ecclesiology of the council. For a more complete treatment, see the commentaries; for the ecclesiology of *Lumen gentium*, see Henri Holstein, S.J., *Hiérarchie et peuple de Dieu d'après Lumen Gentium* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1970).

⁷ “Lumen Gentium” in *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, gen. ed. Austin Flannery, gen. ed., rev. trans. in inclusive language (New York: Costello, 1996). All citations of council documents are from this edition. For further development see Aloys Grillmeier, “Commentary, Chapter 1,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler, vol. 1 (New York: Herder, 1967) 139 n.4.

⁸ See Flannery 11 n. 8 for references; for commentary, see Grillmeier, *ibid.* 144–46.

⁹ See Flannery 11 n. 11 for reference; for commentary, see Grillmeier, *ibid.* 146–49.

patristic (and biblical) insight.¹⁰ Not surprisingly, in view of what has been noted, the entire people of God is described as sharing in the kingly, priestly, and prophetic roles of Christ (nos. 10–12).¹¹ Here I draw particular attention to the prophetic office of the people.¹² No. 12 on the prophetic office of the people of God is an excellent meditation for a theologian.

We begin with what the council says about the Church as a whole. Rooting the infallibility of the magisterium in the entire people of God, the council does not hesitate to write: “The whole body of the faithful who have received an anointing which comes from the holy one (see 1 Jn 2:20 and 27) cannot be mistaken in belief. It shows this characteristic through the entire people’s supernatural sense of the faith [*sensus fidei*] when, ‘from the bishops to the last of the faithful’¹³ it manifests a universal consensus in matters of faith and morals” (LG no. 12; see also no. 25). Note that the term *sensus fidei* is applied to the Spirit informed fidelity of the entire Church.¹⁴ The text explains that, living in such fidelity, obediently guided by the magisterium, the people of God “receives not the word of human beings, but truly the word of God (see 1 Th 2:13).” So the paragraph

¹⁰ For full references, see Grillmeier, “Commentary, Chapter 2” in *ibid.* 153 n.1.

¹¹ The laity’s share in Christ’s prophetic office is strongly affirmed again in no. 35 of *Lumen gentium*, which reads in part: “Christ is the great prophet who proclaimed the kingdom of the Father both by the testimony of his life and by the power of his word. Until the full manifestation of his glory, he fulfills this prophetic office, not only through the hierarchy who teach in his name and by his power, but also through the laity. He accordingly both establishes them as witnesses and provides them with an appreciation of the faith (*sensus fidei*) and the grace of the word (see Acts 2:17–18; Apoc 19:10) so that the power of the Gospel may shine out in daily family and social life. . . . [T]he laity become powerful heralds of the faith in things to be hoped for (see Heb 11:1) if they unhesitatingly join the profession of faith to the life of faith. This evangelization—that is, the proclamation of Christ by word and the testimony of their lives—acquires a special character and a particular effectiveness because it is accomplished in the ordinary circumstances of the world.”

¹² Boyle, “Church Teaching Authority” 151, has called attention to the omission in canons 747–755 of the *munus propheticum* of the whole people of God and of the laity. Absent that, one loses reference to *Lumen gentium* nos. 12 and 35. As he explains, this reduces Book III of the Code on the *munus docendi* to a legal treatise on the hierarchy.

¹³ Here Flannery cites Augustine, *De Praedestinatione Sanctorum* 14, 27 (PL 44. 980).

¹⁴ John J. Burkhard explains the term thus: “In general, two theological terms have come to express this understanding of the participation of all believers in elaborating Christian truth, *sensus fidei* and *sensus* (or *consensus*) *fidelium*. Sometimes they are used interchangeably; at other times, theologians employ these terms to convey a different nuance. *Sensus fidei* might be used to refer to the Christian’s possession of the truths of his or her faith or even of the more fundamental, underlying truth of the Christian belief-system. *Sensus fidelium*, on the other hand, points in the direction of the activity of the subject’s belief, i.e. believers or the faithful, in abiding in, or defending, or elaborating the truth of Christianity” (“*Sen-*

concludes: “The people unfailingly adheres to this faith, penetrates it more deeply through right judgment, and applies it more fully in daily life” (no. 12). The council here continues to speak of the situation of the whole people of God. It is the entire people, united with the bishops, who “cannot err in matters of belief.” Yet it is also true that the last sentence quoted summarizes not only the task of the whole people, but equally, if not indeed especially, the task of the theologian. The sentence bears repeating: “The people unfailingly adheres to this faith, penetrates it more deeply through right judgment, and applies it more fully in daily life.” Much of this text can surely be understood as applicable to the theologian’s work. We need but take the context one step farther. Just as some are ordained to offices and so share differently from the people at large in the same functions of Christ, so within that one people, *Lumen gentium* no. 12 goes on to teach, some are gifted to share differently in one or another function. This being so, the Spirit gives special gifts (graces or “charisms”), making them “fit and ready to undertake various tasks and offices for the renewal and building up of the Church.” These gifts are distributed “among the faithful of every rank,” so among the laity and among religious, as well as among clerics.¹⁵ Here the council calls to mind the list of the gifts in 1 Corinthians.¹⁶ Finally, it turns to the matter of good order. Remember Paul’s problems with the Corinthians. The validity of gifts needs to be discerned. The final sentence of this section of no. 12 makes reference to this task: “Those who have charge over the church should judge the genuineness and orderly use of these gifts, and it is especially their office not indeed to extinguish the Spirit, but to test all things and hold fast to what is good (see 1 Th 5:12 and 19–21).” With every member of the people, office-holders are ultimately in service to the Spirit of God, and that service is to be reflected in their discernment of the gifts.

