

From the Editor

Theology is a hard sell these days, on the university campus as well as in the consumerized public square. The heady times of the immediate post-Vatican II period, when Catholics wanted to know everything about everything—the Bible, Jesus, the history and workings of the church, the range of moral choices—foregrounded the practice of theology, by both clerics and laity, as a worthy vocation in service to believers. Those times are long gone; the respect quotient has been trending downward for years.

We theologians have heard the standard criticisms of our field. Theologians are academic pinheads. They have little contact with the “ordinary believer.” Their jargon is impenetrable. They are not doing theology but sociology (or anthropology or political theory or philosophy). They are dissenters with no respect for the church’s magisterium and (in the words of a former director of the Catholic bishops’ secretariat on doctrine) are a “curse and affliction on the church.”

Leave it to Thomas Aquinas to restore some equilibrium to the situation. In the first question of the *Summa Theologiae*, where Thomas discusses the nature of *sacra doctrina* (one of whose meanings is theological reflection on God’s revelation), he goes straight to the heart of the matter: “*Sacra doctrina* does not pronounce on God and creatures as though they were counterbalancing, but on God as principal and on creatures in relation to him, who is their origin and end” (ST Ia, q. 1, a. 3, resp.).

Right here is the crux of theology. It focuses on God first and foremost. Its initial move stresses what the Dominican Timothy Radcliffe has called “the point of Christianity,” namely, “to point to God who is the point of everything.” And then theology pivots and points to the world. It throws the net wide and takes in everything that has its beginning and end in God, and that is . . . everything. Because of the intensity of divine presence given in creation, the Incarnation, and the Resurrection, everything is connected to the triune God and reveals God in some finite way (Thomas would say “insofar as they are able”). The recognition of finitude applies to the theologian as well: starting from faith, he or she points to God and to the world from a concrete place—somewhere particular, time bound, and necessarily representative of a limited range of experience.

In addressing his students who were aspiring preachers, Thomas simply followed the deep, rich tradition of the church that reaches out to preach the

gospel to the whole world and to every creature. He put that evangelical command and his belief in our participation in divine life into the most precise metaphysical language that he could muster (but even he knew, as Denys Turner reminds us, that language's inadequacy). What Pope Francis has done for our time is widen the focus: the evangelical command applies to all the members of the church—we are all preachers in some way. And so theology's job is to disclose those connections for all believers and inflame our sacramental imaginations. If everything in our worldly experience can be shown to have some rootedness in God—in other words, if the Christian belief in grace-filled creation can be shown to be the most likely story about reality—that surely challenges any belief that “the world” is a cold, mechanical, monetized, God-forsaken wasteland that we must ignore in order to be saved. Theology helps us see the world otherwise and act accordingly.

Textbooks on theological foundations are likely to quote two venerable sayings when defining theology. The first is from the First Letter of Peter, whose author exhorts his audience to “always be ready to give an explanation (*apologia*) to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope” (3:15). The other, from the prologue to Anselm of Canterbury's *Proslogion*, is the source of one of the most common definitions: “faith seeking understanding” (*fides quaerens intellectum*). Both authors stress the need for on-the-spot, feet-on-the-ground skills in discerning and articulating clearly both for ourselves (Anselm) and for others (1 Peter) how the presence of God courses through our lives. And both assume clarity needs to be *worked at*, some reflection needs to be done: we *give an explanation*, we *seek to understand*. The meaning of faith is not all clear at first sight; we must work at achieving as much understanding as we can. We theologians do so by using the materials of experience in which our faith is embedded, the embodied experiences from which we have knitted together our lives and which have been inflected by the historical and cultural settings where they have occurred. Here is theology's hidden life: when pointing to God, at the same time it discloses possibilities for holiness within everyday life lived out in ordinary times and places.

