The Fascinating Reactions to Paul Griffiths' CTSA Talk

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

I confess up front to two difficulties in writing this morning. First, the text of Paul Griffiths? talk at the recent Catholic Theological Society of America convention is not yet published and I was not in the room. Second, I am not a theologian by training but an historian, and the two enterprises yield different casts of mind to be sure. But, with those caveats stated, the issues raised by Griffiths, and the responses they are generating, are too fascinating to sit this one out.

Two theologians whom I admire and upon whom I rely frequently have posted analyses of Griffiths? talk, Meghan Clark and Charles Camosy at the blog CatholicMoralTheology.com, an indispensable resource for anyone writing about the Catholic Church.

Clark?'s critique is precise, that Griffiths? understanding of the vocation of the theologian is too narrow. She writes:

And so I pause at a plenary that appears to assert much of moral theology as not what theology is about? for example: social justice, world peace and the preservation of creation? it was stated are not what theology is about. Sure they may be good things to do, but they are not properly the scope of theology. Whether it was the speaker?'s intention or not? he simply defined my field -Catholic social thought? out of what theology properly does.

It is difficult to engage this because it is focused precisely on what Griffiths said. But, I suspect that broadly I am going to side with Griffiths on this. All Christians? indeed all persons - are called to work for social justice and world peace and the preservation of creation, and theologians should concern themselves with this too. And, undoubtedly, their work in these fields will inform their understandings of
core theological concepts. But, I suspect what Griffiths intended was to draw a line between activism and theological reflection, and to rightly assert that one can work for social justice in a way that has no distinctively Christian roots or significance, and that if a theologian does such, he or she is doing something other than Catholic theology. Again, without his text, it is hard to parse this.

Charles Camosy takes the conversation in a direction that is easier for me to engage because he poses questions that do not rely on a familiarity with Griffiths? text. Camosy writes:

The basic critique of Griffiths I?ve heard from many quarters is that his understanding of the ?game? of Catholic theology as having ?rules? laid down by the bishops of the Catholic Church is far too simplistic. Doesn?t he understand doctrine has developed over time? Doesn?t he understand that it often developed precisely in response to the work of theologians? Doesn?t he understand that there is a hierarchy of truths and different levels doctrine?s capacity to command consent? (Interestingly, especially for a discussion we are having on these pages, the subtext for a number of these questions seem to involve skepticism about Griffiths being a convert to Catholicism.) Doesn?t he understand that theology?and especially moral theology?is messy?

I must say that I?ve become increasingly suspect of the critique offered by academics that ?x is messy.? Most often, in at least in my experience, what turns out to be messy are principles and ideas that the person offering the critique has an interest in destabilizing for other reasons. However, there seems to be near supreme confidence in the clear implications of the apparently unproblematic principles and ideas which serve as the means of offering the ?messiness? critique. Griffiths is aware of the messiness of the tradition?s history with regard to the doctrinal questions mentioned above?his challenge to the CTSA is with regard to the role of the theologian when it comes to such questions. He would likely say that the level of messiness when it comes to understanding the rules for doing what counts as Catholic theology is exaggerated. While there might be disagreements about interpretation here, and level of authority there, Griffiths implies that we all know the basic rules of the game. We all know what counts as the broad rules for doing something that could be legitimately called Catholic theology.

If Griffiths expanded his view of theology to explicitly include moral theology, he might have made his point by referring to discussion of Paul Ryan?s views of Catholic social thought on these pages. Ryan?s attempts to reconcile his faith with his economics (and view of the human person) were met mostly with respectful and but firm critique by our contributors. One classic move of Ryan other Catholics on the (economic) right is to identify their skepticism of federal government, and preference for private and market-driven solutions, with the principle of subsidiarity as understood by Catholic social thought. But as Meghan Clark has brilliantly shown, this kind of claim cannot be sustained. Citing social-doctrinal claims in her defense, she systematically demonstrates that this view of economics cannot bear the name ?Catholic.?