sus Fidei: Theological Reflection Since Vatican II, 1: 1965–1964 and 2: 1985–1989,” *Heythrop Journal* 34 [1993] 52 n.1).

¹⁵ The laity’s share in Christ’s prophetic office is strongly affirmed again in no. 35 of *Lumen gentium*: “Christ is the great prophet who proclaimed the kingdom of the Father both by the testimony of his life and by the power of his word. Until the full manifestation of his glory, he fulfills this prophetic office, not only through the hierarchy who teach in his name and by his power, but also through the laity. He accordingly both establishes them as witnesses and provides them with an appreciation of the faith (*sensus fidei*) and the grace of the word (see Acts 2:17–18; Apoc 19:10) so that the power of the Gospel may shine out in daily family and social life. . . . The laity become powerful heralds of the faith in things to be hoped for (see Heb 11:1) if they unhesitatingly join the profession of faith to the life of faith. This evangelization—that is, the proclamation of Christ by word and the witness of their lives—acquires a special character and a particular effectiveness because it is accomplished in the ordinary circumstances of the world.”

¹⁶ See Grillmeier 166.

Taken in its entirety, no. 12 of *Lumen gentium* can serve as an outline of the vocation of the theologian. With the whole people of God, the theologian is called to adhere to the faith, to penetrate it more deeply through right judgment, and to apply it more fully in daily life. Specifically as theologian, she or he is to perform these tasks by the exercise of the scholarly discipline of teaching, with the research and writing that solid teaching demands. As a member of the people of God gifted with a charism for teaching, then, the theologian is called to exercise that gift for the renewal and building up of the Church, and can expect his or her gift to be tested by those who hold office in the Church.

What might be the experience of a theologian—we will call her Macrina—who prayerfully considers no. 12 of *Lumen gentium*? First, she feels the Wind of the Spirit moving over the depths of the people of God. As one of the people she inhales the Holy Breath. She awakens in awe to awareness of the closeness of the Spirit of God. Her first response is a deep, almost dizzying joy—God loves us. God loves me. That moment is reverence. It is adoration. And then? She tastes the awakening of hope. It is the Spirit of God who breathes in the body of the faithful—from pope and bishops to bawling infants, still dripping from the baptismal waters. Her hope is sure—for never has the Spirit, never will the Spirit, abandon the Church. So she stretches out her arms to accept the Spirit's particular gift to her—the gift of teaching. But then she hesitates. She tastes the sharp edge of fear. The gift, a grace, is given for service to the people of God. It is a gift meant for hard use, not for display. Faithful use of her gift will involve suffering—the kind called for in a lifetime of patient work: one more day of dusty reading. Research upon research. Another talk, another class to prepare, another article to write—a call to selfless giving. Criticism to endure—some valid, and some not so valid. So there will be a price to pay in self-control. But Jesus knew a similar call, and embraced a similar gift. And joy erases the edge of fear as Macrina embraces her gift. Yes, she expects her gift to be tested. She trusts that so long as her work is of God it will be confirmed by those who have charge over the Church. So, as she finishes her meditation our theologian finds herself in-Spirited with courage to exercise her gift wisely within the community of salvation. Yes, a meditation on no. 12 of *Lumen gentium* might go this way.¹⁷

But Macrina would be well advised not to limit her thoughtful reflection

¹⁷ At this point, after a discussion of who belong to the people of God (nos.13–16) and of the missionary task of the Church (no. 17), *Lumen gentium* takes up in turn “The Hierarchical Nature of the Church” in chap. 3, “The Laity” in chap. 4, “The Call of the Whole Church to Holiness” in chap. 5, “Religious” in chap. 6, “The Pilgrim Church” in chap. 7, and “Our Lady” in chap. 8. Certainly aspects of each of these affect the vocation of the theologian, and I will shortly take up questions relating to the magisterium in particular. Space prevents detailed treatment.

