

THEOLOGY'S RESPONSIBILITY AND TASKS IN TODAY'S CHURCH AND WORLD

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[In this lecture, delivered originally at the Catholic University of America, Washington, the Archbishop of Strasbourg develops a question close to his heart, namely theology's responsibility and tasks in today's Church and world. After having enunciated as a principle the embeddedness of this responsibility in faith considered as a total entity, he then outlines the relationship between the different aspects of this faith and theology's multiple tasks. In the final section, he enumerates three formal characteristics of theology that emerge from its direct connection with faith.]

THEOLOGY AS SUCH and in its entirety relates to faith. Theology by its very origin depends on faith; its end is to serve faith. Theology's responsibility then is defined by reference to faith, and theologians' tasks are carried out in relation to it. This expresses the essential, but at the same time remains at the level of generalities. Much more precision is needed. To serve that purpose, I have adopted the following plan. In part one, which also serves as an extended introduction, I propose a *principle* expressed as: *Theology's responsibility is linked to the entirety of faith.* In this first place, I appeal to a principle; the key word in my statement of this principle is "entirety." In part two, which will necessarily be longer, I elucidate the *application* of this principle, using as my formulation: *From faith's different aspects to theology's multiple tasks.* I examine each of the main characteristics of faith successively and provide their application to theology, showing in each case the particular task for theology. There are four characteristics, aspects, or dimensions of faith, to which correspond respectively four tasks for theology. In part three, which serves as a rather

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brief conclusion (comparable in importance to my introductory first part), I draw out the *consequences* for what I call: *Theology's formal characteristics as discourse of faith*.

THE PRINCIPLE: THEOLOGY'S RESPONSIBILITY IS LINKED TO THE ENTIRETY OF FAITH

Theology is bound to faith, or more precisely, to faith in its entirety, in accordance with all its many dimensions. Theology then cannot be placed solely in relation to doctrine; it cannot be related solely to forms of discourse, however fundamental or normative, however firm or authorized they may be. In fact, faith is also celebrated in worship and is applied in the spiritual life and in moral actions. Through all of this it is embodied in a whole set of relational networks and institutions, and thus it is with regard to all these aspects of faith that theology must be responsible. It must seek to be accountable for all of them.

At the same time theological discourse must not remain purely theoretical and timeless. If we were to confine ourselves to the discursive aspects of faith, we could be content with trying to explain, defend, and illustrate teachings: those of Scripture, for example, and tradition and the magisterium. And it could then be left to areas of theology other than theology "strictly speaking" to deal with what would be regarded as merely "concrete applications" or "practical conclusions."

If on the contrary theology's responsibility is defined with regard to all that faith is, it follows that theology should be accountable not only for the teachings of the faith but also how they are in fact lived and practiced by believers, and how they are applied in history and society, in the world and in culture. This includes, consequently, the teachings of the faith in their concrete historical form or aspect: inasmuch as they must be (and are) received and embodied among Christians, but also inasmuch as they are neglected, contested, or rejected by those who are not Christians.

In other words, theology must apply itself to being accountable for the doctrine of faith but it must do so without ignoring the non-doctrinal aspects of faith. This implies a certain number of consequences for theology, both as to the precise tasks it must fulfill and to the formal characteristics of its discourse. But it also implies that, in respect to all the aspects that open up faith *ad extra*, faith is also exposed to investigation by authorities other than itself and theology will have to take account of this fact. This leads us immediately to a second point.

Authorities Other Than Faith

Already as doctrine, faith is expected to enter into dialogue and debate with other authorities, which have their own proper qualifications. In the

first place there is philosophy, with which theology has been constantly in dialogue from its beginnings. But, since the beginning of modern times, the conditions under which theology can engage in such exchanges have changed considerably. On the one hand, dialogue partners have multiplied. Philosophy is no longer the only partner; there is also history—ever since it became a true science at the end of the 19th century—and there are the various other human sciences since the 20th century. On the other hand, these particular partners have become more and more autonomous: they have declared themselves resolutely profane and secular. This was already the case for philosophy from the 17th century, whereas until then theology tended to keep it in a merely “ancillary” status. And it is even more the case today for the human sciences, since they can be said to have been born with the express will of emancipation and autonomy vis-à-vis faith and its “authorities.”

