

A Pastor's Theology

Academic Address 2017

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It seems only fitting that as we move through the year leading up to the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation, that I devote my academic address to one of the most important theologians and pastors which the Lutheran tradition produced and from whom all Christians, Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant, can learn a great deal. In a particular way, we at Mundelein Seminary can benefit from his wisdom for he confronted in his own life the need to bridge the chasm between the Church and the world, between the theoretical and the practical and most important of all, between interiority and action. I am speaking of the Reverend Dr. Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

I'll introduce him to you more formally in a moment. First, however, I want to introduce you to his world. The year was 1921, coincidentally the same year that a German American whose family hailed from Paderborn, having been named the Archbishop of Chicago, decided to resume the operations of the University of Saint Mary of the Lake after it suspended operations for 54 years. Dates reveal a number of coincident. It was, after all, in 1844 that the first bishop of Chicago opened the first university in Chicagoland to train his priests and educate his people. That same year, Frederich Nietzsche died, although his racist ideology did not die with him. During the

intervening years, a cancer of thought grew among the intelligentsia. As it emerged in the 1920's a strange mixture of Freud, Darwin and Nietzsche came together to support a new paganism – National Socialism in Germany. Both Pastor Bonhoeffer and Cardinal Mundelein would speak publicly against Adolf Hitler, Mundelein giving him the nickname “Austrian Paper Hanger” and Bonhoeffer denouncing him for his anti-Semitism. Both men represented the best of their theological traditions. Mundelein with Reinhold Hillenbrand offered the Catholic social teaching as the alternative to both Communism and Fascism. Bonhoeffer offered the central insight of the Reformation, that Christ is the center of life and faith and used that to oppose with all his might a social movement which sought to destroy a whole people and crush Christianity in the process.

Another reason I thought of devoting my Academic Address to Dietrich Bonhoeffer lies in the fact that his career started in a seminary. Marilynne Robinson narrates the early years in her essay by his name. Robinson writes:

Bonhoeffer was the son of a large, affectionate, wealthy, and influential family. He distinguished himself, early, being accepted as a lecturer in theology at the University of Berlin in 1928 at the age of twenty-two. From the first, his lectures attracted students who shared his religious and political views. The divisions in the churches would also have the effect of surrounding him with committed and like-minded people, “the brothers” as he called them, who seem to have answered fairly well to the exalted vision of the church in the world which was always at the center of his theology. In some degree they must have inspired it,

having accepted discipleship at such a cost. Many of them would be arrested and imprisoned, or be drafted and die in combat.¹

We are not facing such a situation as we sit here in this seminary. I will not make an analogy to any current situation and I encourage you to follow suit. But there is one way in which we face the same question as Bonhoeffer and his seminarians.

Underneath the horrific context of National Socialism that overshadowed Pastor Bonhoeffer and his ministry lay a theological question which must be answered in every age, both dramatic and non-dramatic. It is the question of the relationship of faith and culture, of the Church and the world. It seems crystal clear to us, in hindsight, that Bonhoeffer, his comrades and his disciples were right and the ministers of the state churches, both Lutheran and Reformed, were wrong. But on the ground, choices were less clear. The clarity, which Pastor Bonhoeffer had, came from his robust theology and the best that the Reformation traditions had to offer. I am referring to the high Christology which makes him a worthy heir of Saint Augustine. Out of this, Bonhoeffer developed a unique ecclesiology which cut through the fog and became a beacon that led him to safe harbor. [You had to know that ecclesiology would find its way into this talk at some point.]

What is unique in Bonhoeffer's articulation is well stated by Marilynne Robinson: "By 'the church' Bonhoeffer means Christ in this world, not as influence or loyalty but as active presence, not as one consideration or motive but as the one source and

¹ Marilynne Robinson, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer" in *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (New York: Picador, 2005), 108-109.

principle of life of those who constitute the church.”² Bonhoeffer built this theology of church on the work of his teacher, Karl Barth, the single most important theologian of the 20th century.³ It is Barth, Robinson tells us, who gave Bonhoeffer the foundational notion which grounds his theology: “Jesus Christ, as he is attested to in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God, who we have to hear and whom we have to trust and obey in life and in death.”⁴

This identification of the revelation of the divine logos with the person of Jesus Christ, as attested to in the Scriptures, anticipates what you have learned from Father de Gaal in *Fundamental Theology* about “. . . Sacred Scripture, as the highest authority in matters of faith, and Sacred Tradition, as indispensable to the interpretation of the Word of God⁵ both attesting to the *Logos*. Revelation is the person and event of Jesus.⁶ Bonhoeffer emphasizes a critical aspect of ecclesiology, the present-tense action of Jesus in the Church and the world. Christ is not an absent Lord, and so our ecclesiology is not a theory but an ethic, where ethic means making those choices required to live as a disciple in the present moment. Church means living in trust and obedience to Christ, and for Bonhoeffer, in 1933, it meant resisting the so-called Aryan Clause in the constitution of the German Lutheran church which prevented Jewish Christians from ordination and service as pastors.