to this single article in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. The Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* also deserves a place on her preferred reading list, especially nos. 44 and 62. As a woman of her time, she would feel at home in this material. It deals in turn with what the Church receives from the modern world, and with the proper development of culture. Here recurs a great conciliar theme: the Christian message must be expressed today, as it was in the past, “in the concepts and languages of different peoples”; the effort must be made, as it has been, “to clarify [that message] in the light of the wisdom of their philosophers” (no. 44). Such adaptation can only be made with the help of others who are enmeshed in the situation, the training, the organizations, the mentality of the different cultures. Under the Spirit, and within the context of the people of God, there is a specific charge here to theologians: “With the help of the holy Spirit, it is the task of the whole people of God, particularly of its pastors and theologians, to listen to and distinguish the many voices of our times and to interpret them in the light of God’s word, in order that the revealed truth may be more deeply penetrated, better understood, and more suitably presented” (no. 44).¹⁸ The charge is complex. This is a task of the whole people at which theologians are to work with pastors; the manner of that cooperation is not specified here. The task is to listen so as to distinguish the voices of the day. Then they are to interpret what they hear, in the light of Scripture. And why? As *Lumen gentium* no. 12, a passage I have already cited twice, states: “The people unflinchingly adheres to this faith, penetrates it more deeply through right judgment, and applies it more fully in daily life.” Now, in *Gaudium et spes* no. 44 it is stated that the purpose of the work in which theologians are to engage is in relation to the Word of God: revealed truth is to be “more deeply penetrated, better understood, and more suitably presented.” The major difference in this text is that theologians are now given the specific charge to penetrate, understand, and present what they learn.

In fact, the section in which no. 62 falls treats some of the more urgent duties of Christians with regard to culture. *Gaudium et spes* notes the evident fact that harmonizing culture with Christian thought can be difficult, but stresses that, far from harming the faith, the difficulties can “stimulate a more precise and deeper understanding of that faith.” This affirmation leads to an enumeration of related responsibilities of theologians. The text continues and states that research and discoveries in various

¹⁸ See Yves Congar, “Commentary on *Gaudium et spes*, Part II, chapter 4,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler, vol. 5 (New York: Herder, 1969) 219–21 for particularly rich notes on the development of the concepts in this section.

disciplines “bring up new problems which have an important bearing on life itself and demand new scrutiny by theologians” (no. 62). Theologians are also asked to find new ways to present their teaching, ways that will at one and the same time respect the limits of their science, and the situation of their students.¹⁹ In pastoral care, theologians are asked to make use not only of theological principles but also of the findings of secular sciences, especially psychology and sociology, to assist others to come to a more mature faith life. All of this calls for collaboration with experts in many fields. *Gaudium et spes* encourages such work in the hope that theologians will then be able to present the Word in a way more suited to our contemporaries. Furthermore, the document expresses the explicit hope that more of the laity would become theologians. This move is a clearly intentional shift in direction considering the long history of fear of lay theological teaching. As one commentator notes: “Until ecclesiastical circles have overcome the ‘*horror laici docentis*,’ the Church will always lack one dimension of theological discourse.”²⁰ The council’s explicit remarks about the work of the theologian conclude with a reference to the conditions in which the work is to be done: “For the proper exercise of this role, the faithful, both clerical and lay, should be accorded a lawful freedom of inquiry, of thought, and of expression, tempered by humility and courage in whatever branch of study they have specialized” (no. 62). The record shows here intent to prevent repression similar to that experienced by some priests in the period before the council.²¹

Almost 20 years after the close of the council, in 1983 came the promulgation of the revised Code of Canon Law, a revision called for by the council. The Code addresses the freedom of the theologian in canon 218 which reads: “Those engaged in the sacred disciplines have a just freedom of inquiry and of expressing their opinion prudently on those matters in which they possess expertise, while observing the submission due to the magisterium, of the church.”²² How the theologian can enjoy academic freedom while giving appropriate submission to the magisterium has been

¹⁹ Here the text reflects the language of John XXIII: “for the deposit and the truths of faith are one thing, the manner of expressing them is quite another”; speech delivered at the opening of the council: *AAS* 54 (1962) 792. See Roberto Tucci, “Commentary on GS Part II, chapter 2,” in Vorgrimler, *ibid.* 280.

²⁰ Moeller, quoted in Tucci 285. See *ibid.* for an extended citation from Cardinal Lercaro’s speech on the importance of developing lay theologians.

²¹ Tucci, 285–86, reproduces in full the speech of Bishop Pellegrino favoring inserting the phrase “*sive clericis, sive laicis*,” with a note to some of the public reactions to the speech.

²² Quoted in Robert J. Kaslyn, “Title I: The Obligations and Rights of All the Christian Faithful,” in Beal et al., 273; extended commentary follows 273–76.

a point at issue in the discussion of the implementation of *Ex corde ecclesiae*.²³ According to canon 218, the freedom of the theologian carries three qualifications. First, Macrina must accept the faith in its entirety. As Kaslyn remarks in commenting on this canon: “While no one can be forced to accept the Catholic faith against his or her conscience (c. 748, §2), once baptized or received into the church, the person cannot choose to accept or to reject specific articles of the faith.”²⁴ Kaslyn further notes that “the bond of the profession of faith itself must include accepting the hierarchy of truths with Christian doctrine.” Not all truths carry the same weight, depending on their relation to the foundations of the faith.²⁵