As a matter of principle, theology must not keep itself at a distance from these disciplines and their ways of proceeding, secular though they may be. In the same way, as it agreed to dialogue with philosophy because faith has to do with discourse, thought, and understanding, and then with the science of history because Christianity has no place outside of history, so too theology today must engage in conversation with sociology, psychology, linguistics, etc., because, no less certainly, faith is a reality of an institutional order, because it follows the contours of the human psyche, and because it is set forth in texts, etc.

Of course this does not mean that faith will have to renounce itself—a point to which I shall return later. On the contrary, recourse to new methods of treating faith can serve both to highlight better some of its aspects and to eliminate some reservations or criticisms in its regard. Moreover, it must not be forgotten that these more or less new disciplines are not waiting for authorization before attempting to produce analyses and “critiques” of the Christian faith which may be very much to the point. It is preferable then not to leave the initiative completely up to them, but better rather to seek to join them on their own field so as to become capable of engaging with them in proper dialogue.

The whole question then obviously will be to see that the procedures and analyses thus adopted do not go beyond the area of their own competence. In other words, the question will be to know if, with their help, theology does or does not become more qualified to render an account of faith as faith and in accordance with all the aspects of faith as such.

THE APPLICATION: FROM FAITH'S DIFFERENT ASPECTS TO THEOLOGY'S MULTIPLE TASKS

I pass now from the principle to its application. I identify successively four aspects of faith; (1) faith as confession of mystery; (2) faith as light in

the Spirit; (3) faith as engagement with the world; and (4) faith as insertion into the ecclesial body. From each of these in turn I draw the corresponding task for theology. The first dimension of faith flows from its basic characteristic, namely, it is first and foremost confession of the mystery.

Faith as Confession of Mystery

Knowledge and Faith

If faith went unquestioned by human intelligence, if it could maintain and transmit itself without the obligation of entering into debate with whatever considers it from the outside or criticizes or distorts it, there would certainly be no need for theology. Faith would be self-sufficient. Or if faith were in revolt against the intellect and its activity, if it were required to make a *sacrificium intellectus*, theology would not be needed either. Strength of commitment and heartfelt emotion would readily dispense with theology. Or again, if, called to self-understanding, faith could achieve this by means and procedures that would be strictly proper to itself, it could, in all good conscience, stake out its own field of intelligibility. And it could cast into the “outer darkness” all of the other “human, all too human” modes of treating faith.

But it is faith itself that forbids us to look at things in this way. In fact it is essential to faith to be a *logike latreia*, a *rationabile obsequium* (Romans 12:1). The revelation that calls it into being and to which it is required to answer has in its very constitution an aspect of Word-addressed. This means that this revelation will be effectively received only if it is received in respect to the element of knowledge that it wishes to communicate. It means, as a corollary, that this reception will be authentic only if it motivates and mobilizes the intellect of the recipient. Because it is knowledge, the confession of faith is an act that engages the believer’s understanding.

By the same token of course theological reflection appears as a demand of faith. It follows therefore that it has certain precise obligations.

Theology and Faith as Faith

Since theology is not in opposition to but is essential to faith, it cannot aim at substituting its own discourse for that of faith. It must be even more careful not to aim at dispensing with faith in any way! Even though it treats of faith through procedures and methods that are unknown to faith, theology must only proceed in this way in order to bring to light the plausibility, the benefit, the richness of faith precisely as *faith*. It should only proceed in ways that make faith clearer to itself and more alive, *as faith*. The task of theology is not to prove that the truth of faith resides elsewhere than in the act, the attitude, the gesture, the confession of faith as conscious adherence to the revealed mystery of God. On the contrary, theology must

acknowledge its responsibility to bring to light the fact that and the reason why faith is not only a fully respectable and responsible human attitude but one that yields to no other in its own order.

