# THE APOSTOLATE OF THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

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IN RECENT centuries the two most prevalent styles of christian theology have been the biblical and the magisterial. Biblical theology, favoured by evangelical protestants, has found the decisive expression of God's revelation in the bible, and has sought to apply the norm of biblical faith to the belief and preaching of the Church today. Magisterial theology, which has flourished in roman catholicism since the reformation, looks to the pope and bishops to give authoritative guidance, based in some way upon scripture and apostolic tradition. The theologian, according to the magisterial view, is a servant of the hierarchical Church; he expounds and defends the teaching of the Church today.

Both these types of theology are oriented more to the past than to the present, more towards the Church than towards the world. Theology, so practised, tends to revolve continually about ancient questions, some of which are no longer acute. In the last few decades both protestants and catholics have felt the need for a new theology that addresses itself more directly to the experience and questions of contemporary man. In protestant and anglican circles, a new secular theology, inspired in part by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was popularized in the 1960s by Ronald Gregor Smith, John A. T. Robinson, Harvey Cox, Gibson Winter, and others. In roman catholicism, Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World became the *Magna Carta* for a theology in which the entire Church – pastors, theologians and faithful – was invited to 'hear, distinguish, and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine Word'.[1]

In the wake of the Council some catholics took up with enthusiasm the secularization theology of the protestants. Johannes Metz, seeking to go further in the direction of a social critique, launched

[1] *Gaudium et Spes*, 44.

the project of a 'new political theology'. In Latin America, Gustavo Gutierrez and others now propose a 'liberation theology' that would undertake to reflect critically on concrete actualities, effecting 'a confrontation between the Word accepted in faith and historical praxis'.[2] All these new movements in theology may be characterized as 'secular dialogic', insofar as they attempt to achieve new insights through a kind of dialogue between traditional christian faith and the aspirations and insights of contemporary secular man.

For jesuits this secular dialogic style of theology finds official support in a number of recent pronouncements of Fr General Pedro Arrupe. In his allocution to the Procurators of the Society, October 5, 1970, he declared that the first of the Society's ministries, in his judgment, is 'theological reflection on the human problems of today'. He gave several reasons for his conviction that 'the Society of Jesus can and ought to render this service to the Church and to the world'. In an interview of July 1971, Father Arrupe gave what is perhaps his most compendious description of this theological apostolate:

> In the arena of intellectual concern, I consider theological reflection to be of prime importance. I think that the great issues of our time – the human problems of today's world – urgently require rethinking in terms of a truly evangelical theology. I am referring to such issues as humanism, freedom, mass culture, development, violence. In my view, theological reflection is incomplete without the insights of the human and exact sciences. This presupposes the work of a team – a multi-disciplinary team. For my part, this is the service we must render man: to look for divine solutions for the tormenting problems of today. And when I say 'divine', I do not mean a type of disengaged angelism. What I have in mind are solutions that are very concrete, a contemporary incarnation of a God-view of our present world, arrived at by a search illumined by faith.[3]

In the following pages an effort will be made to describe, in a general way, the subject matter, aims and methods that might be appropriate for the apostolate of theological reflection as carried on within the Society of Jesus. The ideas will be those of the present author, but an effort will be made to build on the proposals of Father General Arrupe.

The first thing that strikes one in the project is perhaps the sub-

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[2] Gutierrez, Gustavo: *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973), p 79.
[3] *America*, vol 125 (7 August, 1971), p 57.

ject matter upon which theological reflection would be expected to focus: not the traditional doctrinal themes, such as Trinity, christology, Church and sacraments, but the great human problems of today's world, such as those of war, oppression, poverty, pollution, and the breakdown of human community on various levels. The new theology is predicated on the assumption that the christian Church has a distinctive contribution to make in these areas. As justification for this assumption, it has been pointed out that since biblical times the prophets have always protested against man's inhumanity to man and have sought to set before man the things that are to his peace.[4] The redemptive power of the gospel, where it touches the existence of man on earth, cannot fail to renew and improve the quality of personal and communal life. Whatever leads in the long run to coldness, hatred, violence, alienation, boredom and the like, cannot possibly stem from Christ and the gospel.

It may be objected, of course, that the great human problems of today are too technical in character to be solved by theologians, and that scripture and Church tradition, the special resources of theology, have very little to say about questions such as nuclear warfare, world population, and international economic exploitation. To this objection we must concede that there are technical aspects to such problems that require the expertise of the specialist. But after the specialist has had his say, there still remain questions of ultimate value that are properly theological in scope. They concern the order of justice and charity, the nature and destiny of man.