The second qualification to academic freedom directly concerns learning. Macrina must be learned in the area in which she writes; her opinion will have weight in relation to her knowledge and sound judgment. The third qualification is a caution that the theologian must observe due submission (*obsequium*) to the magisterium. Here Kaslyn comments: “All the faithful participate in the teaching function of the church (see c. 747); however, sacred pastors have a specific responsibility to ensure the probity of that which is taught.”²⁶ To insure sound teaching is a primary episcopal responsibility. Since teaching is the primary gift of the theologian, it is inevitable—and necessary—that the two offices relate to one another. The same Holy Spirit endows the people of God with the teaching office exercised by the hierarchy, and also bestows the vocation of the theologian on others for the better service of the one same people of God. As Paul taught, there are multiple gifts for the building up of the One Body. The issue today is not whether bishops should exercise their responsibility for teaching with respect to theologians, but how. The issue is acute because of the unparalleled numbers of lay theologians in the Catholic Church today. As already noted, *Gaudium et spes* expressed the hope that more of the laity would become theologians. They have responded, and their presence faces the Church with a new situation. I turn now to an examination of the changing ways the vocation has been exercised.

²³ For a good review of a centrist position on this issue, see Richard McBrien, “Academic Freedom and the Catholic Theologian,” in *Issues in Academic Freedom*, ed. George S. Worgul, Jr. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1992) 126–42. All the essays in this volume are pertinent; the other authors are James P. Hanigan, Raymond F. Collins, Avery Dulles, Donald W. Wuerl, William J. Byron, Charles E. Curran, John E. Murray, Jr., and George S. Worgul, Jr.

²⁴ Kaslyn, *ibid.* 274.

²⁵ *Ibid.* with reference to canons 750–754, the commentary on canon 205, and *Unitatis redintegratio* no. 11.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 275.

CHANGING ROLES

If theology is “faith seeking understanding,” then, so long as there have been believing Christians, there have been theologians. Yet the group of believers who exercise the theological vocation has changed, as has their understanding of their work. In the great foundational centuries theologians were mostly bishops. Yves Congar noted that in the formative period what characterized the episcopal function was the *cathedra*, the chair or seat of the bishop, with its continuity, its succession, its teaching. So, for example, when Athanasius speaks of the Council of Nicaea, his argument does not rest on intrinsic authority. Rather, it turns on the fact that Nicaea expressed the faith received from the apostles and the Fathers. A relevant text Congar cited from Athanasius reads: “The Fathers, in matters of faith, never said: Thus it has been decreed, but: This is what the Catholic church believes; and they confessed what they believed directly, so as to show unmistakably that their thought was not new, but apostolic [*De synodis* 5, PG 26.688].”²⁷ The authority of the Fathers is rooted in the faithful passing on of what they had received, so in “tradition.” From Paul’s account of the institution of the Eucharist, cast in the already freighted vocabulary of “receiving” (*paralambano*) and “passing on” (*paradidomai*), through the insistence of the Fathers of Chalcedon that the creed “received” from Nicaea remain unchanged (DS 300): in all the changes of those first 450 plus years, while the cast of Fathers grew, their place in the chain of tradition continued to serve as guarantor of their authority.

These bishop-theologians understood their work as the proclamation of the word. Paul exhorted Timothy: “Proclaim the word; be persistent whether it is convenient or inconvenient; convince, reprimand, encourage through all patience and teaching” (2 Tim 2:4, NAB). Irenaeus insisted that true learning consists “in unfolding the meaning of the parables, and showing their agreement with the truth, and in explaining how God has realized God’s own saving plan for humankind” (*Adversus haereses* I, 10, 3). In the Nicene controversy a key issue was whether it was acceptable to introduce the non-scriptural term *homoousios* into the creed. Throughout, the work was first and foremost the transmission and interpretation of the Word of God. Methodologies, like those developed by Origen (*De principiis*) and Augustine (*De doctrina*) are principally methods of exegesis. Typically theological works took the form of sermons, letters, and treatises. There ideas were worked out. Quite often these came to final form later, as the

²⁷ Yves Congar, “A Brief History of the Forms of the Magisterium and Its Relations with Scholars,” in *Readings in Moral Theology* 3, ed. Charles Curran and Richard McCormick (New York: Paulist, 1982) 316.

authors participated in synods and councils, whether local, regional, or general. Teachers who were not pastors (such as Tertullian, Origen, and Jerome) were accepted, in part, because they too engaged in a theology dominated by Scriptural commentary, and they shared the same understanding of authority. But it remains true, as Congar remarked, that “at the very least from the fourth century onward, theologians are most often bishops and important bishops are theologians.”²⁸

Under pressure from the great westward migration of peoples the seat of empire moved east, cities in Western Europe were gradually depopulated, and in time the Western Church lost touch with the Church in the East. This period of reconfiguration of society witnessed the rise of Western monasticism. Veneration for the Scripture and devotion to the liturgy of the hours alike fostered monastic learning. Theology found a new home in the monasteries. Among those who preached and wrote, giving advice to popes and rulers alike, in time one finds monastic theologians like Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) and Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179). In fact, Anselm (ca. 1033–1109)—he who described theology as “faith seeking understanding”—began as a monk; he was called from his position as abbot of Bec to become archbishop of Canterbury. Examples can be multiplied. In method and sense of authority these men (and some very few women) remained in continuity with their predecessors from the foundational period of Christianity. Essentially throughout the first millennium theologians were bishops and monks; their authorization to teach was one with their ordination and/or religious profession. The form of their theological work was principally biblical reflection.