Clearly then, not only is theology essentially distinguished from the "human sciences" as these are applied to matters of faith, but it is also marked off from the "religious sciences" whatever their specializations. If theology works on expressions of faith, on forms or aspects of faith, as these religious sciences do, as theology it must never allow itself to forget that faith has produced these forms, that faith gives them their true consistency, and that theirs is a call to faith.

Accordingly, theology appears as nothing more or nothing less than one of the modes of expression of the confession of faith itself, as a form of accomplishment of the very process of faith. In the way it treats of faith then, the specificity of theology does not reside in the fact that it would succeed to faith as something essentially different from it, for example as a completely different type of knowledge. The specificity of theology can be stated as follows: it aims at carrying as far as possible intellectual investigation and conceptual articulation of the aspect of knowledge and of understanding that is co-essential to faith as such. To this element, verified from the very first instant of faith, all believers of themselves have access.¹

Faith as Life in the Spirit

Faith implies much more than a form of knowledge. Theology has also a responsibility in respect to all that goes beyond knowledge, in faith understood as adherence to the mystery, which I designate here as "life in the Spirit." Other tasks for theology follow from this responsibility.

The Spiritual Dimension of Faith

The fact must be acknowledged that, at least in Western theology, there has been for some centuries an increasing tendency to confine theology to intellectuality. It can even be said that modern theology has come more and more to consider reason and enlightenment as its principal if not its only companion. As a result there have often been two victims. On the one hand, theology itself tended to become purely a matter of reasoning, demonstration, and deduction. That deprived it of all access, other than rational, to its object, which it nevertheless considered as incommensurable with pure human reason. On the other hand, the properly spiritual dimension of faith, when it was not simply abandoned to itself, was left to "spiritual theology" called "ascetic and mystical." This latter did not always manage

¹ See Joseph Doré, "Les cent ans de la Faculté de l'Institut Catholique de Paris," *Revue de l'Institut Catholique de Paris* no. 36 (October–December 1990) 73–74.

to maintain living contact with the confession of faith, and consequently it found itself in all sorts of psychological backwaters or affective hypertrophies.

All of the great theological productions of the past, however, were linked to strong currents of spiritual vitality in the Church. Augustine would not be comprehensible without the fine flowering of the North African Church, nor the Cappadocians without early monasticism, nor even Thomas Aquinas without the Order of Preachers And what of Bérulle or Newman, what of Rahner and Balthasar?²

We have now come to an age in which, on the contrary, a considerable gap seems to have opened up between current theology on the one hand and, on the other, all that has to do with prayer, spiritual experience and, more generally, what is called “popular piety.” Moreover, a situation is emerging that is surely new in the history of the Church: theology can be studied without receiving, concomitantly, a true spiritual formation. Even during the abstract neo-Scholastic period, the students—most of them later to become priests or religious—were provided for in this regard in their seminaries or scholasticates. This is no longer the case. Formerly students in theology could find the means to come into living contact with the reality of the mystery that theology claims to deal with in a whole environment of prayer and, more generally, in the various “spiritual exercises.” Their successors of today on the contrary feel quite frustrated. Not being compensated elsewhere, the lack of connection they perceive between theological discourse and its potential to give access to the reality that it deals with, brings them to condemn theology. Theology, they say, does not allow them to pursue, by supporting and enriching it, the spiritual path that in fact brought them to theology.

The conclusion is inescapable that, if it is theology’s responsibility to be accountable for faith, this implies that every theologian today must make or remake room for the properly spiritual dimension of faith. This is how Joseph Ratzinger puts it, with a slightly polemical note that takes nothing from the positive import of his words:

Just as we cannot learn to swim without water, so we cannot learn theology without the spiritual praxis in which it lives. This is by no means intended as an attack on lay theologians, whose spiritual life often enough puts us priests to shame, but, rather, as a very basic question about how the study of theology can be meaningfully structured so that it does not succumb to academic neutralization in which theology becomes ultimately a contradiction of itself.³

² Similar reflections can be found in “Woran krankt heute die Theologie? Ein Gespräch mit Prof. Gisbert Greshacke,” *Herderkorrespondenz* 43 (August 1989) 362–68.

³ Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology. Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987) 322.

The Sacramental Reference of Theology

Prayer and the spiritual quest, however, are not the only means available to faith to come into contact with the reality on which it depends, and which is none other than the very mystery of God. God's speaking is not restricted to communicating knowledge and calling to a way of life. God communicated God's self once and for all in Jesus Christ; and through Christ's ever-active mediation God continues to be communicated through space and time, by the Spirit of God, in the sacraments of the Church. Since faith is the attitude through which this self-revelation of God is received, it also includes the practice of the sacraments, in and through which God effectively and efficaciously signifies here and now God's self-communication to the believer.

It follows then that theology's responsibility extends also to this aspect of faith. Theologians must not forget that the mystery about which they reason is the very one that really presents itself to be encountered and received in the sacraments. Remember that, for example, neither a theology of the Trinity nor a theology of redemption is possible independently of an effective reference to the Christian celebration of baptism and the Eucharist. And note that here theology is not only referred to the texts of the ritual according to which the sacraments are celebrated, but also to the symbolic and mystical experience that the sacraments, as rites practiced in faith, make effective. Faith, for which theology is accountable and to which then it must defer, is inconceivable without the sacraments of the Church which celebrate it and make it a source of life. It must be said then that a sacramental dimension is essential to theology, to all theology.⁴

Theology, being by nature discourse, only deals directly with expressions of faith. But (i) theology worthy of the name must be accountable for faith as faith, and (ii) faith worthy of the name *non terminatur ad enuntiabile sed ad rem*.⁵ Theology must therefore find the means—beyond discourse necessarily, even if they must remain expressed through discourse—to keep real contact with and to offer real access to the reality that is implied in faith and that is none other than the revealed/communicated mystery of God. These means are none other than prayer and the spiritual quest, as well as sacrament and liturgical celebration—in other words, realities from the Spirit and in accordance with the Spirit.

Faith as Engagement in the World

Faith, and thus theology, can exist and be realized only in the world, simply because they can be realized only as human. There is no contradic-

⁴ Joseph Doré, "Discours théologique et réalité sacramentaire," in *Rituels: Mélanges offerts au Père Gy*, ed. Paul de Clerck and Eric Palazzo (Paris: Cerf, 1990) 251–61.

⁵ *Summa theologiae* 2–2. q. 1, a. 2, ad 2.

tion here with what has just been developed as the spiritual dimension of faith and of theology. Indeed in confessing the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, Christian faith can only be really coherent if it takes the means to incarnate itself!

The Practical Dimension of Faith

Faith calls for conversion; it wants to give life. It is not truth independently of the path that leads to it or without the life it aims to give: life in the Spirit, certainly, but more precisely, life-in-the-Spirit-in-the-world. If this is so, theology must present faith in such a way that it appears open not only to a "spiritual" type of appropriation but also to a decision that changes one's life, and thus is situated in the ethical domain, which involves the practical domain. Once again, further tasks for theology emerge.

On the one hand, inside the Church itself, it is for theology to bring to light many things important for faith considered as engagement in the world. Negatively, it must locate all of the lacunas, or even all the deviations that faith can exhibit in its concretely lived forms. Positively, it must bring to light all the possibilities it could have, whether by virtue of a better knowledge of the Christian tradition or by reason of a better articulation of the aspirations and potentialities of people today.

On the other hand, concern with lending support to the decision and the practice of faith today requires that theology helps to ensure respect for the hierarchy of the truths of faith. Because of that, it is invited to present the faith in such ways as to put emphasis on its heart, its center, and its vital core. This implies of course no attack on the integrity of doctrine, but it becomes more urgent than ever to go straight to the essential, which illuminates everything and with regard to which everything is to be determined.

