

No shortcuts to good theology

Richard McBrien | Nov. 15, 2010 Essays in Theology

[Editor's Note: Fr. Richard McBrien is recuperating from back surgery. Until he fully recovers, which we expect by the end of this school semester, we will be running "encore presentations" from Fr. McBrien's column archives. This column dates from September 1966.]

In theology, as in similar disciplines, there is a fine line between honesty and recklessness. It is honesty which compels us to admit that Catholic theology, for the greater part of this century, has been too abstract, too unbiblical, too simplistic and ahistorical in its approach to the official documents of the magisterium (teaching church), and too dependent upon a particular philosophical framework. It is recklessness, however, which proposes that philosophical analysis, fidelity to earlier magisterial documents, and the concern for precision and accuracy should be abandoned altogether, that somehow the history of theology terminated with the death of the last Father of the church (if not much earlier) and then, mysteriously, resumed its normal course sometime during the Second Vatican Council.

Honesty will move us to admit that theology has had no real influence on our thinking or in our lives because so much of it has been meaningless and beside-the-point. But it is a reckless spirit which prompts us to conclude that theology is inherently irrelevant and that we can get on with the business of the Christian life without serious reflection on our faith.

Indeed, we have had so much "honesty" since the Second Vatican Council, so much confession of sin, so much verbalized embarrassment over the past, that some Catholics may begin to feel that they are excused from further theological effort simply by going through these penitential motions. What we are now entering upon in the church, it seems to me, is a crisis neither of authority nor of honesty, but a crisis of competence.

The proper display and use of power (on both sides) will eventually resolve the problem of authority, just as the growing strength of the labor movement finally interested the Fords in the question of social justice. And the problem of honesty is a least on the way to a solution with the maturation of the various media of communication, and especially the revolution in Catholic publishing-and literacy. But the problem of competence, or the lack thereof, admits of no ready solution.

There is no short-cut to serious theological progress or to growth in theological understanding. The achievement of this kind of maturity demands hard work. Theological wisdom does not come in large doses-and in paperback form. Wisdom is the fruit of understanding, and understanding the product of research, study, and reflection.

We are deceived if we suppose, for example, that all there is to know about the Bible can be had on the pamphlet-rack or in newspaper summaries of talks given by those who frequent the lecture circuit. We are deceived if we think that all the answers to the problem of the church's mission are to be found in Harvey Cox's *The Secular City* -- and we are more thoroughly misled if we think that none of the answers are to be found there!

In one respect, the further we are removed from Vatican II, the better off we shall be. Many Catholics still look

upon theology as an endless battle between liberals and conservatives. But this makes the theological enterprise all too easy, in an illusory sort of way. The liberal reads his kind of theologian (often in "digest" form) and accepts the conclusions uncritically (in much the same way as the conservative Catholic of an earlier period would have devoured the textbooks on ethics and natural theology). Meanwhile, a certain type of conservative attends, or approvingly reads about, various conventions to hear the whole process of church renewal reduced to a communist plot. They are, I suppose, the first "death-of-the-Holy-Spirit-theologians" in our time.

So long as we perpetuate these categories, theological understanding will remain an elusive prize for both sides. For as matters stand now, some conservative Catholics will dismiss everything written by a Gregory Baum or a Hans Küng, and some of the more liberally-oriented Catholics will not hear of transcendence, or conciliar definitions, or Pope Pius XII. The tragedy is that there is a far larger group of Catholics who cannot work up any enthusiasm for the prejudices of either group and thereby concludes that theology is simply "beyond" them.

What distinguishes good theology from bad theology -- apart from its fundamental relationship to faith and the Christian community -- is the competence of the theologian, and not his "liberalism" or his "orthodoxy." Before we invest our valuable time and money in his work, we are entitled to question his academic credentials.

Does his work give evidence of thorough research, or is it simply popularization twice-removed from its original source? Are his conclusions pre-formed (and, therefore, always predictable), or are they shaped only by objective study and reflection? Is his starting-point the Bible and the church's reflection on her biblical faith in the light of the contemporary situation, or is it simply the writings of four or five European theologians currently in vogue?

Is it theology done in the service of the whole church, or is it a kind of polemic against brother Christians, both inside and outside the Catholic church? Is his work well-received by other reputable theologians, again, both inside and outside the Catholic community? Is he disciplined enough to endure the long hours of study and meditation and writing and rewriting, or does he abandon his desk all too often to move from one discussion group (or lecture, or convention, or forum) to another as if in outright defiance of the law of diminishing returns?

These are not idle questions. Theology is the servant of faith. A theology superficially done means a faith poorly served. And this principle applies not only to the professional theologian, but also to every Christian the moment he or she begins to ask the question: "What does this doctrine mean?" Or: "What does the Gospel demand in this situation?" At that point the Christian is involved in theology. It is important for himself and for the church that it be good theology.

Unfortunately, the price of "good theology" is higher than many Catholics are willing or able to pay. Reading is essential. Discussion is important, but discussion without personal study beforehand can easily degenerate into a program of "shared ignorance." And more important, finally, than both reading and discussion is the actual implementation of theological insights. The Christian who will not live the Gospel cannot hope to understand it.

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