As the Western economy once more supported cities, these in turn supported a new kind of school, the medieval university. There the finest minds engaged in philosophical analysis under the tutelage of Aristotle, whose works were newly recovered. Theologians, many of whom were members of the nascent mendicant orders, brought the new learning into their work. One result was the *Summa theologiae* of Aquinas. The method of the “Schoolmen,” Scholasticism, is highly analytical and depends on use of the *quaestio*.²⁹ One may ask whether an approach totally dictated by logical analysis is appropriate to theology understood as “faith seeking understanding.” Can such a science study God? Aquinas addresses this

²⁸ Ibid. 317.

²⁹ A review of how such argument proceeds helps clarify the magnitude of the change in method. A major topic, like God and the divine perfections, is divided into its component parts, each of which becomes a number. Each article consists of parts: (1) a *question*; (2) negative replies to the question, or “*objections*”; (3) an argument from authority (the weakest logical argument), called “*on the contrary*”; (4) an argument from reason, begun with the phrase “*I answer that*”; (5) and finally, *replies to the objections*.

concern: "In sacred science all things are treated of under the aspect of God; either because they are God Himself; or because they refer to God as their beginning and end. Hence it follows that God is in very truth the object of this science" (*ST* 1, q. 1, a. 7). In the hands of the great Scholastic theologians, including with Thomas Aquinas figures such as Albert the Great, Bonaventure, and Duns Scotus, theology flourished. Their teaching authority, the "magisterium of the professor's chair," was highly respected, though understood as another way of teaching than that of bishops, who held the "magisterium of the pastoral chair." Aquinas comments on the distinction several times. For example, he writes: "Spiritual hazards hang over those who hold the position of magisterium. Learning combined with charity avoids the hazards of the magisterium of the pastoral chair but a person does not know for a certainty if he has this charity. On the other hand, the person avoids the hazards of the magisterium of the professor's chair by learning which he can know that he has" (*Quodl.* 3, a. 9, ad 3).³⁰ Clearly, in Aquinas's judgment, it is safer spiritually to be a professor of theology than to be a bishop!

It is this double sense of "magisterium" that gave immense authority to the theological faculties of the universities, with that of the University of Paris preeminent among them. It came to be considered that in Christendom there were three powers: the *sacerdotium*, centered in Rome; the *regnum*, centered on the Holy Roman Emperor; and the *studium*, centered in Paris.³¹ Eventually doctors of theology so overshadowed bishops that, during the Council of Basel (1431–49),³² "at the thirty-fourth session . . . 25 June, 1439, there were 300 doctors but only thirteen prelates and seven bishops."³³ That council marks the final flourish of rampant conciliarism. The situation was quite different at the Council of Trent (1543–65). Congar's description is felicitous:

The Council of Trent achieved a happy collaboration between theologians and Fathers. First, theologians were admitted to congregations partly composed of

³⁰ Quoted in Yves Congar, "Theologians and the Magisterium in the West: From the Gregorian Reform to the Council of Trent," *Chicago Studies* 17 (1978) 218, with four additional citations from Aquinas, and several from other authors.

³¹ Bibliography cited by Congar (*ibid.* 220) includes: E. Gilson, *Humanisme médiéval et Renaissance: Les idées et les lettres* (Paris, 1952) 171–96; H. Grundmann, "Sacerdotium, Regnum, studium. Zur Wertung der Wissenschaft im 13. Jahrhundert," *Archiv f. Kulturgesch.*, 34 (1951–52) 5–21; A. G. Jongkees, "Translatio studii, Les avatars d'un theme médiéval," *Miscellanea Mediaev.* in hon. J. F. Niermeyer (Groningen, 1967) 41–52; G. LeBras, "Paris: seconde capitale de la Chrétienté," *Rev. Hist. Egl. de France* 37 (1951) 5–17.

³² The last of the three councils called to resolve the crisis of papal authority resulting from the Western Schism (1378–1417).

³³ Congar, *ibid.* 221.

bishops; then congregations of lesser theologians were established, that is to say, not conciliar Fathers, ahead of delegates and prelates. The opinion of theologians was considered; then the Fathers drafted a decree and, before publishing it, submitted the text to the theologians. Then, the theologians were allowed to speak in assemblies, which brought the difficulty of limiting their interventions. Among the bishops, several were good theologians. All in all, after a period of resistance by the Fathers, the interventions and importance of theologians have been growing.³⁴

Afterwards, diverse schools continued, and the faculties of theology remained active powers until the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars.³⁵ Theologians continued to flourish in monasteries; it is worth remembering that in these years there emerged two of the three women doctors of the Church—Teresa of Avila and Thérèse of Lisieux. Yet theologians for the most part remained clerics, and their work continued to be tightly linked to that of the cleric. So, for the most part, the situation would remain until Vatican II.

