Theology as a Way of Life

Michael Downey

As the academic study of theology has become more closely affiliated with the university than the seminary or school for ministry the author makes a case for understanding the centrality of theology to the life of the pastoral minister. Ministry is a mode of discipleship which must consciously reflect upon the key question of theology: Who is God?

My governing concern here is to argue against a view of theology that places it in the pigeonhole of a seminary curriculum or relegates it to courses hurdles en route to ministry in the Church. In such a construal, theology and theologians are depicted as existing in ivory towers, disconnected from and unrelated to the needs of a living Church.

Theology as Vocation

Theology is a vocation in the Church and for the Church, recognized as such from the period of Christian origins, beginning with Justin in the West and Origen in the East, both of whom were lay. It is now more commonly recognized that the vocation of the theologian and the vocation to ordained ministry are distinct. Too often this distinction is overdrawn, and a wide chasm is placed between them. As laypersons undertake theological education and formation, candidates for ordination sometimes facilely identify themselves as “doers” or “hands on” sacramental ministers, leaving the more speculative, theological work to the theologians who increasingly are, and will likely continue to be, lay.

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Even while recognizing the distinct call of the theologian, it is nonetheless true that theological education and ongoing formation are a necessary ingredient of the vocation to ordained ministry: deacon, presbyter, or bishop. Among some in the West, there is an emergent sense that it is impractical to consider ongoing theological education and formation, the cultivation of the *habitus theologicus*, as part and parcel of the priest’s life. The priest is thought to be the “people’s person” with a compassionate heart, a listening ear, a “doer,” or a “servant leader.” As I see it, this position is untenable and its consequences, both remote and immediate, disastrous.

My purpose here is twofold. By contrast I wish to present a view of theology and the theologian as deeply related to the concerns of human life, history, the world, and the Church. My second purpose is related to the first. I claim that theology is first and finally deeply pastoral. The priestly vocation is impoverished when the theological component is displaced from, or thought to be tangential to, it. Theology is not something one does in preparing for ordained ministry, a hurdle to be gotten over, a comprehensive examination to be passed. Theology ought to be a constant in the life of the priest.

A contemporary theologian would do well to begin with an articulation of social location—where he or she stands, his or her *sitz im leben* (situation in life). For my purposes here, let me say that my call is to be a theologian in service of the Church. Theology is the governing concern of my life. Indeed it is why I have chosen to set aside all other options so that this way might be pursued as the way to make good on the one and only life I have to live. Theology is my vocation, a whole way of life directed to probing theology’s single most important question: Who is God?

It seems to me that the same question is at the heart of any Christian life seriously lived and, above all, any Christian life given to prayer. Indeed if, echoing the collective wisdom of the tradition, the theologian is, above all, one who prays, then the theologian might have something to say not just to seminarians, priests, and vowed religious, but to any and all who seek to live the Christian life seriously.

**A Mode of Discipleship in Time and Place**

Theology as a way of life is best understood in terms of discipleship. Jesus asks us to listen to him, to hear him, to follow him. By so doing, we come to know him. In knowing him, we know the One who sent him (John 14: 6ff). Theology as a way of life is a personal identification with Jesus Christ in and through
the Spirit. Theology, then, is a mode of discipleship: a distinct way of listening, hearing, following, and coming to know something about God in Jesus Christ in the communion of the Spirit. From this point of view, theology cannot be done outside the context of discipleship.

Discipleship is both gift and task. It is an event taking place in the here and now. The challenges of the Gospel are to be heard and seen in our own time and place, not in some “golden age” of the past. Here and now (Eph 1:3-14) means the particularities of the contemporary scene. The theologian engages the questions of our times. One betrays the Spirit’s gift if he or she simply repeats what has already been said simply because “the Church” has said it.

Of the criteria to which the theologian looks to adjudicate the veracity of truth claims, there is one that enjoys preeminence, and that is the Spirit’s gift (John Paul II, n. 44). It is by the gift of wisdom that we are able to judge things according to the Gospel. This wisdom is one that respects not only tradition and teaching, but above all text—the text of the Scriptures. At the core of the theological task is the daily ascesis of letting the text of the Gospel take hold of us. With this comes the recognition that the Gospel provides no easy, ready answers, few precise moral prescriptions. The gift of wisdom—distinct from the wisdom found among intellectual virtues—helps us judge the meaning of things. Wisdom is distinct from faith (since faith accepts divine truth as it is) in that wisdom enables judgment according to divine truth (Aquinas, II-II, 45, 1 ad 2).