It must be noted however that these different tasks of lending aid in the practical presentation and practical decision of faith are not subordinate tasks that would require only second-class methods, matters simply of pastoral care, and thus limited to "techniques" merely or even "tricks." Once it is accepted that it is faith that is involved, and that its future depends also on a task of reflection and of thought, it is obvious on the contrary that theology simply cannot here be kept or keep itself from involvement.

The "Committed" Aspect of Theology

However, a further step must be taken. In its practical concern and practical dimension theology must not be preoccupied with the world and culture merely so that faith may have greater chance of being accepted there, and thus to allow the Church to develop further. The mission of faith is also to change the world itself, to transform it, to contribute to its be-

coming more human and more fraternal, and to advance justice and peace there. Consequently, theology must develop its practical dimension from this "extra-ecclesial" point of view also.

Let me insist on this, to be absolutely clear: faith and thus theology give attention to the world, not only in order to reply to the attacks and the resistance of non-believers against faith and against the Church, and not only in order to compensate for the insufficiencies and infidelities of Christians in their witness to the faith. Faith and thus theology must also, and even primarily, be interested in the world as world, at least in the way God loves it (John 3:16). For it is truly the world of human beings—of human life and its conditions—that faith and theology must illuminate and transform in order to lead them toward the salvation that God offers them.

Today it is obviously in what has been traditionally called the "Third World," and more particularly in the Latin American theologies of liberation, that this aspect of theological responsibility has been especially highlighted, but there is also—and we must not forget it—the whole European "political theology." The great Christian tradition, it should be noted, has always considered that a moral-practical dimension is part and parcel of theology—so much so that it gives it, under the name of "moral theology," a particularly important place both qualitatively and quantitatively (see the outline of the *Summa theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas). Moreover, it has always been clearly understood that the doctrine of God's omnipotence and the doctrine of the Lordship of Christ Crucified not only have practical consequences as a sort of "side effect," but indeed of themselves involve certain implications both for social justice and for political order and organization. This is also true of the teaching of Christ on the unique and double commandment of love, and of the final judgment of history as it is announced in Matthew 25, for example.

This is not the time to develop this point, but it is important to claim its place for a dimension of theological responsibility too often neglected. It is made all the more important by the fact that, although in principle theology keeps its distance from the conditioning effects of the world, this does not prevent it from being in reality more or less consciously subject to them. It has the duty then to shoulder its own responsibilities in a world in which, in any case, it lives. Only it must do so for the right reason: the reason precisely of faith and of its own responsibility in the world, avoiding ill-considered positions as well as polemical distortion and undue interference.

Theology must take responsibility in history for what it says to the world about God and on behalf of God. It announces the Word of God in the form of a framework of covenant between God and humanity, in the form of a history and an event of salvation, of a law that is source of life and blessing, of a judgment that is carried out in the world with power, of a

future for human history in God, of a promise and a call. All of these realities, inseparably already present and yet to come, divine and human, gifts of grace and tasks committed to the faithful, must take shape in history, to be revealed and accomplished there.⁶

Faith as Insertion into the Ecclesial Body

Faith, for which theology is accountable, possesses obviously an ecclesial nature. It is impossible then for the same character not to be verified in the case of theology. This is manifested mainly in two ways.

The Ecclesial Dimension of Faith

All of the aspects already enumerated of faith taken in its “entirety” have as condition and effect an insertion, effective and more and more marked, of the believer into the community of believers that is the Church. The faith by reference to which theology defines its responsibility is the faith of the Church: the faith that the Church both declares and announces, celebrates and lives, attests and incarnates. Clearly then, theology must always aim to be, and must be in fact, related to the concrete reality of the Church, and inserted intimately into it.