What theology intends to disclose, then, is “the sacrament of the moment.” This phrase, from the eighteenth-century classic *Abandonment to Divine Providence* ascribed to the Jesuit Jean-Pierre de Caussade (1675–1751), calls attention to the presence of God at each point of our time-bound lives. God gives God's own self in everything, at every moment. No flashy miracles or complicated theological methods are needed to discern this presence, only faith. “What is the secret of finding this treasure?” Caussade asks. “There isn't one. This treasure is everywhere. It is offered to

us all the time and wherever we are. . . . God's activity runs through the universe. It wells up and around and penetrates every created being. Where they are, there it is also."

It may seem odd to invoke the insights of the apparently anti-intellectual spirituality of passive abandonment in support of the practice of theology. But the emphasis in *Abandonment* on God's initial act of giving and our response to it follows Thomas' theological method precisely, in a more affective key. What Caussade was resisting was the sterile rationalist piety of his time (as was Thérèse of Lisieux later) and its overreliance on the supposed certainty of humanly concocted spiritual methods.

What authentic theology needs to resist today is a similar extreme: the reduction of Christian belief and practice to simply an infinitely repeatable trademark or a set of bloodless objective statements. Today, when the sacramentality of the moment is in danger of being swamped by other explanations that claim to be *the* most likely story about reality (free-market economics, celebrity consumer culture, the money-politics-power trio, sectarian ideologies, etc.), theology's historically and culturally aware capaciousness is more important than ever in bringing the sacramentality of reality to the fore.

At the recent convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America, the philosopher of religion Paul Griffiths created a stir with a polemical address that outlined a very narrow definition of theology. Theology, in this definition, is essentially speculative rationality in search of doctrinal truth expressed propositionally, pursued under episcopal authority. The sole audience for theology's product is the magisterium, the official teaching authority of the church, which pronounces on the validity or nonvalidity of the doctrinal propositions.

For me, at least, a truncated definition like this raises a number of red flags. No one would deny that theology is a rationally reflective practice. But reducing the task of theology to abstract, disembodied concept-formation with a propositional endgame geared to a single audience jettisons a long, situationally sensitive (and indeed pastoral) tradition of theologizing. Even in its most stilted phases, theology for centuries has done its work for at least two audiences, the primary one being all the members of the church who ask what to do in order to be saved. Like Bartimaeus in the healing story that Mark's Gospel uses to exemplify true discipleship (10:46–52), we all "want to see." And just as the new vision and new spiritual insight granted by Jesus led Bartimaeus to follow him on the way (10:52) to Jerusalem, the Cross, and eventually resurrection, the contemporary practice of theology should disclose the presence of God underlying every moment and help us actualize its possibilities.

Making clear how the mystery of God is disclosed in the fabric of life is theology's task. Theology is a practice, even an art; it is never simply a theoretical exercise involving the rightness or wrongness of statements. Its task, as its long history testifies, has an existential thickness, a source in real questions and an application to real situations in the present. The First Letter of Peter urges us to explain our deeply experienced hope grounded in Christ to all those—believers and nonbelievers alike—who need hope right now. The understanding that Anselm pursues is an aid to today's prayer life. And Thomas' vision of *sacra doctrina* perceptively describes the truly mystical underpinnings of all reality: God the giver who makes the first move in creating the space for everything to participate in divine love, and everything that participates in divine love. Theology remains poised before the mystery of God and between two necessary actions: it first points to God, and then pivots to point out how every aspect of reality points to God as well.

In order to stave off any misperception that theology is best served cold and objectively, perhaps the mystery of the sacrament of the moment and theology's response to it should be put more succinctly, more affectively, with more care for its fragility. Gerard Manley Hopkins (whose poetry Dennis Hamm examines in this issue) helps us: the anxious lushness of his verse perfectly mirrors Thomas' point about our complex, pivoting attentions. In "God's Grandeur," Hopkins grasps the sacrament of the moment with pitch-perfect accuracy:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil.

While "Carrion Comfort" shows the poet gripped by the awesomeness of pointing to the mystery that over and over again is revealed in that moment:

That night, that year
Of now done darkness I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!) my God.