Theology is a word that many Christians find esoteric and alien to their vocabulary and their experience. They do not use the word, and would not consider themselves able to understand—much less actually to do—thology. Yet in the course of their lives they have become thoroughly shaped by theological principles and indelibly marked by good practices: virtue-in-action. Doing theology has actually become almost second nature to them. Just as Molière’s Bourgeois Gentilhomme was surprised to find that he had been speaking prose all his life, so with theology in the life of many Christians today. This is a great pity: Christians should not be intimidated by theology.

This reflection aims to encourage more theological thinking and acting—not just occasionally or as an academic pursuit, but as a way of life. I submit that theology can and should be more intentionally or explicitly part of our lives, and that even those who already speak prose may learn how to improve their performance and impact.

A recent book by Clemens Sedmak, Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a new Humanity, illustrates how, from accumulated wisdom, practiced faith, and daily experience, people act in a theologically sensitive fashion: they walk by faith, attending to their sisters and brothers, trying to behave as mature Christians, and attempting to model their lives on Jesus. Clemens Sedmak says that theology is “merely a matter of waking up. A good theologian, one might say, is a person who is close to people, who has a creative imagination and the gift of listening, who shows a commitment to hard work [. . .]. Being a theologian is more about who one is than about what one knows. Theology is about life, and doing theology is part of living a responsible life” (1–2). Many people we know are surely theologians by this measure. But if more were to take the notion seriously, we might find we could re-frame our lives in a more explicitly God-centered fashion. We could become increasingly people-centered and justice-oriented. And this would make a huge difference to many lives.

Let us wander beyond the field of theology into an adjacent—if not, to many, a

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foreign—field. From the field of the social sciences we may be able to glean something, and bring it back to our own theological barns.

All theology either has, or surely needs, a cross-cultural dimension. Sociology and cultural anthropology have something quite helpful to offer anyone committed to theological and (cross-) cultural communication: not merely verbal communication, but the totality of communication that we may call mission.

Mission is, first and foremost, God’s communication with humanity, across the cultures and through the ages. Our participation in God’s mission is demanded of us by our baptism, which “incorporates” or gathers us into the body of Christ, so that through, and as a feature of, this incorporation, we continue and extend God’s communication with humanity.

The social sciences can help. “Participant observation” identifies a methodological approach undertaken by those—typically social/cultural anthropologists—whose training is intended specifically to prepare them for cross-cultural interaction, by enabling them to encounter and communicate with people of different languages and cultures, and with different perceptions, judgments, value-systems, and worlds of meaning (Jorgensen; Hammersley and Atkinson). “Participant observation” sounds disarmingly simple, though the reality is rather subtle and even sophisticated. But its skills can be readily developed by virtually anyone with a real interest in other people and a desire to learn from them, and it can work splendidly as a theological method: a way of doing theology.

In 1915 Bronislaw Malinowski found himself stranded in New Guinea. He spent the years of the Great War interned in the Trobiand Islands where he developed the intense, interactive field-working methodology that became known as “participant observation,” and has since become the rite of passage for all fledgling anthropologists.

Although “participant observation” is commonly focused on an unfamiliar social reality, such as an ethnic group, social, political, or religious community, it can just as easily work in a neighborhood, a local parish, or even a family. It is designed to facilitate the encounter between outsider and insiders, in order to deepen the outsider’s understanding of insiders’ perspectives, to unlock the meaning or significance of what they do, or to identify what characterizes them as a social and cultural group. It is a way of respectfully approaching and understanding “the other”; and it requires both participation and observation. This is where it becomes interesting, and challenging.

Some people tend to control other people or social situations; participant observation is not for them. It demands that the inquirer be sufficiently self-conscious, or reflexive, to be sensitive to the social dynamics in general, and in particular to the inquirer’s effect on the people being encountered, or even “studied.” The participant observer undertakes intensive, long-term encounters that demand deference and mutuality—marks of respect and antidotes to manipulation.

Sometimes we may very much want to participate, and other times we are quite happy to observe. But “participant observation” requires flexibility, the willingness to negotiate, and not simply doing what we want or what we find comfortable. We may be invited—or expected—to participate when we would happily observe, and vice versa. If we acknowledge that we are the outsiders, we may learn to defer to the insiders, and even to allow ourselves to experience a degree of discomfort rather than to impose on others. Assuming we can learn when and how to participate and
when and how to observe, and to cultivate observant participation, which is a further challenge for those who become caught up in the moment, we will develop relationships of respectful mutuality.

Another theological term for this is ministry. Ministry bespeaks service. It is not puffed up but attends to rather mundane, though not insignificant, matters. The root of “ministry” is mini-, small, which is of course the opposite and complement to maxi-, big. And maxi- [= magi] is at the root of magisterium, the “big stuff.” “Participant observation” strives to be ministerial rather than magisterial. Perhaps its greatest contribution to theology is that, properly internalized, it can help us to become better ministers in the spirit of Jesus. It requires attentive listening, the establishment of trust, and a degree of risk-taking.

Not that “participant observation” throws prudence and caution to the winds; rather, when we are outside our own familiar bailiwick, our own intuitions must at least be supplemented by trust in others’ wisdom, and our own spirit of independence should be moderated by graciousness. If not, we will simply ride rough shod over the sensibilities of others. Then, we will be guilty of rudeness or arrogance. These are no basis for authentic ministry but are some of the sinful faces of clericalism and patriarchy.

Jesus is our model. Sometimes, he participated in people’s lives, whether in their meals or their gatherings. At other times, he observed, as a wanderer through Galilee and Judea who noticed the problems, the daily struggles, the sin and the grace at work in people’s lives. He also combined observation with participation, though not always on his own terms. The Canaanite woman (Matt 15:21-8), the woman at the well (John 4), and the woman who anointed him with oil (Mark 14:3-9) are only three of the people who called him to participate when he might have been more inclined to observe. Likewise, when he might have participated to the point of interference, he knew how to allow—or to challenge—others. When his disciples, surrounded by five thousand hungry people, looked to him, he countered, “Give them something to eat yourselves” (Matt 14:16); when he saw Zacchaeus hiding in the tree, Jesus invited himself as guest (Luke 19:6); when Peter was foundering in the waves, Jesus bade him “Come!” (Matt 14:29).

We are at a critical juncture in the history of the Church and the world. We are baptized with the Spirit of Jesus, and called to continue his work as faithful disciples. We ought therefore to take ourselves as seriously as Jesus takes us: we are called, we are sent: commissioned to bear much fruit. That makes our lives theologically implicated: they are Godly lives, theologically structured. But our discipleship is to be discovered and developed, and not through control or dominance. The way of Jesus is the way we must walk, leading and following, teaching and learning, presiding and serving. Participant observation and observant participation may afford some helpful approaches, sensitizing us to our impact on worlds and people we encounter, challenging us to be receivers as well as givers, and allowing us to develop appropriate levels of trust and vulnerability, so that we help to build communities of interdependent followers of Jesus. “Participant observation”—even more than academic training—may help us to be theologians in the Spirit of Jesus. And insofar as theology is praxis-derived and praxis-oriented, this approach may offer a way for us Christians to converge with The Way of Jesus. We have to discover the mind of Jesus; and as Sedmak says, a theologically mindful person makes all the difference in the world.
References