It follows from this that the seriousness of its mission in the world leads ecclesial faith to take shapes and forms that can vary greatly according to places and circumstances. The ecclesial reference of theology cannot remain general, theoretical, and abstract. To avoid the risk of being completely non-existent, this reference must take on a quite specific form in some precise context of the Church. Thus all theologians must apply themselves in identifying what their precise ecclesial “base” may be. This base will not be assured merely by the canonical mission and by the hierarchical “visa” that allows them to teach officially. It demands a true commitment and an effective engagement, limited though it may be, in the concrete ecclesial, pastoral, and apostolic task. Only on this condition will the theologian deal with the faith as it is and not merely with an idea or a representation of it—with the faith in such a form as really brings it to life and embodies it in history and in society.⁷

The “Magisterial” Situation of Theology

Theology is and always must be even more involved in the Church. But, in this Church, theology is not the supreme instance in the order of truth.

⁶ Joseph Moingt, “Un avenir pour la théologie,” in *Traversées de la théologie. A la mémoire de Henri de Lavalette (1925–1985)* in *Recherches de science religieuse* vol. 75 (October–December 1987) 601–28, at 612.

⁷ See Joseph Doré, “La responsabilité et la tâche de l’UER de théologie et de sciences religieuses,” *Revue de l’Institut Catholique de Paris*, no. 39 (July–September 1991) 27–28.

Subject to the Word of God as it is recorded in the Scriptures and reflected by the interpreting tradition of the Church, theology is likewise dependent on a magisterium. This magisterium is exercised by an authorized hierarchy, with the ministry of governing, which includes precisely a responsibility in relation to the transmission, interpretation, and teaching of revealed faith.⁸

As successors of the Apostles, the bishops of the Church "receive from the Lord . . . the mission of teaching all peoples, and of preaching the Gospel to every creature, so that all men may attain to salvation." They have been entrusted then with the task of preserving, explaining, and spreading the Word of God of which they are servants.⁹

If this is the case, it is clear that being accountable for faith will also necessarily mean that theology takes its bearings from the ecclesial magisterium. How is it invited to do so? The first task will always consist in carefully checking the "type" or the "degree" of authoritativeness of the positions taken by the magisterium in the area concerned in each case. There are precise rules for this: the authoritativeness in question "becomes clear from the nature of the documents, the insistence with which a teaching is repeated, and the very way in which it is expressed."¹⁰

Once this is done, the second task for the theologians will be to strive then to understand this teaching in its contents, arguments, and purposes. This will mean an intense and patient reflection on their part and a readiness, if need be, to revise their own opinions and examine the objections which their colleagues might offer them.¹¹

A third task, however, will appear to devolve upon the truly "responsible" theologians if, "despite a loyal effort," they find "serious difficulties, for reasons which appear to them well-founded, in accepting a non-irreformable magisterial teaching." They are then invited to make known their difficulties to the competent magisterial authorities, "in an evangelical spirit," remaining open to a deeper examination of the question.¹²

John Paul II summarized well the desirable spirit for cooperation and debate between theology and magisterium in an address to a large group of German theologians in Alt-Oetting on 18 November 1980:

Love of the Church as it exists, which also implies fidelity to the witness of faith and to the ecclesiastical Magisterium, does not divert the theologian from his work nor

⁸ The journal *Recherches de science religieuse* has devoted two issues to the question of the magisterium: vol. 71 (January–March and April–June 1983). See especially my introductory article: "L'institution du magistère" 13–36.

⁹ *The Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*. Instruction of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1990, no. 14.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* no. 24.

¹¹ *Ibid.* no. 29.

¹² *Ibid.* nos. 30–31.

take from him any of that autonomy which is not to be denied. The Magisterium and theology have each a different task. For that reason, one cannot be reduced to the other. Nevertheless, they serve the same cause. And precisely because of that structure they must remain in constant dialogue. In the years that have followed the Council, there have been numerous examples of positive cooperation between theology and the Magisterium. You must deepen that base, and even if new conflicts should appear, continue your work in the spirit of common faith, with the same hope and the love that unites all men.¹³

