

Retreat from theology's frontiers

Thomas C. Fox | Aug. 29, 2011 NCR Today

We report today that the Vatican's orthodoxy watchdog department, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, has sharpened its focus on the way theology is being conducted in our church today. The purpose of the congregation is to uphold Catholic doctrine. The congregation, however, misconstrues its role when it becomes the arbiter of what constitutes Catholic theology, managing and even squelching discussions within the theological magisterium. Doctrine and theology should have separate places in the Catholic lexicon.

This week's story involves what many theologians consider [the most prestigious theological journal in the English-speaking church, *Theological Studies*](#) [1].

Theology cannot be dictated -- if it ever could be. It serves us best when it exists within the context of healthy discourse. We need free and open discourse to nurture Catholic ideas and Catholic engagement in the world today. This is why it is essential that journals like *Theological Studies* are free to support healthy discussions -- and are not intimidated for engaging in them. Yet for more than a generation now our church's hierarchy has stifled healthy theological give-and-take. Our church is less healthy for it. The primary areas of Vatican concern have been moral theology, liberation theology, and ecclesiology, including ordination and the role of women in the church.

Consider the deep and unhealthy divide that continues between married couples and official church pronouncements on artificial contraception. Why this divide? In good part, this is because healthy discussions in the field of moral theology have not taken place since *Humanae Vitae*, pronounced in 1968.

This has been a tragedy of historic proportions and it can be traced to a stilted understanding of natural law, and the interplay of faithful Catholics with the world in which they live. Church teachings on matters of sexuality (consider birth control) and moral theology (consider gays as "intrinsically disordered?") simply do not hold up for many faithful Catholics. Our church teachings have become divorced from human experience.

Eventually, many Catholics have simply decided to leave the church. According to a recent Pew Research Center report, for example, one out of three U.S.-born Catholics has left the church, many of them citing church teachings on sexuality.

More than ever we need robust theology; we need research, papers and discussions, which bring more life to the church. As *NCR* readers know, our tradition has opposed a scripture-alone approach, recognizing the need for scripture and tradition. In other words, our church is not supposed to simply repeat the words of scripture, but must strive to understand the word and work of Jesus in light of the changing conditions and realities of human existence. To carry this out is the task of theology.

In the first millennium, for all practical purposes the bishops were the theologians. In the second millennium, monastic schools began and then universities came into existence. Theologians emerged as a separate area of expertise not only as individual theologians but also as faculties of theology. These faculties had some authority in the church and made a number of pronouncements. Theologians played authoritative roles in the ecumenical

councils in the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries. Even at the Council of Trent theologians played an institutional role.

In the more modern period, individual theologians and groups of theologians continued to play an important role in church and papal teaching. We recognize, for example, that the encyclicals dealing with Catholic social teaching beginning with Pope Leo XIII were prepared by theologians.

The Second Vatican Council was a good illustration of the role of theologians. At times we might give too much importance to Vatican II itself. There would never have been a Vatican II if it were not for the theologians at work before the council in many areas, such as the new theology, ecumenics, liturgy, catechetics, and moral and pastoral theology. At Vatican II theologians played a significant role in preparing documents and bringing bishops up to date. Today we remember, in speaking about the council, the theologians more than the bishops themselves!

Thomas Aquinas well illustrates the creative role of the theologian. He was not content just to repeat what had been said, but used Aristotle, whose works were just becoming known again in Europe, to understand better the Catholic faith. Recall that after Aquinas' death two bishops condemned his work. Unfortunately, in the 19th and 20th centuries, church authority used Aquinas for exactly the opposite purpose -- to prevent dialogue with the modern world.

The present situation of theologians in the church must be seen in light of what Jesuit Fr. John W. O'Malley has called the "papalization of the church," which is to say that the pontiff has become the defining element of what it means to be Catholic today. In our theologically stifled climate, neither bishops nor theologians are allowed to speak up for change in the church.

Yes, the papacy should be the final authority in the church, but it has now become the only authority. Yes, theologians will always be prone to mistakes. Theologians must be true to their role and criticize one another, and at times the hierarchical magisterium must step in. However the magisterium cannot just tie itself to one school of theology and condemn all others.

Today little doubt exists there is a widening gap between many theologians and the episcopal magisterium. Some tension in this area will always exist, but the present gap is not good, not healthy.

The Vatican move against *Theological Studies* is likely to exacerbate this gap. In the *Theological Studies* article, Jesuit Fr. Thomas H. Smolich, president of the Jesuit Conference of the United States, notes that the society "has a cordial, ongoing relationship" with Cardinal William Levada, who heads the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

This is good news. Let's hope that wisdom eventually prevails and this theological dark night soon comes to an end.

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