In Justin, Origen, and especially Ireneaus and Athanasius, theological writing was done with pastoral intent in the face of new questions, in light of shifting modes of perceiving and being. Athanasius’s preeminent concern with the Incarnation gave rise to a sustained argument against any effort to denigrate human flesh. In their different “todays,” Aquinas and Bonaventure, Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar, Elizabeth Johnson and Catherine Mowry La Cugna, have addressed the pressing questions of their day (Kennedy; Nichols; Puyo; Vorgrimler; Schindler). Their concern is concrete: Christ’s presence in these circumstances—in this time—and in this place—is anything but an abstraction. Their focus in every case is with the mystery of Christ’s identification with the human reality. The life’s work of each one can be understood as a Spirit-assisted search to find the idiom and form in which the Christian mystery is rendered accessible.

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**The gift of wisdom**

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The revelation of Christ is in and to the world. If we do not know much about the world in which we live, or care much about it, if we do not understand ourselves to be first and finally members of a people in *our own time and place*, then we will not know much about revelation (Vatican II, n. 1). This claim recognizes that the theologian is not preoccupied principally with his or her own ideas, but with the concerns of the Church. Of the theologian it must be said *sentire cum ecclesia*—to sense or feel with the Church—or at least to share the concerns of the Church. This requires an alertness to the questions of the community, attentiveness to the voices of all who are part of the Church, a willingness to see and hear each one of the Body—member for member—especially those whose questions disturb, unsettle, call into question our most tightly-held religious assumptions and convictions. If we are not to give credence to all we hear, this calls for the wisdom which is the Spirit’s gift.

**Learning How to Read**

At the core of the theological vocation is the challenge of learning how to read human life, history, the world, the Church. This is not like “surfing the net” or grabbing useful information from the newspaper, or skimming a how-to book. Reading as a habit of being entails willingness to pause, to gaze, to ponder, to spend time. It is a way of seeing, a non-pragmatic regard for creation, for others, for God. It is a habit cultivated so that the valuable takes priority over the useful, the beautiful over the merely functional. It is a way of beholding in reverence all the vestiges of divine life wherever they might be found. For this is how and where God is speaking. But, I suggest that we will be unprepared for this sort of beholding unless we cultivate a disposition of reverence before the text of the Gospel, learning how to receive the Spirit’s gift given in the revelatory text.

Amidst the here and now of reading their times, theologians work within a system, a framework, a comprehensive worldview, at the heart of which is a fundamental insight, a governing concern. At the core of the vocation to theology as a way of life is discipleship of Jesus Christ in a preeminent way. It also entails learning from, becoming disciples of, the major theologians of the tradition who followed Christ in their own lives. In every age, in light of the here and now, in response to questions engaged, the major theologians of our tradition have given shape to distinctive systems, guided by a central intuition around a christological image, a particular understanding of Christ.

For Athanasius, it was the centrality of the Incarnation, the Logos in flesh. Aquinas’s guiding insight was that of the *exitus et reditus* in which all comes from God and returns to God with providence ordering all things, and where the wisdom of God in Christ is the key. Bonaventure’s vision is shaped by the Christ who is among us in *il poverello*, the Christ who is crucified in the flesh of Francis.
of Assisi, summoning us to compassionate service of the poor, the weak, and the wounded. Closer to our own day, Karl Rahner recovers the humanity of Christ as symbol of God, whereas Yves Congar’s reading of John 17 leads him to give sustained attention to the Church as the Body of Christ in an ecumenical setting. Hans Urs von Balthasar’s entire theological project may be understood in terms of the kenosis of God in Christ, the divine self-abandon in gift and in giving at the heart of the trinitarian life.

Each of these christological images “speak” to questions raised at different times and places, the “todays” of these theologians, springing from and giving rise to manifold expressions of Christian discipleship.

