

Academic Address
“The Nature of Theology”
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Since becoming academic dean, one of my tasks is to deliver a yearly address to the Seminary community on the academic life. To this address we also invite all of the resident graduate and post-graduate students of the University, who share in the intellectual formation of this place. My sense of what this address can contribute to your formation is focused on the nature of theology itself.

While I do not follow a specific school of theology, I have been most influenced in thinking about the nature of theology by the Neo-Patristic School. The Neo-Patristic School, like many theological movements, was a reaction to what came before it. The Russian School was a philosophical approach to religion. It sought after a mystical intuition called *sobornost* through Sophiology.¹ It was represented by such great thinkers as Vladimir Solovyov, Fr. Sergei Bulgakov, Fr. Pavel Florensky, and Nikolai Berdyaev. This approach was opposed by another set of great thinkers, Fr. Georges Florovsky and Vladimir Lossky who would focus on the doctrine of *theosis*. It would be Florovsky who would give the movement its name when he called Lossky’s *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* “a neo-patristic synthesis.”

¹ See *On Spiritual Unity: A Slavophile Reader – Alexi Khomiakov, Ivan Kireevsky, with essays by Nicholai Berdiaev, Pavel Florensky and Yuri Samarin*, trans. and eds. Boris Jakim and Robert Bird (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarn Books, 1998). See also Andriy Walicki, *The Slavophile Controversy: History of a Conservative Utopia in Nineteenth Century Russia* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975).

This controversy began in the 1930's and lasted, actively, until around 1937. It remains a controversy less about the conclusions which the philosophers and theologians reached as much as a debate about the nature of theology itself. I will someday try to solve this controversy in the classroom in an elective course, but that is not my task today. It is the nature of theology that I want to explore with you, in light of my reading and experience in the Eastern Churches. This approach, I hope, will open new avenues of insight for you precisely because it is foreign, even alien to your Western and Roman way of thinking. At the same time, you should be able to see the common ground, the foundations upon which all authentic Christian theology is built. So my goal in this exploration of theology's nature is at the same time to relativize particular schools of thought and to absolutize the source of all theology in the Revelation of God in Jesus Christ and transmitted to us by the Church.

So, to begin, I want to quote Archimandrite Vasileios (Gondikakis) about the fundamental nature of theology:

The *Logos* (Word or Reason) became flesh and dwelt among us. (John 1:14) This forms the basis of the Church and is its new joy. From that time on its "reason endowed worship" is theology. And theology becomes holy action, a proclamation of the Church's life whose aim is to incorporate the whole rational nature of men in the "strange divination."²

² Archimandrite Vasileios (Gondikakis) of Stavronikita, *Hymn of Entry: Liturgy and Life in the Orthodox Church* (Chrestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 18.

Archimandrite Vasileios is covering a lot of ground in that short paragraph. But while the style may be alien to you, the matter it deals with is not. Benedict XVI has stressed time and again a proper appreciation of the *Logos* in Christian theology. Indeed, Pope Benedict XVI has expressed often that Reason and Faith must be joined for separate they are distortions of the truth. Faith unmediated by Reason become fundamentalism. Reason undirected by Faith becomes relativism. Both deformities tear at the intellectual fabric of society and you are charged to bring the healing power of the Gospel to reunite faith and reason for the good of culture. Culture is thus, divinized. Fr. Vasileios goes on:

If the Word of God had not assumed human nature, He would have left it in darkness, “for what is not assumed is not healed.”³ And if our theology does not assume us, if it does not change our life, it will leave our life outside the taste of the new creation, in the darkness of ignorance, and so outside the mystery of theology which is the manifestation of the struggle for and the fact of salvation in Christ.⁴

Father Vasileios is asking Christians to recognize that theology at its core is living the grace received in baptism, the grace to enter into the very life of the Trinity. Such a life will “agree” with the Eucharist, when “along with your word you give your flesh and blood to others. Only then do your words mean something.”⁵ Such are the words and

³ **St. Gregory the Theologian**, *Letter 101*: PG 37:181C.