The problems with which theological reflection deals cannot be solved by the traditional procedures of dogmatic theology. That theology proceeded by deduction from abstract principles culled from the bible and authoritative documents. The new theology looks upon the classical sources of scripture and tradition rather as the literary distillation of the divinely shaped religious experience of our forbears. Sacred history is holy because it discloses the depths of our own history; it is relevant because it mediates the forgiveness and hope we need in order to confront the world in which we live. The memory of the Exodus and Easter, the two great events that respectively lie at the centre of the Old and New Testaments, enables us to face our guilt and our weakness with the assurance that God will not leave us without his powerful assistance.[5]

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[4] Cf Lk 19, 42.

[5] Winter, Gibson: *The New Creation as Metropolis* (New York, 1963), pp 78–81. See also Cox, Harvey: *The Secular City* (New York, 1965), p 254.

Sustained by this confidence, the inquirer addresses himself to the concrete situation in which he finds himself involved. He proceeds by reflection, which Gibson Winter defines as 'a coming to consciousness in the consideration of the present meaning of events'.[6] In the words of Marcel, 'The act of reflection is linked, as bone is linked to bone in the human body, to living personal experience'.[7] Christian reflection seeks to discover the true meaning of one's being through reflective participation in the saving events of history – especially the decisive event of Jesus as the Christ.[8] Without expecting to find peremptory biblical arguments that tell us what we should think, say, or do today, the theologian assumes that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jesus Christ is also our God, and that we are called to hear his voice in our time. Revelation is to be found not so much in clear directives from the past as in the dimension of ultimacy within our own experience. God's revelations to our predecessors afford paradigms or guidelines for the present; they serve to suggest and open up the depth-dimensions in the experience of the believer today. In this sense, one may speak of 'continuing revelation'.

Recognizing the inseparable connections between theology and the spiritual life, some have sought to introduce into theological reflection the principles of discernment set forth by St Ignatius in his Spiritual Exercises. Biblical readings, liturgy, and personal prayer are recommended to provide an authentic context of christian faith, to rid oneself of attitudes that could blind one to spiritual things, and to release the energies that could lead to christian insights. Through a kind of play-acting, the discerner experiments with various possible conclusions and seeks to see what kind of spiritual effects they entail. Are they conducive to love, joy, peace, patience, and self-control?[9] Do they lead to consolation, according to the descriptions given in the Spiritual Exercises?[10]

The supposition of this process would be that if a man is evading the evidence, if he is not completely honest with himself, if he is distorting what he sees in order to avoid some hard decision, he

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[6] Winter, *op. cit.*, p 68.

[7] Marcel, G.: *The Mystery of Being* (Chicago, 1960), vol 1, p 97.

[8] Winter, *op. cit.*, p 70.

[9] Cf Gal 5, 22–5.

[10] See for example the description in the *Spiritual Exercises*, 316: 'I call consolation every increase of faith, hope, and love, and all interior joy that invites and attracts to what is heavenly and to the salvation of one's soul by filling it with peace and quiet in Christ our Lord'.

will not be able to experience the pure joy that 'descends from above',[11] but he will be arid, troubled, and restless in mind. Where the proposed solution is perceived to be congruent with the gospel, however, the thought of embracing it will bring unclouded peace and liberty of spirit.

Spiritual discernment of this kind will be especially appropriate to questions in which the believer himself is involved, those in which he has a high personal investment. Issues such as these will arouse various kinds of affections, and will make it possible to discern the various 'spirits' – as St Ignatius calls them – in the light of the gospel.

In theological reflection on communal human questions, it will be advantageous, as Father Arrupe suggests, to make use of a team. The members of the team will have to be carefully selected. In the first place, all must be sincerely committed to the gospel, for the aim of the process is to decide what belief or course of action most accords with the revelation of Christ.[12] Secondly, the team must constitute a community: they must have a common language, a capacity to understand one another's statements, and a good measure of mutual trust. Thirdly, they must be open to change their ideas and life-styles if the results of the discernment call for this. Finally, to guard against one-sidedness, the team should normally include persons of different temperaments, backgrounds, and specializations. For the dynamics of the discernment, it has often been found beneficial to have different age groups and sexes. In short, everything should be varied except the one essential – concern for resolving the issue at stake in the light of the gospel.

In the course of the discernment all should reflect on the evidence. They should make deliberate efforts to incline themselves this way and that, in order to experience what it would feel like to give various responses to the question under discussion. All should express themselves with frankness, even if this should involve real conflict. Anger may be appropriate, so that the participants will get in touch with their own feelings and discover the points at which they are emotionally involved. If the parties to the discussion are politely restraining themselves, this may be a sign that they do not

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[11] Exx 184; cf Jas 1, 17.

