

# Bringing a Sense of the Sacred to the Teaching of Theology

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It is important for all of us to try to read the signs of the times. All of the modern Popes, starting with Leo XIII down to Pope John Paul II, have spoken out against one of the great evils affecting Western Christian civilization: the evil of secularism. Our contemporary age is characterized by an increasingly hostile secularism which seems to banish God from the public arena and even from the minds of men, if such a thing were possible. All of us must live in contemporary society. We must breathe in this miasma of secularity. The Church also lives in the world. Members of the Church are not immune from this mental aberration. As we all know, many things have happened to the Church that we love, particularly in the last 25 years. There is so much confusion today. Unfortunately, this seems to be the word which characterizes the contemporary Church in so many parts of the world. One of the principal sources of this confusion lies, I believe, in a misreading of a number of conciliar documents, particularly in the area of the equivocal use of the term, *the world*. What is the world? What does the Council mean when it speaks of the world as it does in so many of its documents? It is precisely in the equivocal use of this particular term, that a host of serious difficulties has entered into the thinking of priests, religious, and the laity.

St. Thomas Aquinas in his masterful *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, with his characteristic insight and lucidity, observes that in the Scriptures, particularly in St. John, the word *world* is used in three senses. First of all, it refers to physical creation. We are told that God looked at it and saw that it was very good. When John speaks of this, he speaks of the true Light coming into the world, i.e., coming into physical creation. Secondly, St. Thomas observes that this term is used as referring to the society of men. Again here, the term is a good one. We are told “God so loved the world that He sent His only Son.” But this word has another meaning — as a spirit. This is what was traditionally known in spiritual theology as the *spiritus mundi*. Our Lord speaks of this spirit rather bluntly. He says, “I pray not for the world. I have given them thy word and the world has hated them because they are not of the world even as I am not of the world. I have not prayed that thou should take them out of the world but that thou should keepest them from the Evil One.” Here the world is equated with the sphere of the Evil One, and of course one of Satan’s titles in Sacred Scripture is Prince of this World.

What follows here often is forgotten, but it is very important. Our Lord continues: “Sanctify them in truth. Thy word is truth. As thou did send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world and for their sake I consecrate myself that they also may be consecrated in the truth.” Notice the intimate connection which exists between holiness, the truth, and Revelation. Christ reveals that He Himself is the Truth. The communication of this truth is seen as the essential element in the mission of the Church as she goes out into the world. This mission is undertaken, however, only *after* they have been consecrated in that truth.

Because many did not make this vital distinction grounded in Sacred Scripture between the world as a society of men (which is a good thing) and the world as a spirit (which is hostile to the spirit of the Gospel), many became deeply confused and began in a very worldly way to appropriate the dominating *ethos* of our age, which is a hostile secularism foreign to the spirit of Christ. This began to have a very deleterious effect throughout the Church, as can be seen particularly in the curriculum of Catholic colleges and universities. Courses began to be ordered according to a foreign structure taken from outside the household of faith.

If we understand the process of secularization as being the removal of religion from areas where it once held swaying influence — that’s the way Peter Berger defines it — then we are obviously going to be having some serious difficulty when we speak of a secularization of theology. Theology defines itself as that science which studies God. Frank Schubert, in an excellent little article which appeared in *Crisis*, briefly traces the secularization of theology through a study of the descriptive titles of theology courses as found in the bulletins of three major Catholic colleges. Schubert speaks of this as being a representative selection. He takes, for example, Boston College, which is in the hands of the Jesuits; St. John’s, which is run by the Vincentians; and of course, Catholic University of America, which is diocesan.

A fine example taken from the article is the course described in Catholic U’s catalog of 1958-1959, Theology 607, 608 dealing with the Trinity, obviously taught both semesters, which reads as follows: “*God, one in three, Creator and giver of life. The existence and attributes of God in the Hebrew Revelation and Western theological tradition. The mystery of the Trinity, divine procession, relations, persons, temporal missions, trinitarian nature of Christian life, God the Creator and the various orders of created beings, angels and the visible*

universe, man, divine prophets, and the conservation and governance of things.” It sounds like a pretty good course.

Let’s move forward in time to the Boston College catalog, 1971-1972. We find no course on the Trinity, but instead Theology 173. The description: Title: Group Dynamics and Theological Models. “*This will be a classical group dynamics seminar conducted in the form of a tea group in which the participants use the experiences generated in the group to further their learnings about themselves. . . . Openness, honesty, interpersonal risk taking, trust building, constructive use of conflict, intimacy issues will be explored. An attempt will be made to create a new climate where a new behavior can be safely tried. Conceptualization of learnings will be encouraged to determine some models derived from applied behavioral science, but additional emphasis will be placed on viewing these models in terms of their significance as theological models. Ways of conceptualizing such process issues as acceptance, forgiveness, judgment, concern, prayer, self-denial, etc., as the occasion arises.*”

I remember the first time I was called upon to teach a course in college theology: it was a course entitled, “Faith in Jesus Christ.” I remember I was asked by a young student what I was going to be talking about in my opening lecture and I told her, “The Most Blessed Trinity,” to which she responded, “Oh, that stuff.” Shocked somewhat, if it is in fact possible to be shocked somewhat, I found that she was devoid of any true intellectual curiosity. I thought perhaps she was like Elizabeth of the Trinity, who from the age of three had a sense of the divine indwelling in her soul. This was not the case. Here there was no sense of mystery and no sense of joy. All Christians seek to go to Heaven. Heaven is the very goal of our life where we hope to spend an eternity drinking in that heavenly vision of the Triune God, that vision which beatifies — a source of joy, rapture, and unending bliss.