⁴ Vasileios, *Op. cit.*, 23.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

witness of the saint, who is the true theologian, who speaks about God by being “broken and distributed “as is the Lamb of God each time the Eucharist is offered.⁶

What is it to be “broken and distributed?” Ultimately, it means to experience kenosis, self-emptying. Said another way, it involves what Maximos the Confessor refers to as undergoing negation. Father Vasileios writes:

Theologians are saints “who have undergone the way of negation.”⁷ The saints are theologians who have undergone deification,⁸ and they open up the way to untaught knowledge, they pour out the grace of the Holy Spirit.⁹

This way of negation, or deification is called sanctification in the West. Oswald Chambers calls it purity. “Purity is not innocence, it is much more. Purity is the outcome of sustained spiritual sympathy with God. . . . Remember that vision depends on character – *the pure in heart* – see God.¹⁰ Sanctification, or theosis is what Father Vasileios calls, the “maturity of repentance.”¹¹

Repentance is required of everyone who becomes a member of the Church. And thereafter, maturity of repentance is inevitably revealed as transfiguration; an

⁶ **Ibid.** See also the **Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom**

⁷ Archimandrite Vasileios of Starvontika, *Hymn of Entry* (New York: Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984), 24. See also St. Gregory Palamas, *In Defense of the Holy Hesychasts* 2:3:26 Christou I, 561.

⁸ Archimandrite Vasileios of Starvontika, *Hymn of Entry* (New York: Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984), 24. See also Saint Maximos the Confessor, *Quest to T_____22*, P.G. 90:324b

⁹ Archimandrite Vasileios of Starvontika, *Hymn of Entry* (New York: Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984), 24.

¹⁰ Oswald Chambers, “Vision by Personal Purity” from *My Utmost for His Highness* (March 25th) in *The Collected Works of Oswald Chambers* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Discovery House, 2000), 763.

¹¹ Vaseleios, Op. cit.

involuntary change coming from without and a spontaneous testimony to the fact that God saves the man who approaches him.¹²

This maturity of repentance, which is a condition for theology, is done in the Church. The Orthodox Church has a different expression than we do in the West for the term “concelebration.” We use the term to refer to the actions of bishops and presbyters performing the priestly actions in the Mass. The Orthodox usage is different. It refers by concelebration to the action of the Church, each member according to his or her place in the mystical body, concelebrating with the Head of the Body, the High Priest of the New Covenant, Jesus Christ. I was always startled by the rubric in the Divine Liturgy where the priest refers to the deacon as “my fellow concelebrant.”¹³ This different ecclesiology, more organic than ours in the West, leads us to another important point about the nature of theology: theology is the product of the whole church. Each member of the body, in the communion of the Holy Spirit, contributes to theological reflection. Just as the Liturgy cannot be served by a single celebrant, but depends on the dialogic song of priest and people, so to theology is a mutual product. Father Vasileios says:

¹² Ibid.

¹³ This prayer is part of the dialogue between the priest and deacon after the veiling of the gifts and before the litanies of supplication and kiss of peace and Creed. It is alternately translated from Old Slavonic as “my fellow celebrants”, “my concelebrants,” or “my fellow ministers”. Nevertheless, this is not an issue of translation, for as Fr. Vasileios notes, the theology which underlies the phrase is that of the whole mystical body engaging in the Eucharistic action – according to the office of each. See *A Service Book: The Divine Liturgies of the Orthodox Catholic Church According to the Use of New Skete* (Cambridge, NY: New Skete, 1978), 72.

If the Orthodox theologian gives guidance to the believer, then equally the believer, fighting the good fight in the Church, directs and lights the way for theological knowledge.¹⁴

Doxology is the sole source for theology. The liturgy is a theological rite, not in the sense of being a collection of allegories, but in the more fundamental sense that worship alone is truly “speech about God.”

Father Barron has told the seminarians that their task here is to become pastoral theologians. The master of divinity degree has this intent. Like the medical degree or the law degree, the M.Div. is a practitioner’s degree. Divinity, law and medicine were called the learned professions, and this reveals something about our task in intellectual formation. They are learned because the individual practitioner must integrate a body of knowledge and a set of skill which will admit him to the full range of the practice. They are professions because each required of the individual the profession of an oath before they would be admitted to the community of practice. Part of the reform of the Second Vatican Council was the desire to return to a more patristic vision of the sacred ministry. The *Ressourcement* School in particular studied the Fathers of the Church and noted that the principal theological product of these men was not the treatise but the sermon. Pastoral theology, then, emerges from practice. It should have all the rigor of academic theology, but it must include a wider field of sources, specifically the experience of the communities in which the pastoral theologian serves. But this description has a flaw, in that it implies that other approaches to theology do not need

¹⁴ Vasileios, Op. cit., 25.