Divine Self-Abandon

At this juncture we come to crucial questions: What is the christological image most apt for our own time and place? What is the mode of discipleship particularly suited to the incarnation of the gospel today? If theology as a way of life is a life of discipleship, who is this Christ we follow? And how far to follow? In what is perhaps his most instructive encyclical, Fides et Ratio, John Paul II spells out what he sees as the “current tasks for theology” (John Paul II, nn. 92–99). He writes: “The very heart of theological enquiry will thus be the contemplation of the mystery of the Triune God” (n. 93). Further, “From this vantage point, the prime commitment of theology is seen to be the understanding of God’s kenosis, a grand and mysterious truth for the human mind, which finds it inconceivable that suffering and death can express a love which gives itself and seeks nothing in return” (n. 93). In line with Hans Urs von Balthasar, John Paul II maintains that the prime task of theology is “understanding God’s kenosis” and, by implication, that the Kenotic Christ, the self-emptying of God in Christ, the divine self-abandon, is the most apt christological image for our own time and place. What does God’s kenosis mean . . . and why is seeking to understand this mystery the current task, the prime commitment of theology today? Seeking to answer this question is both a response to John Paul II’s challenge to understand God’s kenosis as well as living the theological question in a way that leads to contemplating the mystery of the Triune God.

To speak of kenosis is to speak of the Incarnation of God in Christ. But this is not a past event. Central to the Catholic sacramental imagination is the realization that the Incarnation continues. And so does the kenosis at the heart of the Trinitarian self-abandonment in gift. From the perspective of sacramental theology, Jean Corbon understands the Eucharist as an ongoing manifestation of Christ’s kenosis. The Church, then, as Christ’s Body, is to become an expression and extension of that kenosis in its own time and place. He writes:
In the last analysis, the Eucharist runs its course between two *kenoses*: that of the Word in his personal body and that of the Spirit in the body of Christ that is the Church. Our celebration moves from the icon of the nativity to the icon of Pentecost. But since throughout the divine liturgy that Spirit has made us live within ourselves the event of Jesus' passage, we must be attentive to the life he is going to live with us after the celebration. Having become the Church, we must live the Church’s life as a *kenosis* of the Spirit. The gift to us of God’s ever faithful love must be answered by an authentic life of charity which the Holy Spirit pours into our hearts. We too must give our gift fully; that is, we must divest ourselves of ourselves in that same *kenosis* of love . . . (Corbon, 106–07).

*Kenosis* is nothing more, or less, than the mystery of Christ’s identification with the human reality but with a particular slant, informed by a singular insight. The insight is that of self-emptying, best understood in light of Philippians 2, 1 Corinthians 1:18ff., and 2 Corinthians 12:8-10, wherein human wisdom is juxtaposed to the folly of the cross. John Paul suggests that the theme of *kenosis*, this self-emptying, is most suited to address the crucial issues of our times. Why?

John Paul II situates his understanding of theology within the context of its relationship to philosophy, and also in light of the claims of modernity, developments in psychology, aesthetics, and hermeneutics. He also points to the merits of postmodernity, as well as its shortcomings. All of these, without exception, have failed to satisfy the deepest desires of the human heart. Human hubris has built, and continues to build, systems—political, economic, philosophical, and theological—that promise but ultimately fail to deliver. With a sense of both urgency and anguish, John Paul II has repeatedly drawn attention to the disastrous consequences of such systems propelled by the hubris of unaided human reason: war, systemic impoverishment, genocide, dehumanization and de-personalization and, preeminently, the Holocaust of six million Jews and six million others.

From the vantage point of *kenosis*, God comes without pretension, in contrast to the hubris of reason unaided, putting a bold question mark in front of reason’s effort to figure it all out. *Kenosis* questions any and all systems of thought. The divine mystery does not rest in God’s inscrutability, but that God should appear in such a fashion. *Kenosis* is the scene on which God appears, refusing to identify with human achievement, resisting the inordinate need, or demand, to measure success, to assess projected outcomes. All these defy the logic of the gift, the emptying out of self in order to appear on that scene, the scene of human weakness and vulnerability, to identify with human beings in the concrete circumstances of their lives. This is a God who does not fill in for human want, but is present *amidst* it, *amidst* human longing and want. This is the meaning of God’s *kenosis*. The most important practical lesson for discipleship today is this: we
must give up a naïve view of a very active God, intervening, filling in the gaps where human reason fails.