It does strike me as somewhat strange that we should need to point out the joy of studying theology. St. Thomas calls this *felicity*, as he says in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, “To be able to see something of the highest realities even by an argument which is thin and weak is cause of the greatest joy.” Theology is the *regina scientiae*. Who cannot long to study her? To anyone who is a Catholic, the deep joy of growing in theological knowledge is like falling in love. It’s something that can’t be explained to the individual who has not experienced it. It certainly does not need to be explained to the individual who has experienced it. As Plato says, “It’s that divine goodness which is among the greatest of Heaven’s blessings upon men.” The indifference that was on the face of this young girl was the shadow of unbelief. It’s not that this young woman was an atheist, but the effect of atheistic thinking was there. This manifested the idea that such central truths as God, the beatific vision, the Trinity, are not that important. Now, all truth, especially divine truth, is light and food for the soul. As our Lord said in his rebuke to Satan, “Not by bread alone doth man live, but by every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God.”

We have at the present time an entire generation starving to death. The profound tragedy is that they are languishing far from their Father’s house. But the tragedy is even greater because, unlike the Prodigal Son, they don’t even think of returning to their Father’s house. Why? Because when they were in that house, and they sought bread, all too frequently they were given stones. Sadly at times, not only stones, but scorpions whose sting has poisoned them with sin and has blinded them to the liberating truth of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So how do we maintain or bring a sense of the sacred to the teaching of sacred theology? The crisis of secularism in the Church is a crisis of faith and for a crisis of faith, unfortunately, there is no easy solution. Now I don’t mean to oversimplify the complexity of the situation; the situation is grave, but as our Lord said, “This kind can only be cast out with much prayer and fasting.”

If we look at the great theologians of the Church, we find two recurring elements which have characterized their approach to the teaching of theology. The Church’s greatest minds have always been her greatest saints, who reveal to us that theology must be approached with two key elements. First, a deep and a profound sense of gratitude. Secondly, united to this gratitude must be a sincere humility. Let us stop and reflect on this: our intellects are so limited. This life is so short, it passes away so quickly. We are called to hear the words of the great St. Augustine, “I have undertaken the task of dealing with divine things. I who am a mere man with spiritual things. I who have a being of flesh with eternal things. I who am mortal!” What a profound sense of reverence, awe, gratitude and humility we find in the great doctor of grace. This is the attitude which the theologian must bring to his teaching and writing.

St. Thomas, the angelic and common doctor, also manifested this attitude, particularly in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* where Thomas writes, “Beneficially, therefore, the divine mercy provides that it should instruct us to hold by faith, even those truths which the human reason is able to investigate. In this way, all men would easily be able to have a share in the knowledge of God and this without uncertainty and error . . . and so in the plan of the divine mercy, I have the confidence to embark upon the work of a wise man even though this may surpass my powers and I accept myself the task of making known as far as my limited powers will allow, the truth which the Catholic Faith professes, and setting aside the errors that are opposed to it, to use the words of Hilary, I am aware that I owe this to God as the chief duty of my life that my every word and sense may speak of Him.” This is St. Thomas, the greatest systematic mind in the history of the Church. Here again we find reverence, humility, and profound gratitude.

Who cannot fail to recall Thomas' words to Reginald toward the end of his life? Reginald exhorted St. Thomas to try to finish the monumental *Summa* that he had stopped working on because of an overpowering mystical experience. Thomas, quietly and simply, responded, "Brother, I can write no more. I have seen things which make everything I have written seem as mere straw."

Pope John Paul II, throughout his Pontificate, has held up St. Thomas Aquinas repeatedly as the great example for theologians and educators and as a guide for the formation of priests and for Christian youth. Unfortunately, many of these talks are not well known. Obviously, this attitude of gratitude and humility must spring from the bedrock of an integral Catholic faith. The obedience of faith demands a complete submission of the mind and will to God who reveals Himself through His Church. This faith introduces man to Revelation.

Here God initiates this encounter and reveals Himself to man. In so doing, He reveals the depth of His infinite love for each individual man, yes, even for theologians. Man's response in faith must be a grateful acceptance and a humble opening up to the divine initiative and a confident abandonment to the antecedent power of God's love. It is through faith that man is enlightened and attracted by God. St. Thomas states that as long as man is in the state of being a wayfarer, he is capable of reaching a certain understanding of the supernatural mysteries through the use of his reason but only to the extent to which the latter rests upon faith. We live in an age where it has become necessary to restate the obvious. The entire theological enterprise depends upon the possession of divine Catholic faith. This faith is the very key to understanding, as St. Augustine said, "By believing, you become capable of understanding. If you do not believe you will never succeed in understanding. Let faith, therefore, purify you so that you may be granted the privilege of reaching full understanding." It almost appears that there is a denial today that the faith is related to the truth. Many teach and act as if the faith is not true.