² Ibid., 109.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint: The Encyclical Letter on Christian Unity* (Rome, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995), no. 79.

⁶ See Benedict XVI, *Verbum Dei: the Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Word of God* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2009).

Belief demands action. If Jesus is the living Lord of the Church, now, in the present moment, then ecclesiology becomes an ethic. Jews could not be excluded from the Church, nor expelled from the country for the simplest of reasons: Jesus Christ was a Jew. If you expel the Jews, you expel Jesus. Such a church is no longer Christian. This seems self-evident to us, sitting here in 2017. But you need to realize, this was the first such defense of the Jewish people.”⁷

While this point is painfully obvious to us, so many years after the Nazi period, the underlying theological point is what I want to call to your attention. “In 1932, [Bonhoeffer] wrote: ‘The primary confession of the Christian before the world is the deed that interprets itself.’⁸ Marilynne Robinson comments on this pregnant phrase by saying: “An obedient act owes nothing to the logic or expectations of the world as it is, but is affirmed in the fact of revealing the redeemed world. Action is revelation.”⁹

Father Marek Duran’s students in Fundamental Moral Theology must surely have recognized in Robinson’s comment the root genius of action theory, as developed by Karol Wojtyla/Pope Saint John Paul II, himself another 20th century church leader formed and shaped by World War II. And those of you engaged in the study of theological anthropology with Father Kunkel or soteriology with Father Hebden, will no doubt recognize one of the key insights of distinguishing between the world as it is and the redeemed world.

⁷ Robinson, *Op. cit.*, 114

⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 111.

Bonhoeffer is closer to my friends in the Neo-Pastoritic school of Orthodoxy than he is usually given credit for. (Actually, I'm not sure anyone has given him credit for this, but someone should. Oh wait, I just did). Whereas classical Protestant theology, and Barth is an example of this, holds that the Fall had noetic consequences, such that though redeemed, we are still untransformed, Orthodoxy while agreeing with the Catholic Church that redemption brings with it actual change, goes even farther to speak about how the whole cosmos is repaired by grace. This is well illustrated by Marilynne Robinson's point that the "obedient act . . . reveal[s] the redeemed world."¹⁰

Bonhoeffer's theology, as you can see from Robinson's description, is rich and sophisticated. And a theological lecture hall is a relatively safe place, even for such dramatic ideas. But Bonhoeffer felt a call within a call, to leave the classroom and to return to the pastorate. In this he gives us an example for ourselves.

As a seminary, all of us see the parish as the destination of our work. Virtually all of your priest-professors and the lay faculty are active ministers or members of local parishes. As Father Kartje frequently reminds you, the parish is the integrating point of Mundelein's theology. As Saint John Paul II says in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, the pastoral dimension of formation should integrate the other three dimensions.¹¹ John Paul wrote,

The Council text insists upon the coordination of the different aspects of human, spiritual and intellectual formation. At the same time, it stresses that they are all

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ John Paul II: *Pastores Dabo Vobis*: the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Formation of Priests (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, no. 57).

directed to a specific pastoral end. This pastoral aim ensures that the human, spiritual and intellectual formation has certain precise content and characteristics; it also unifies and gives specificity to the whole formation of future priests.¹²

What I want to propose to you is that Dietrich Bonhoeffer offers us a vision of pastoral theology which calls forth that integration.

I said earlier that we at Mundelein Seminary can benefit from Bonhoeffer's wisdom as we confront in our own lives the need to bridge the chasm between the Church and the world, between the theoretical and the practical and most important of all, between interiority and action. In this final section before my dramatic conclusion, I want to examine three points. First, I want to describe how he continued to function as a theologian after he left the classroom. Secondly, I want to say more about how his ecclesiology is an ethic. Lastly, I want to use his notion of "this-worldliness" to suggest a pastoral stance and how addressing the church/world dichotomy we will discover that we must explore the interiority/action dichotomy. Those of you familiar with the Byzantine Office of Vespers will recognize this paragraph as the equivalent to the deacon's exclamation "Let us complete our evening prayer to the Lord" which, among the many things it means, is not an announcement that the flight of the spirit is over, merely a promise that the plane has begun its descent. I suppose this is an apt image since I wrote this paragraph while flying over Germany on my way back from Israel.

¹² Ibid.