Once we challenge reason’s ability to be independent, even under the guise of a Christian philosophy, we too are cast aside, pushed aside, like the infant at Bethlehem. Once we call into question the canons of pragmatism, the unbridled drive for efficiency and productivity, the consumerist culture that relegates health care to commodities to be consumed/bought, and education to “learnings” to be assessed, then we too are pushed aside with the crucified teacher and minister of mercy on Golgotha. _Kenosis_ calls for a discipleship in which we are to be compassionate with the crucified Christ. It demands a commitment to solidarity with all who have been pushed and shoved to the edges of society and Church, precisely because of raising critical questions about the very structures and systems—constructed by human hubris—which render so many voiceless, useless, a nuisance. Putting a question mark before such systems of depersonalization and dehumanization has the consequence of being put alongside all others who are victims of those crumbling systems to which John Paul II has drawn attention in _Fides et Ratio_. Theology as a way of life often entails finding oneself on the outside, even while at the heart of the Church. Fidelity to the vocation of the theologian may require that liminality—living faith at the edge, even and especially at the edge of the Church—be embraced as a permanent factor of one’s existence. Indeed, when one is there long enough, one learns that the edges may be the center.

It is from this place that we learn how to read, see, yet again . . . and to hear again. For we have asked, Who is God? The insight given is that God is the God of self-emptying love. The God whose very life is the Love that pours itself forth. We have asked: How far to follow? We have been brought to the edge, of society and Church . . . and also to the edge of comprehension, the limits of our ability to comprehend the magnitude of God’s love manifest in divine self-abandon. Here, the theologian participates in the mystery of the _kenosis_ in at least three ways.

First, the theologian strives for a comprehensive view. For all the striving for comprehensiveness on the part of Athanasius, Aquinas, Bonaventure, Rahner, Congar, Chenu, Von Balthasar, Elizabeth Johnson, or Catherine LaCugna, there are facts, from their own “here and now,” their “time and place,” that do not fit. Like it or not, this calls into question the adequacy of even our best theological systems.

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Theology as a way of life is itself a participation in the *kenosis* in a second sense. The farther I follow in this way of discipleship, the more I must accept the provisionality of all I know. I am, after all, the *Doctor ignorantia*. One of the most important things in life is learning how not to know. This is not the same as simply not knowing. What is meant by “not to know” here involves admitting, accepting, and embracing our limits. This involves embracing the tensive interaction between knowing and not knowing. To recognize our own emptiness so as to stand ready to receive the gift of wisdom on offer.

Then there are the human limits that the theologian experiences over the course of a lifetime: illness, diminishment, dying. Here the wisdom of the theologian, if indeed the gift has been received, cultivated, nurtured and sustained, is for all who constitute the Body of Christ, the human family in all its diversity. It is our own *kenosis* itself that becomes the scene on which God appears. Theology is learning how to see, how to read, how to contemplate the presence of God amidst our own brokenness and weakness, as the region not only of wound but of wisdom. Here, too, God does not fill in the gaps, or take away human want, but is present amidst it. We have asked how far to follow the Kenotic Christ and have found ourselves at the edge, at our own limits. It is here that there is room enough for God.

**Kenosis as Key to Contemplation**

Theology as a way of life is not so much a quest to find God as it is a way of living freely and responsibly with, in, and from the gift, the grace, of having been found by God, precisely on the scene of our own weakness and vulnerability, in the darkness of our faith, in the timidity of our hope, in the poverty of our love. So we learn how to look, how to read again, now with the eyes with which we have been seen, to speak with the words which have wrapped ‘round us and wrapped us ‘round: Love’s look. Love’s Word. So we see and we taste, which is to say we contemplate, the mystery of the Triune God (John Paul II, n. 93).

The doctrine of the Trinity affirms that God is immutably turned toward us and for us in self-giving love, that the very being of God is constituted by the self-giving that is constitutive of love. God is not self-enclosed or self-contained, but toward us, for us, with us and in us. God is Giver, Given, and Gift/ing. To claim that God is love (1 John 4: 8) is to say that God is the life that pours itself forth, always, everywhere, unceasingly, never-to-stop coming as gift. God is love in the way that a ruby is red or an emerald green. God’s love is such that it is never emptied but is, rather, all the fuller in the giving of it. This is the wisdom the Kenotic Christ, emptied in self-gift from crib to table to cross.

Who is God? The mystery of God’s *kenosis* discloses a God who is ad-vent-ing. The God disclosed in Christ’s *kenosis* is the God who comes and is coming. To
contemplate the mystery of the Triune God from this vantage point is to see that human life, history, the world, and the Church, even and especially in all their brokenness and vulnerability, have been seized and saturated by gift. Such a way of seeing is itself a gift given only when we are willing to set aside the “wisdom of the world” and embrace the “folly of the cross.” This is a language and a logic of gift. The theologian must first learn how to receive, and then give thanks for the Gift Given and still Gift/ing with the entirety of the one and only life I have to give.

References