Aquinas distinguished a *magisterium cathedrae pastoralis* (magisterium of the pastoral chair, reserved to “the hierarchy”) from a *magisterium cathedrae magisterialis* (magisterium of the doctoral chair, held by the “master” in theology).¹⁴ This does not mean that the two should be placed in parallel, for there is no doubt, at least in Catholic theology, that the last word belongs to the first of these two “magisteria,” namely to the pastoral authority, to the hierarchical ministry, to the ecclesial government. But it would not be appropriate either to end up with just any form of subjection of the second. The tasks are in fact quite differentiated. It undoubtedly falls to the magisterium to ensure that fidelity to the apostolic doctrine is maintained as the authentic tradition of the Church has understood it; it must also see to it that the unity of the people of God in confessing the truth of its one Lord is confirmed and strengthened. But, essential as these tasks are, they are far from being sufficient for the life and vitality of faith in the world today, for the world poses questions to it about new problems, or engages in criticism or refutation of it, or even adopts a position of open indifference toward it. Here it is precisely for the theologians to intervene. Hence it is obvious that the theologian has an indispensable role, one that, to be effective, needs to be exercised with prudent boldness. It is obvious too that theologians must enjoy trust—with the obligation on their part to earn it—and must be given freedom, though clearly on the understanding that they use it responsibly.

THE CONSEQUENCES: THEOLOGY'S FORMAL CHARACTERISTICS AS DISCOURSE OF FAITH

From what has been stated about theology's responsibility and tasks in respect to Christian faith some consequences follow for the theological process and method themselves: these must be historical, confessing, and fundamental.

¹³ *La Documentation Catholique*, n° 1798 (December 21, 1980) 1162. See also: Paul VI, *Discours aux participants au Congrès international sur la théologie du Concile Vatican II*, 1 Oct. 1966: *AAS* 58 (1966) 862 f.

¹⁴ In particular: *In IV Sent.* 19, 2, 2, q. 3, sol. 2, ad 4.

Theology as Historical, Hence Both Practical and Eschatological

Since it has a position of responsibility regarding faith taken in its entirety, and thus regarding faith considered also as historical and social fact, the theological perspective here defined is thoroughly historical. It is important to note, however, that this is the case not only in the sense of history as science and knowledge of the past, but also with regard to history in its concrete existence, in other words with its sociocultural and its economic and political structures and conditions. Since faith, which is a condition of theology, is conditioned historically, the theological process and method will necessarily be thoroughly affected by history, and will be so in various ways.

Because faith comes from the history of the past and thus is not a timeless doctrine, theology will be obliged to conduct a "positive" investigation; but this must always be careful to situate the doctrines in the totality of their original conditions of formulation and reception.

Because faith must be practiced and incarnated in present history, and thus must prove itself in the field of ethics, including the political dimension of ethics, theology will have to become practical, under pain of imprisoning faith in ideology.

Because faith opens up history to the future, making history possible through the combined invocation of the "principle of hope" and of "eschatological reserve," theology will make sure not to present itself as a closed totality or as a closed-loop system. On the contrary, it will make sure always to point to the ever greater God whose revelation, even though already definitive, is destined to be fully accomplished only "at the end." Accordingly, theology will always also conduct its business under the sign of eschatology.

Theology as Confessing, Hence Both Hermeneutical and Institutional

Because theology is accountable for faith, in that it is adherence at the level of knowledge to the revealed mystery of God and engagement with it at the level of existence, theology as understood here cannot avoid considering itself as confessing. It should be specified however that the confession in question is not only a matter of intellectual thought and of affective interiority: it can be accomplished only as and in the act of taking on the very conditions that make it possible. Once again consequences follow for the theological process and method.

Since it is the acknowledgment of the absolute mystery which is God, the confession of faith is at the same time the acknowledgment of a pure gratuitousness, and it should be added even that the awareness of that gratuitousness can only increase in direct proportion to the knowledge one has of it. Not for a moment, under the pretext that it is an operation of

intelligence and of thought, can theology convey the least impression that it could be master of its object in any way. On the contrary, it is urged to make room, in its process and its method, for an essentially contemplative or even doxological aspect.

