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Theologian to peers: Teach 'faith received from the church'

by Joshua J. McElwee

Omaha, Neb. — When teaching college students the high concepts of Catholicism, the church's academics must also convey the faith as an act of personal transformation and not just big thinking, a noted theologian told approximately 300 of his peers Thursday.

Fr. Robert Imbelli suggested forgetting about the distinctions typically made between those who teach theology and those who teach the basics of church teaching.

Theology and catechetics must at times be blended as "only in service of the mystery of Christ and his church is [theology] preserved from vacuity," the author and Boston College professor told the theologians gathered for the annual meeting of the College Theology Society meeting at Jesuit-run Creighton University.

"The faith the theologian seeks better to understand is the faith received from the church," Imbelli said.

"The further understanding sought is to serve the church and its mission," he continued. "The theologian is not an independent contractor."

Imbelli's portrayal of the theologian's role as partially an explainer of church teaching comes days after the U.S. bishops announced that a Jesuit known for espousing a similar view of the theologian's task was chosen to direct the bishops' office responsible for investigating church academics.

Part of his role at that office, Fr. Peter Ryan told *NCR* Thursday, may involve making interventions in theological debates to "make sure that the faith is being handed down intact."

The College Theology Society meeting, which runs through Sunday, is focused on a similar theme: "Teaching theology and handing on the faith: Challenges and convergences."

The meeting, the 59th of the society, will see a number of plenary presentations and almost 100 sectional meetings where academics will be able to present and critique papers including reflections on the spirituality of sports and the witness of Salvadoran martyr Jesuit Fr. Rutilio Grande.

Founded in 1953, the society represents lay and religious teachers of undergraduate theology from both Catholic and other ecumenical backgrounds. It meets annually in conjunction with the National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion.

Opening the meeting Thursday, Imbelli said he wanted to respond to six different conflicts he sees facing Catholicism today.

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Imbelli, who was a priest for the New York archdiocese while studying in Rome during the Second Vatican Council, said the six themes reflected an evolution of the "signs of the times" since the council opened 50 years ago.

Currently an associate professor at Boston College's theology department, Imbelli was previously the director of its Institute of Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry.

He is also the author of the 2007 book *Handing on the Faith: the Church's Mission and Challenge*, a collection of essays by different contributors on problems facing the church praised at its publishing by Cardinal Avery Dulles.

Imbelli's six "signs of the times":

1. a decline in Catholic subcultures that "formed and nourished people like me";
2. a decline in Catholic elementary and secondary schools;
3. widespread "biblical and theological illiteracy" among college students;
4. polarization among members of the Catholic community where some blogs "serve as a house of horrors mirror";
5. tensions among theologians and bishops "with particular instances too well-known to require further specification"; and
6. "the issue of identity and mission of Catholic colleges and universities."

Addressing his signs specifically to Catholic colleges and universities, Imbelli said in recent years, institutions of higher learning have developed a tendency to camouflage their Catholic identity or to distance their theology from catechesis.

Instead, he said, the two must "form a differentiated continuum rather than discrete ecclesial tasks."

Citing extensively from council documents and the New Testament, Imbelli told the theologians they must focus in their teaching on the hope of the resurrection of the Lord and on personal relationship with Jesus.

Imbelli called the passage in the first letter of Peter -- where Peter writes that the disciples should "always

be ready to make a defense ... for the account of the hope that is in you" -- a sort of theologians' job description and proposed that the standard understanding of the theologians' task be somewhat altered.

Instead of 11th-century St. Anselm's formulation of "faith seeking understanding," said Imbelli, theologians might consider their task as "hope seeking understanding." And the grounding of that hope, he said, "is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead."

Likewise, the crux of the Christian faith is building a personal relationship with Christ, Imbelli said.

"Both theological education and handing on the faith are configured around the person of Jesus Christ," he said. "Loving relationship with him is the distinctive remark of Christian discipleship."

Theologians must also consider infusing their work with a "poetics of belief," or of an understanding of the "indispensable place of poetry, music, and the arts in the Catholic theological tradition," Imbelli said.

To end his talk, he quoted contemporary American poet Christian Wiman's assertion that there is need for "a language capacious enough to include a mystery that, ultimately, defeats it, and sufficiently intimate and inclusive to serve not only as individual expression but as communal need."

Imbelli quoted Wiman: "Christ is a shard of glass in your gut."

"Christ is God crying, 'I am here,' and here not only in what exalts and completes and uplifts you, but here in what appalls, offends and degrades you," he continued. "To walk through the fog of God toward the clarity of Christ is difficult because of how unlovely, how 'ungodly' that clarity often turns out to be."

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