to consider experience. Hence, I would say that the distinction between academic and pastoral is only a relative one. Father Vasileios says of this: “When we talk of patristic theology, we are talking about the testimony of the Fathers’ lives, about the impression made by the presence of the theologian, not simply about the outcome of his intellectual industry. It is impossible for him to say or be one thing and his theology another.”¹⁵

Implicit in this is another dimension of what Father Barron was referring to in his description of a pastoral theologian. He has often described his own experience of being a newly ordained priest as one in which “You go to everything in the parish. You look around. You pay attention. What will emerge, quite naturally, is a sense of where you are needed and where to insert yourself in ministry.” In other words, a pastoral theologian does not come with a pre-packaged agenda. He comes with eyes and ears, looking at and listening to the experience of the people he is sent to serve, to find where his gifts and his theology are needed. Vasileios notes: “If the Orthodox theologian gives guidance to the believer, then equally the believer, fighting the good fight in the Church, directs and lights the way for theological knowledge.”¹⁶

One of the things which the faculty hopes will distinguish this University from other schools of theology and ministry is our notion of contemplative theology. This does not mean that we are promoting monasticism [with due apologies to Abbot Vincent]. It means we reject “university theology.” Proud as we are to be a seminary with the full powers of a university, we reject the method and approach which

¹⁵ Vasileios, *Op. Cit.*, 23-24

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

separates theological studies from spirituality. The renewal of seminaries centers on this insight which we intend to project outward into all the schools and institutes of the University of Saint Mary of the Lake. Father Vasileios puts the task this way:

Today, by contrast, we often take theology out of the theanthropic mystery of the Church in which it was sung by the Fathers. We transfer it to the field of mere academic discussions, where each person, remaining an individual, an isolated authority, states his opinions and goes his way. The resultant “theology” however, is not the very theology of the Church. If we disincarnate theology and transfer it as a mere opinion, to a round table for discussion, it is wrong and untenable to say that this is “the truth.”¹⁷

And this brings me to my final point about the contemplative dimension which reveals to us the essence of the nature of theology. Listen carefully to another quotation from Father Vasileios:

The Kingdom of God is not a Talmud, [by which he means a precise manual of practices which by performance make us right with God] nor is it a mechanical collection of scriptural or patristic quotations outside our being and our lives. [What we in the West would call an Enchiridion]. The Kingdom of God is within us, like a dynamic leaven which fundamentally changes man’s whole life, his spirit and his body. What is required . . . is to approach . . . holy texts with

¹⁷ Vasileios, *op. cit.*, 32.

the fear in which we approach and venerate [the saints] holy relics and holy icons.¹⁸

Theology is speaking about “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father and the communion of the Holy Spirit.” Pope Francis, in the first days of his Petrine ministry as Bishop of Rome, has been using word and deed to remind us of a most basic truth. Father Vasileios puts it this way (although he would not like me using his words to illustrate papal teaching),

Our words are often flabby and weak. For the word to be passed on and to give life, it has to be made flesh. When, along with your word, you give your flesh and blood to others, only then do your words mean something.¹⁹

The key idea regarding the nature of theology, then, is that it occurs solely between knowledge of the Triune God revealed by Jesus and the knowledge of oneself as *imago Dei*. If either of these elements is missing, the result will not be theology. I began with a quote from Father Vasileios:

The *Logos* (Word or Reason) became flesh and dwelt among us. (John 1:14) This forms the basis of the Church and is its new joy. From that time on its “reason endowed worship” is theology. And theology becomes holy action, a proclamation of the Church’s life whose aim is to incorporate the whole rational nature of men in the “strange divination.”²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid. 34.

¹⁹ Ibid., 36.

²⁰ Archimandrite Vasileios (Gondikakis) of Stavronikita, *Hymn of Entry: Liturgy and Life in the Orthodox Church* (Chrestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984), 18.

Divinization, not knowledge, is the goal of theology. Knowledge has a role, but is not the goal. Theology is the body of Christ in the communion of the Holy Spirit growing in knowledge of itself as the image of God and in knowledge of the communion of the Father and the Son and Holy Spirit, both of which draw the individual into the doxological life which sends him or her out to make the gift of self to others. Said in the words of the Formation Program, true theology is at the service of the pilgrim on the journey along the paths of the Christian life, which Father Barron describes as finding the Center, of knowing you are a sinner and knowing that life is not about you.²¹

²¹ Robert Barron, *The Strangest Way: Walking the Christian Path* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002).