CHANGES IN THEOLOGY

Meanwhile, in the 18th and 19th centuries, quite contrary developments in ecclesiology and in methodology heightened tensions around the work of theology. In ecclesiology, 18th-century discussions of papal infallibility evoked a stronger and more precise distinction between the teaching Church (*Ecclesia docens*) and the believing or learning Church (*Ecclesia credens* or *discens*).³⁶ Increasingly, as Congar argued “there was a tendency to give ‘magisterium’ an autonomous and absolute value, whereas soundness consists in not separating the form of the apostolic ministry from the content of tradition.”³⁷ In the early 19th century the word “magisterium” appears in its modern sense.³⁸ As the hierarchical magisterium takes on the connotation of “the” teaching office, the teaching role of the theologian

³⁴ Congar, “A Brief History” 322.

³⁵ For specific actions of such faculties in the period, see Congar, *ibid.* 322–23. For studies covering the period, see James K. Farge, *Orthodoxy and Reform in Early Reformation France: The Faculty of Theology of Paris, 1500–1543* (Leiden: Brill, 1985); Jacques M. Gres-Gayer, “The Magisterium of the Faculty of Theology of Paris in the Seventeenth Century,” *Theological Studies* 53 (1992) 424–50; Michael D. Place, “From Solicitude to Magisterium: Theologians and the Magisterium from the Council of Trent to the First Vatican Council,” *Chicago Studies* 17 (1978) 225–41.

³⁶ Congar, *ibid.* 323.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ See Yves Congar, *Tradition and Traditions* (London: Burns & Oates, 1966) part 1, trans. Michael Naseby, chap. 6, esp. 189–221; “A Brief History of the Forms of the Magisterium” 314–31; see also John P. Boyle, “The Ordinary Magisterium: Towards a History of the Concept: 1,” *Heythrop Journal* 20 (1979) 380–98; “The Ordinary Magisterium: Towards a History of the Concept: 2,” *Heythrop Journal* 21 (1980) 14–29.

was viewed differently. The theologian's task, according to Pius IX, became "to show how the doctrine defined by the Church was contained in the sources of revelation, in that very sense in which it had been defined."³⁹

Such an understanding, rooted in the 19th-century ecclesiology of the Roman school, had in common with Enlightenment rationalism the assumption that the most meaningful truth was ahistorical and unchanging. It is typical of premodern theology. But contrary developments in methodology were underway. The introduction of a critical stance with respect to the limitations of knowledge seriously challenged this assumption. As John E. Thiel notes, the premoderns, faced with critical arguments, had three choices: to deny (or ignore) them; to accept them and admit their prior position may have been well-meant but was in fact wrong; or in Thiel's words to "admit the cogency of the criticism while affirming the legitimacy of the precritical theological vision, if not its simple claims to authority traditionally understood. The first two courses demanded allegiance to a more or less traditional model of truth as a timeless and therefore changeless relation. The third course required the reconciliation of truth and historical development."⁴⁰

The beginning of the papacy of Pius IX in 1846 coincides almost exactly with the end of the work of two of the leading figures in the Tübingen school. Johann Adam Möhler died in 1838 and Johann Sebastian Drey retired in 1846. Both men were prominent in initial Catholic efforts to respond to rationalist arguments by incorporation in theology of concepts dependent on historical development. At the same time Joseph Kleutgen, then working at Freiburg, reaffirmed the Scholastic method, soon taken up by the Roman School. The neo-Scholastic revival which followed effectively quashed Catholic historical theology for more than a century. At issue was the nature of truth itself as eternal, objective, and unchanging. The struggles of Catholic theologians until shortly before the Second Vatican Council reflect how difficult it has been for those accustomed to think in those categories to begin to reconcile their understanding of truth with the facts of historical development. Within that century fall, in 1864, the publication of the *Syllabus of Errors*, in 1907, the condemnation of modernism in the decree *Lamentabili*, and the encyclical *Pascendi*, and in 1950, the encyclical *Humani generis* in which Pius XII, citing Pope Pius IX,

³⁹ Citation from Francis A. Sullivan, *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist, 1983) 183.

⁴⁰ John E. Thiel, *Imagination & Authority: Theological Authorship in the Modern Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 68. While I am indebted to Thiel's analysis of what he terms the paradigm shift from the Classical to the Romantic paradigm of theological authorship, my own analysis here follows a somewhat different pattern as I struggle with the situation of theological work in the Roman Catholic Church today.

wrote: "Theologians must always return to the sources of divine revelation: for it belongs to them to point out how the doctrine of the living Teaching Authority is to be found either explicitly or implicitly in the Scriptures and in Tradition."⁴¹ Shortly thereafter followed the definition of the dogma of the Assumption.