[12] This is not to exclude the participation of resource persons who, without being explicitly committed to the christian faith, may be in a position to provide valuable information or criticism of the process of discussion.

really trust one another, and are hardly in a position to achieve a common discernment.

The result of the process may or may not be a consensus. Unanimity should not be too cheaply purchased, but on the other hand it should be earnestly sought. Even if agreement is not reached, the process may be beneficial in terms of strengthening the community and its capacity to approach its problems together. Where a good decision is reached, the result will normally be increased vitality and mutual harmony among the group – and these results, when experienced, may be viewed as a confirmation of the decision itself. The existence of a community of reconciling inter-action is both the fruit and the pre-condition of a healthy process of discernment.

In the past, the ignatian methods of individual and corporate discernment have been principally employed for practical decisions about how one should live, rather than for theoretical decisions about what one should hold to be true. In extending the process to theological reflection, I am here suggesting that there should be no dichotomy between thought and action, at least in matters touching on faith. The act of faith is itself a free commitment, and thus amenable to discernment techniques. Furthermore, it would seem that every genuinely theological problem has ramifications in the practical order. What a man thinks about christology, for example, affects the way he relates himself to Jesus in trust, worship, and imitation. The same may be said, quite evidently, about one's beliefs regarding the Church, the sacraments, law and gospel, justification, merit, and eternal life. In matters of faith, theory and praxis are not two juxaposed entities but two aspects of a single, indivisible reality.

An analysis of the history of ideas makes it increasingly clear that the vested interests and ambitions of individuals and groups have played a great and often decisive role in determining the positions adopted on controverted questions. From Church history it could be shown that the lines of division between opposed parties – especially in cases leading to ruptures of communion – have generally followed the path of social and cultural groupings. More than we are accustomed to realize, the personal autobiography of the theologian or churchman enters into his views regarding the limits of orthodoxy. All the authorities and *loci* to which a theologian appeals must be subjected to careful scrutiny. Is it possible that, under the banner of loyalty to the bible, or to tradition, or to the pope, or to the local church, or to the present leading of the Spirit, there lurks an 'inor-

dinate attachment' to what suits the theologian's own interests or convenience? To those content with the present structures of Church and society, all efforts to bring about radical change will seem impetuous and wilful. To the discontented, conversely, all efforts to justife the existing structures will appear hypocritical and defensive. The method of discernment is predicated on the assumption that it is possible, though difficult, for a man to overcome the biases that come from selfish concerns.

Once this ideological factor in theology has been unmasked, a practical consequence comes into view. The theologian is responsible for the social situation in which he operates. If that situation causes him to align his ideas with the interests of a particular class, he may be obliged, for the sake of truth, to move into a different milieu. If a man is concerned with problems of world justice and poverty, he will have to ask himself whether he can be free to think the truth as a member of an affluent élite. Yet it must also be asked: would not a sociological identification with the dispossessed make one a prisoner to the class-interests of the proletariat? Turning to more traditional theological problems, a man would have to ask himself whether he could acquire the necessary perspective if he identified himself too closely with the Vatican or with an insurgent national church seething with anti-roman animus.

At any event, it is clear that more attention must be paid than in the past to the arena in which theology is practised. The sociology of knowledge makes it clear that answers are in large measure predetermined by the situation in which the discussion is carried on. In the classroom, theology becomes academic; in the pulpit, kerygmatic; in the chancery, juridical. It cannot be assumed that the best theology will come from universities and seminaries, or for that matter from curias or monasteries. For many problems, the optimum milieu will perhaps be extra-ecclesiastical. Theology owes much to the military experiences and scientific associations of a Teilhard de Chardin and to the political ventures and prison-reflections of a Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The arena of living theological reflection on the human problems of our day will presumably include not only the school and the parish but also the hospital, the prison, the inner-city ghetto. A theology that merely looks at these situations from a distance cannot speak appositely to the deeper problems that arise out of human suffering, punishment, and oppression.

In this connection a word should be said about the 'centres' for theological reflection, which some have proposed as matrices for a

new and creative theology.[13] As sometimes conceived, such centres would be ecclesiastical counterparts of the Brookings Institution or the Hastings Centre. Theological 'think-tanks' of this type might well play an important role in the theology of the future. They are free from many of the financial and bureaucratic problems that plague the universities, and from the narrowness of purpose that hampers seminary theology. Such institutes would be flexible, and could easily provide for close association among members of an inter-disciplinary team. In relative immunity from the pressures of interested groups, they could function with recollection and freedom. But there are dangers in this, as in any particular formula. Such centres, situated at a comfortable distance from the real anxieties of the poor and oppressed, might get out of contact with the actual world and its groanings for redemption. A place where only experts were at home might generate a rarified and remote type of theology quite different from the vital and concrete reflection of which we have been speaking. Much would therefore depend on the ability of such a centre to retain a close and continuing association with persons involved in the real struggles of life.