I share Camosy?s long-held suspicion about the ?messy? argument. Of course, life is messy and it was messy when Augustine and Aquinas turned their pens to their scrolls too. The danger of not consciously, intentionally, and, yes, faithfully working from within the tradition is that the core concepts with which theology, especially moral theology, concerns itself ? justice, sin, redemption, and the like ? may be perennial but our understanding of them as concepts are deeply conditioned by the culture in which we live. A theologian must be careful to make sure that when they write about justice, they understand justice in a way the Church understands justice, not in the way a pagan might. I have raised the concern before that far too much of contemporary academic theology appears to be little more than an effort to baptize contemporary understandings of any particular issue from the role of women in the Church to the moral nature of gay relationships to the moral analysis, and theological analysis, of the economy.
At least, this is what I understand to be the essence of Camosy’s concern and his pointing the question in the direction of Congressman Paul Ryan’s attempts to cloak his economic arguments in Catholic drag should catch the attention of those on the left who otherwise fall prey to the “it’s messy” argument. As I never tire of saying, the Church’s critique of libertarian economics is not an economic critique, just as the Church’s critique of certain strands of liberation theology was not an economic critique. The Church’s critique in both instances has to do with what we mean when we say “human person,” with Christian anthropology. The answers our theologians come up with in discussing socio-economic systems, or sexual morality for that matter, can be quite diverse, but they cannot contradict what the Church teaches about the human person. If they do, they are “out of bounds.” Not as arguments but as Catholic arguments. Just because it is a Catholic who entertains a given thought does not mean it is a Catholic thought that is given.

The value of working from within a tradition apparently needs some attention, although to me it is quite obvious. First, it is the only thing that saves us from the gross indignity of being a child of our own age. Second, the tradition helps to keep the Church, not just the theologians, well armed in its most essential social function, which is to stand in critique of dominant cultural powers. Third, the Holy Spirit has been vouchsafed to the Church, and to the extent I can stand within the Church, in this instance by thinking with the Church, that is the extent to which I can share in the promise that the Spirit will not lead me to perdition. The infallibility of Church is a negative gift. It does not even mean that the Church is always right. It does mean that the Church can never be wrong in such a way as to lead a soul to perdition. If I differ with the Church, I am going out on a limb, on my own, without the promise of being kept free from that kind of error. This quality of infallibility was wonderfully captured by then-Cardinal Ratzinger when asked about the belief that the Holy Spirit guides the cardinals in their selection of a new pope:

*I would say that the Spirit does not exactly take control of the affair, but rather like a good educator, as it were, leaves us much space, much freedom, without entirely abandoning us. Thus the Spirit’s role should be understood in a much more elastic sense, not that he dictates the candidate for whom one must vote. Probably the only assurance he offers is that the thing cannot be totally ruined. There are too many contrary instances of popes the Holy Spirit obviously would not have picked!*

?The thing cannot be totally ruined.? We have just come through a century in which one of the most cultured nations in world history not only engulfed the world in war but set about the task of exterminating God’s Chosen people. The potential for humans to “totally ruin” things scarcely needs much in the way of additional evidence. The promise of the Spirit to the Church, and consequent doctrine of the infallibility of the Church, is not nothing.

The age old definition of theology is faith seeking understanding. If I have a criticism of much theology in the past few years it is that the nouns were reversed, that theology has been a lot about understanding, usually informed by secular reality, seeking faith. When Pope Francis said the Church needs a theology of women, many people pounced on him, including here at NCR, saying that we have forty to fifty years of feminist theology already. But, is that theology Catholic theology? Is it rooted in the tradition of the Church? Does it start with the faith of the Church and then seek understanding or is it a more or less unpersuasive attempt to cloak ideas sourced elsewhere in Catholic drag?

Almost every weekday morning, I have a chat on the phone with my friend and colleague Tom Roberts. (I give him the weekends off!) And, not a week goes by that we do not disagree on an issue and the source of the disagreement is that Tom places a higher value on experience in the formation of Catholic thought
and praxis and I place a greater emphasis on history and tradition. Theology, indeed the vocation of any Christian, is a kind of dialogue between tradition and experience. Very few thing tradition should be kept in a box on the mantle to be dusted once a week. Very few think that experience is such a powerful argument it can never lead one astray. But, the debate that Paul Griffiths have touched off is important because the Catholic theological community has been far too open to experience as a form of validation and, more to the point, all too willing to treat the tradition as a thing to be left on the mantle. It is strange to thing of a left-leaning theologian as having much in common with a Lefebvrist, but neither really wants to put the tradition to work. And both are quite willing to ignore the fact that the tradition continues and that the Magisterium of the Church did not cease at any point but is at work today. What the Church needs today is theologians who start with the doctrines of the Church and seek understanding of those doctrines in light of their experiences. That is what the Church needs in every age. We are followers of the Lord Jesus before we begin, and we must follow Him in our choice of methods and even our choice of topics to understand, and, for theologians, yes, the authority of the Magisterium is not just a respectful acknowledgment that someone has to set the ?rules of the game,? but a commitment to the belief that the Spirit is at work in the Church, the whole Church, and that in our Church, the Magisterium operates through an apostolic succession. We are all of us Catholics bound, and liberated, by a rule of faith, and especially our theologians must take that rule of faith as their starting point. I am not sure that was Paul Griffiths? point, but it is mine.

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