However, theologians such as Newman⁴² and Blondel⁴³ had recognized that the underlying problem with which Catholic theology needed to engage was the notion of development of dogma. After 1950, taking every advantage of the encouraged return to the sources, scholars such as Edward Schillebeeckx⁴⁴ and Karl Rahner⁴⁵ addressed this issue. Rahner's approach, for example, identified what he called "the constitutive elements of the dynamism of dogmatic development." These are five. For Rahner "the constitutive elements of the dynamism of dogmatic development" include: (1) the Spirit and grace; (2) the magisterium of the Church; (3) concept and word; (4) tradition; and (5) the acknowledged presence of dogma, as dogma, as revealed by God.⁴⁶ This analysis brings theological concepts and historical understanding into conversation.

It is interesting to find the Spirit listed here, and listed first. This brings us to a third change in recent theology affecting the vocation of the theologian. The first change was a shift in ecclesiology in which the hierarchical magisterium took on the connotation of "the" teaching office. The second, occurring at the same time, was a shift in methodology which sought to incorporate critical historical thought into the theological task. Ultimately, Catholic theologians addressed this shift through theories of development of dogma. The third change that I wish to consider brought to the fore a neglected aspect of Pneumatology, the consideration of charismatic gifts. Not surprisingly, a man who recognized the role of the Spirit in the dynamism of dogmatic development also devoted serious thought to this aspect

⁴¹ *Humani generis* no. 21, with reference to Pius IX, *Inter gravissimas*, 28 Oct. 1870, *Acta* I, 260.

⁴² John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* [edition of 1845], ed. J. M. Cameron (Penguin: Baltimore, 1975).

⁴³ Maurice Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics and History and Dogma*, Eng. trans. of *Histoire et dogme* (London: Harvill, 1964).

⁴⁴ For Edward Schillebeeckx a key essay is "The Development of the Apostolic Faith into the Dogma of the Church," in *Revelation and Theology*, vol. 1 (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1967) 57–83.

⁴⁵ For Karl Rahner, three of the most important pieces are "The Development of Dogma," *Theological Investigations* 1, trans. Cornelius Ernst (Baltimore: Helicon, 1963) 39–77; also "Considerations on the Development of Dogma" 3–35, and "Virginitas in Partu" 134–62, both in *Theological Investigations* 4, trans. Kevin Smyth (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966).

⁴⁶ "Considerations on the Development of Dogma" 11–30.

of Pneumatology. In what follows I am deeply indebted to Karl Rahner's essay, "The Charismatic Element in the Church."⁴⁷

Earlier I recalled that, according to *Lumen gentium*, "the holy people of God shares also in Christ's prophetic office" (no. 12). So the people give witness to Christ by a life of faith, love, and praise. According to this Dogmatic Constitution, such witness is enabled by the Spirit of God who animates the entire Church just as the soul vivifies the human body. Through living out its share in the prophetic office of Christ, the people of God "adheres to the faith, penetrates it more deeply through right judgment, and applies it more fully in daily life." To make the people holy and to enable them to do what needs be done for both the renewal and the building up of the Church, the Spirit gives special gifts or charisms. These gifts are abundant, and often may be quite simple. Rahner remarked: "Because we are selfish ourselves, we are only ready to see good, good brought about by God, where it suits our advantage, our need for esteem, or our view of the Church. But this unrecognized goodness, and even charismatic goodness, is found in the Church in rich abundance. That is not altered by the fact that more is brought into God's barns than is consigned in the pages of newspapers, and magazines, histories of civilization and other such human halls of fame."⁴⁸ Among the gifts recognized from New Testament times is teaching. It is indeed a gift proper to both the ordinary and extraordinary magisterium of the Church. However, it has never been the exclusive gift of office holders in the Church, as our very brief review of the history has shown. If both charism and office are the work of the Spirit, then the dualism of charism and office is divinely willed. Fundamental contradiction between the two cannot continue, because the Spirit cannot and does not work against Itself.⁴⁹ But in fact disagreements continue to arise. They are unavoidable. God's gifts pour into the Church both through office-holders and through members who hold no office. Only God, the gift-giver, knows where these gifts are leading. While the gifts come from the one Spirit, they are not one gift, any more than a single one of us forms the whole Church. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 12, insisted that the body needs all its members—and all their gifts. For him, the variety of humans with their various gifts relate as members to the one body, which is Christ. The question then arises whether, solely at the human level, any unity at all can be hoped for. Rahner suggested that the only thing capable of bringing unity to the Church on the human level is love, which he names

⁴⁷ Karl Rahner, "The Charismatic Element in the Church," in *The Dynamic Element in the Church*, *Quaestiones Disputatae* 12, trans. W. J. O'Hara (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964) 42–83; page numbers cited here are from this printing. Reprinted in *The Spirit in the Church* (New York: Seabury, 1979) 33–73.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 65.