Father Arrupe refers to theological reflection as an apostolate, and in this I believe he is unquestionably correct. In earlier times, the term 'apostle' usually referred to one who felt divinely commissioned to herald a clear and definite message. Today, however, we are more aware of the complexity of the task of making Christ's redemptive presence efficacious in the lives of men and women. The Church, as a servant-community, has the responsibility of engaging the world in reflection on the meaning of its history, and of summoning people to search for the divine import of the events in which they are engaged. Gibson Winter, who takes note of this task, calls for the establishment of 'evangelical centres and academies' in which dialogue may be undertaken with a view to shaping the future.[14] Such centres, he suggests, need not be mere auxiliaries of the residential Church; they may actually *be* the Church in the new society.[15] Although Winter perhaps looks upon the Church too exclusively from the prophetic angle, he is correct in seeing this prophetical-critical function as an intrinsic element in the mission of the Church today.

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[13] These are discussed, for example, in the unpublished report of the North American Task Force on jesuit apostolates sent to J.-T. Calvez S.J., Chairman of the Preparatory Commission for the 32nd General Congregation, 9 August, 1972.

[14] Winter, *op. cit.*, pp 71–72, 85–88. [15] *Ibid.*, p 127.

Finally, a word must be said about the jesuit character of this theological apostolate. The life of the vows should be an important asset. St Ignatius apparently had in mind the formation of a group of men who could penetrate the citadels of power and influence in Church and society without running the risk of being corrupted by the class-interests of the dominant élite. To banish all national chauvinism he insisted on the international character of his Society. To guard against any bias in favour of the rich and powerful, he insisted on strict poverty and on the refusal of honours and dignities. The vows, in his conception, were intended to guarantee humility, detachment, and evangelical freedom: virtues which, in the present investigation, have been found basic to the discernment process. For, as we have noted, ethnic and class-interests frequently blind men's judgment, especially in the area of those great human and social problems that have been proposed as the principal subject matter of theological reflection.

The Society of Jesus has many other resources for engaging in a collective apostolate of theological reflection. The ignatian heritage of 'discernment of spirits' is an invaluable tool. Without claiming any monopoly on the wisdom of the Spiritual Exercises, the jesuit order has a long tradition of familiarity with this work. In addition, as Father Arrupe observes, the Society presently has a large number of members well-versed in theology and cognate disciplines, residing in many different parts of the world. To this one might add that the Society has a tradition of openness to the world, of adaptation to changing circumstances, and of concern for theoretical problems of long-range practical import.

An impression might arise that theological reflection would be the appanage of a special category of research theologians. The whole thrust of the present essay has been to dissipate this illusion. While professional theology has an indispensible contribution to make, such theologians, as an isolated class, could easily be victimized by their own biases. They instinctively shy away from the ambiguities of practical life and tend to the neat abstractions of book-learning. For their reflection to be made socially fruitful, research theologians must be in close contact with persons involved in the practical stuggles of daily life. In a letter to all Major Superiors, Father Arrupe, referring to his allocution to the Procurators two years before, made a helpful distinction among three levels of theological reflection:

> When I spoke, for example, of 'theological reflection' I was not only

> thinking of specialized theological analysis at a scientific level requiring inter-disciplinary efforts, but also of a more pastoral reflection in direct apostolic work, and of the kind of theological-spiritual reflection that we should exercise with regard to our own personal work. Such reflection, in touch with reality, and comprising elements from actual experience, is of great value also to those who pursue theological reflection on higher levels. It could also be said that in this way human events are illumined by the light of faith.[16]

A clearer recognition of this type of reflection as a dimension of the total life and apostolate of the Society of Jesus should cast much-needed light on the vexed question of theological education of younger jesuits. Only the person who has been trained and habituated to make correct use of scripture and tradition, and to perceive the sacred or divine dimension of apparently secular problems, will be adequately equipped to engage in the apostolate of theological reflection. If this is to be the primary apostolate of the whole Society of Jesus, as Father Arrupe has proposed, all jesuits must be taught to think theologically. Jesuit theologates have a special responsibility to master and transmit the art of concrete and vital reflection on the great human problems of our day.

[16] 8 September, 1972.