Since it does not give itself its own "Object," the confession of faith is led on the contrary to realize that this "Object" can only be recognized to the extent that the confession was preceded and solicited by it. Accordingly, theologians must realize that they speak of their "object" only from the relation they already have with it—and even, to be more precise, only if that object has already been encountered by them in some way in their actual historical situation. In other words, theology cannot fail to include by the same token a hermeneutical aspect.

It is through the mediation of the Church, and in accordance with its community and hierarchical structure, that the revelation of the mystery is actually transmitted, and thus that the confession of faith is made possible. Consequently, there is also an institutional component in theological discourse: those who engage in it have always to situate themselves vis-à-vis the diverse and interrelated ecclesial authorities; these in turn solicit, make possible and regulate the authentic process of faith, even when it takes the specific form of the theological discourse.

Theology as Fundamental, Hence Critical and Theological

Theology's responsibility, both as historical and as confessing, is to seek to produce an understanding of faith that "gives an account" of faith, at least as far as that is possible. In this sense it can be said to belong to the tasks of theology to bring to light and to bring up to date the foundations of faith. This is readily expressed today by saying that theology is, and thus must aim to be, fundamental. More precisely, this task is not one that belongs only to a moment, be it the initial moment, of the theological process. On the contrary, it characterizes the whole process, whatever the aspect or the article of faith under consideration.

One should be clear, however, what "speaking" means here. If, on the one hand, one can consider as fundamental only what can be secured as such through reflection and reason, it remains true, on the other hand, that the result of that reflection cannot substitute itself for the very reality that faith confesses as its own ground. Theology and its reasons cannot be the *foundation* of faith as such. One must say rather that the task of theology is neither more nor less than to make evident (to the extent possible) that what grounds faith precisely *as faith*—even from a rational point of view—is its recognition of the Foundation that it confesses, which is none other than God. What consequences follow for the process and the method of theology?

Because faith is knowledge—firm knowledge—it thereby demands by that fact the operation and the deployment of all the virtualities and all the modalities of knowledge possessed by the one who professes it. Nothing further needs to be said to confirm that theology will be reflective and speculative, and that it would be “failing in faith” not to be so, as far as that is possible. It has already been noted that this disposes theology to have recourse to all the effective resources of human thought. It must be added here that this is only one means among others, but one very significant in its sphere, of taking seriously the mystery that has willed to give itself so as to be known. Philosophical disciplines or human sciences, each of them must know how to keep its rational balance. But all of them can and indeed must be urged to highlight as far as possible what appears to be a law of Revelation: the more the mystery is revealed, the more one applies oneself in consequence to knowing it, the more its majesty and its incommensurability, but also its gratuitousness and the splendor of its gratuitousness, are affirmed.

While the foundations that theology seeks to make known as those of faith are offered to our knowledge, it is an evident fact that we for our part regard ourselves as entitled to take our own position on the conditions and the means of his access to what he can hold as truth. Modern times have indeed established a general critique of knowledge and an epistemology of the different disciplines according to which this human knowledge is distributed. Insofar as theology wants to speak to and for human beings as they are, and in the culture as it is, it cannot refuse the task of critique. And it must not omit to practice what is called, in a somewhat too facile term indeed, “the critique of the critique.” But it is already in the nature of critique worthy of the name not to lose sight of its own limits.

Theology however must not present the result of its critical and speculative reflection as the foundation of faith. On the contrary it was emphasized above that it is for theology to show that what grounds faith as faith—even from a rational point of view—is the recognition of the Foundation that it confesses. That is to say that finally the task of theology is to adopt an overall point of view on all that the human being is, on all that God is, and on their relations—on “the Totality.” Thus even after the so-called age of the “death of metaphysics,” theology must acknowledge its responsibility to discuss the totality of “reality,” to bring a properly ontological dimension to its discourse, in other words—ontological as theological, however, because what is acknowledged here as the Foundation of the whole reality of the world and of history is properly the revealed mystery of God’s self-communication. It is at the same time a very particular ontology, since it holds that absolute Being desires to communicate self to the other beings, and in consequence must be acknowledged as “other than (simply) being,” to apply (out of context) an expression of Emmanuel Lévinas.