⁴⁹ See *ibid.* 71–73.

as “the love which allows another to be different, even when it does not understand him.” He went on to describe what this means in cases of conflict:

The principle that charity brings with it implies that each in the Church may follow his spirit as long as it is not established that he is yielding to what is contrary to the Spirit; that, therefore, orthodoxy, freedom and goodwill are to be taken for granted and not the opposite. Those are not only self-evident human maxims of a sensible common life built on respect and tolerance for others, but also principles which are very deeply rooted in the very nature of the Church and must be so. For they follow from the fact that the Church is not a totalitarian system. Patience, tolerance, leaving another to do as he pleases as long as the error of his action is not established—and not the other way round, prohibition of all individual initiative until its legitimacy has been formally proved, with the onus of proof laid on the subordinate—are, therefore, specifically ecclesiastical virtues springing from the very nature of the Church.⁵⁰

One may wonder whether such patience and tolerance is expected of theologians in the present situation. The Spirit remains in the Church. Indeed, it is the task of office-holders to discern the validity of the gifts. It is in particular the task of bishops to insure sound teaching. Earlier, a canonist, commenting on the limitations to theological freedom, stated: “All the faithful participate in the teaching function of the church (see c. 747); however, sacred pastors have a specific responsibility to ensure the probity of that which is taught.”⁵¹ When it comes to testing the validity of a gift, the council advises office-holders “not indeed to extinguish the Spirit, but to test all things and hold fast to what is good” (LG no. 12). That advice is for the bishops whose burden is not lightened by the awareness that it is possible for their actions to thwart the work of the Spirit. History is full of examples: Joan of Arc, burned at the stake, and John of the Cross, thrown into prison; Newman left to languish for years under a cloud of suspicion, and Mary Ward, whose Rule was rejected and whose institute was suppressed in 1631—though today most of what she wrote in the Rule is commonplace for active women religious. God’s gifts do not eradicate the possibility of human error. Each bishop, like each theologian, is but one servant of the one Spirit who animates the Church, of the one Christ who is Lord of the Church. Each must presume the good will of the other. Difficult as it may be, each must learn to recognize the one God who is acting in the other.

Every charism involves suffering because it is painful to fulfill the task set by the gift and, at the same time, to endure the opposition of another within the Church whose opposition may, in some circumstances, be as justified as one’s own. Rahner wisely commented: “One’s own gift is always

⁵⁰ Ibid. 74–75.

⁵¹ See above page 12.

limited and humbled by another's gift. Sometimes it must wait until it can develop until its *kairos*, its hour has come, when that of another has passed or is fading. This painful fact is to be viewed soberly as an inevitable consequence of there being one Church and many gifts."⁵² To suffer opposition is not in itself proof that one's gift is authentic—or inauthentic. The authenticity of the gift, which is for the Church, is shown by how the person bears the sorrow that accompanies it. Such a person, it is noted, "knows that it is the one Lord who creates a force and resistance to it, the wine of enthusiasm and the water of sobriety in his Church, and has given to none of his servants singly the task of representing him."⁵³ Sobering words, these. If anything, what is confirmed is what too many already know: there is grief and anguish in following the vocation of a theologian.

CONCLUSION

I began from the understanding of the work of a theologian as a true vocation, a call from God to a particular work in the Church. In practice, unlike the vocations to the religious life or to the priesthood, confirmation of the vocation of the theologian is restricted to academic qualification for the work. Examination of sections of *Lumen gentium* and *Gaudium et spes* led to recognition that this vocation is a charism located within the prophetic office of the people of God. The specific work of the theologian is reflected in the council's charge, which reads: "With the help of the holy Spirit, it is the task of the whole people of God, particularly of its pastors and theologians, to listen to and distinguish the many voices of our times and to interpret them in the light of God's word, in order that the revealed truth may be more deeply penetrated, better understood, and more suitably presented" (no. 44). Further, the council expressed the explicit hope that more of the laity would become theologians. Such a desire, once met, would effect far-reaching changes. My summary review of the history showed that until Vatican II, theologians were usually clerics, although the gift was never exclusively reserved to office-holders. In the two centuries leading up to the council there were changes in theology that would affect the theological vocation. These included a shift in the understanding of the magisterium, and changes in methodology, as historically critical approaches were incorporated. Additionally, renewed attention to Pneumatology brought deeper understanding of the place of charisms in the Church.

Today the community called Church is blessed with a large group of theologians who are not clerics. These women and men have welcomed the

⁵² Rahner, "Charismatic Element" 77.

⁵³ Ibid. 78.

gift of their vocation. As a cadre they are a first generation. The academy has tested such of their qualifications as fall within its purview. But the institutional Church has yet to devise a means to test and to confirm the vocational call of its theologians specifically as vocation, and as vocation not of necessity linked to either the clerical or the religious state. The implementation of *Ex corde ecclesiae* seems to be a first stumbling step in that direction.

Meanwhile, the gift remains. And how does one endure in the in-between? Macrina, and all her colleagues, whose life work is to be about the task of faith seeking understanding, continue to exercise the vocation as the gift that it is. For these professional theologians, lay women and men, clerics, and religious, all of them, Paul's advice holds: "Live by the Spirit" (Gal 5:16). The signs of such living are simple: love, the love that allows another to be different, even when one does not understand the other. And joy, the joy that flows from exercising one's own gift to the best of one's ability. The list of signs is familiar: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified their flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also follow the Spirit" (Gal 5:22–25). We know in whom we have believed. Our hope is secure, and, as the spiritual has it, "Joy comes with the morning."