I still vividly recall as a theology student in Rome, Pope John Paul II's address to the students, opening our academic year. The Pope spoke of the importance of humility. He stated, "This is an essential for a theologian, because it constitutes the humus in which the flower of prayer takes root and is germinated." The Pope went on to say that "an essential element of theological commitment must, therefore, be recognized in dedication to prayer. Only humble and assiduous prayer can obtain the outpouring of that interior light which guides the mind to the discovery of truth."

St. Augustine always told his faithful ones to pray fervently for this divine illumination: "God, our Father, you who exhort us to pray to you and give us what has been asked of you, listen to me, who am shivering in this darkness, and stretch out your right hand to me. Let me see your light. Bring me back from errors and bring it about that under your guidance I may return again to myself and to you."

Would that all theologians could utter such a prayer. Now there have been two extremes throughout the history of theology, and at the present time, these continue. On the one hand, due to certain crises in the Church's history, there has been a distrust of reason which has led to fideism. On the other hand, we have an excessively rationalistic approach, what we would call secularized theology, which does not allow for the dimension of supernatural mystery, and at times even of truth. This latter tendency toward a secularized theology is the far more common tendency today. As a result, theology has been divorced from the life of grace. It has been divorced from spirituality. This is an extremely dangerous situation. We have seen it before in the decadent scholastic philosophy and theology of the 15th century when theologians and mystics stopped talking to one another. It's dangerous because all authentic Catholic spirituality must be deeply grounded in doctrine. As the great theologian, Garrigou-Lagrange stated, "Ascetical and mystical theology is the summit and the crown of all theology."

So let us summarize. Secularism has led to a crisis of faith in the Church. It has led some to a fideism and more commonly to this excessive rationalism which distorts the Faith. Nowhere is this excessive rationalism more evident than in the area of scriptural studies today. Seldom do we find reference to Sacred Scripture as being God's Word. Lip service, of course, will occasionally be paid to God as the principal Author, but then the books will be treated in a purely human way. This strikes at the very heart of theology and at the very heart of Christianity as a revealed religion.

Is it little wonder that priests today have difficulty in preaching, particularly young priests who have been formed in this type of exegesis? In my own seminary teaching, I had a number of good seminarians, men who were going to make fine priests, come to me deeply disturbed over what had been demonstrated to them in their courses on exegesis: Christ didn't know who He was . . . Christ never intended to found a Church, etc. Now of course, Alexander the Great can organize an empire in nine months. Augustus Caesar can lay the foundation for a stable empire that will last for centuries, but the Incarnate Son of God could never have provided for the continuance of His teaching in history! This is nonsense. This is absurd.

Returning again to the Pope's address (and I will never forget it because he spoke this with such a deep, passionate intensity), he said: "A true theological commitment, let us say so frankly, can neither begin nor conclude except on one's knees, at least in the secrecy of one's interior self where it is possible to worship the Father in spirit

and in truth.” In the teaching of theology we must be men and women of prayer, men and women of humility, men and women of gratitude. We must try to maintain the sense of mystery.

Christopher Dawson pointed this out in his book, *Understanding Europe*, where he speaks about his own experiences as a young man. He said, “Christian education was not only an initiation into the Christian community, it was also an initiation into another world. The unveiling of spiritual realities of which the natural man was unaware and which changed the meaning of existence, and I think it is here that our modern education, including our religious education, has proved defective. There is no sense of Revelation. It is accepted as an instruction. Sometimes as useful knowledge. Often as a tiresome task of work in preparation for some examination. But nowhere do we find that joyful sense of the discovery of the new and wonderful reality which inspired the true Christian culture.”

In order to maintain a sense of the sacred in the teaching of sacred theology, we must first reject the false spirit of worldliness and deepen our faith by growing and cultivating responses of gratitude and humility. How is this done? There is no other way than prayer. If you want reform of the Church, there is only one road: to return to the habit of mental prayer. In nurturing this sense of prayer, gratitude, and humility, a theologian thereby becomes a true man of the Church in loving, full communion with the thought, the sentiments, and the life of the Church. The theologian as a man of the Church is one who acknowledges and rejoices in the gift of the Magisterium which finds its origin in the heart of Christ.

We must get back to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. In returning to Him we are not going back to an idea or an abstraction. We are not returning to a weak man who does not know who he is or what he is doing, but the very Word of God, the eternal Son, God Incarnate, full of grace and truth. For the call to divine faith is a call to gratitude and a call to humility. For in returning to the God-man, we find that His own words best epitomize His very self, “Come and learn of me, for I am meek and humble of heart.” Meek and humble of heart He is, yet, as St. John tells us, “In Him was life, and the life was the light of men and the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it. He is the true life which enlightens every man who comes into the world.”

So we should not be fearful of the world or of secularization or of the modern liberal theologians, for in this great work of restoration which we are undertaking, He Himself has assured us, “Fear not, for I have overcome the world.”