Bonhoeffer left the classroom, but did not leave theology. He became a pastoral theologian. As a discipline, pastoral theology is the engagement with experience. As you learned from Father Webb and Mrs. Couri in Pastoral Care and Counseling, experience is the stuff pastoral care is made of. We bring our theology to bear upon it, but never as an imposition. Rather, it is as a discovery. Through the habit of theological reflection, we discover the movement of God already at work in the experience of the individual or group. The pastoral theologian acts to lead a person in discovery of the current and active presence of Jesus in what is an already redeemed world. Theological reflection seeks to “make core beliefs immediate and compelling, to forbid the evasions of transcendence and of acculturation.”¹³

Pastor Bonhoeffer continued to write theology. It took the form of sermons, public lectures, circular letters (a genre which continues to exist today in the form of the bulletin article or perhaps, dare I say, the blog post). He also wrote books. All these theological works were held together by a pastoral vision, which Robinson describes as “a beautiful iteration of doctrine, a sort of visionary orthodoxy: ‘History lives between promise and fulfillment. It carries the promise within itself, to become full of God, the womb of the birth of God.’”¹⁴

If you take this approach to pastoral theology as the integrator of all the dimensions of your life as a public minister, then ecclesiology becomes an ethic. Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology assumes the reality of God who reveals himself in Christ and

¹³ Robinson, *Op. cit.*, 115-116

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 115.

especially in the immediate presence and active agency of Christ in his Church. Since the church is composed of the baptized, they have the capacity to recognize with words of truth. Discipleship means the church being aware of itself through its acts. Christ is at the center, but Christ is also at the margins. We can only see this if have the experience of small Christian community. Bonhoeffer tried to create this in the seminary at Finkenwald which he helped establish as an underground training center for pastors after the climate of society turned against them. It should be noted though that his was not a rejection of the world, but as desire for the realization of what Robinson calls “visionary memory” which allows us to “see divine immanence in the world [as] an act of faith, not a matter to be interpreted in other than its own terms. . .” Robinson continues:

Two ideas are essential to Bonhoeffer’s thinking: first, that the sacred can be inferred from the world in the experience of goodness, beauty, and love; and second that these things, and, more generally, the immanence of God, are a real presence, not a symbol or foreshadowing. They are fulfillment as well as promise, like the sacrament or the church.”¹⁵

Bonhoeffer calls this quality “this-worldliness.” It is nothing other than a profound belief that Christ is autonomously present, dependent on no human intention or belief or institution.”¹⁶ The church/world dichotomy collapses under this conviction. The Church cannot retreat from the world and she cannot be other than Christ’s presence in

¹⁵ Ibid., 122.

¹⁶ Ibid., 124.

the world, the whole world, including the margins and even in the midst of those principalities and powers who work against Christ.

In 1933 he wrote an article which would set him on his final course in ministry. The title was "The Church and the Jewish Question." Bonhoeffer wrote the following:

The church has an unconditional obligation to the victims of any ordering of society, even if they do not belong to the Christian community. . . . This might mean not just to bandage the victims under the wheel, but to jam a spoke in the wheel itself. Such action would be direct political action."¹⁷

Bonhoeffer enjoyed some political cover through his family relations and was able to travel to Switzerland and Sweden. There he connected with the resistance, both Protestant and Catholic. The political action was to see if a coup against Hitler was possible. These efforts failed, as did his protection. He was arrested and imprisoned. His ministry then turned inward to intercessory prayer. This phase of his life was one of "taking the distress and poverty, the guilt and perdition [of his enemies] upon [himself] and pleading to God for them. He wrote that in this "We do for them what they cannot do for themselves." He connects all of this to Christ in Gethsemane, and in his intercessory prayer from the Cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

The close of Bonhoeffer's life closes this academic address and the circle of argument about the role of the pastoral dimension of formation in our lives as a small

¹⁷ Ibid. 113.

Christian community. Those of you who take my course on ecumenical and interreligious dialogue will recall that I like to quote the Rev. Norma Sutton, an Episcopal priest who co-taught Prayer and Life in the Spirit with me for many years. Rev. Sutton stated that there were two goals in Christian spiritual theology. I extent this to all of theology, because, as Father Hennessey will tell you, all theology is spiritual. The two goals are *theologia prima*, speech to God and *theologia secunda*, speech about God. The second is frankly impossible without the first.¹⁸ The revelation of the redeemed world is not disclosed through argument, but action – and a very special kind of action. I’m going to close with the most challenging statement of theology that I have found in Bonhoeffer. In this, he challenges Luther himself based on a theological reflection on the experience of discipleship. The phrase is this: “It is only through actual obedience that a person can become liberated to believe.”¹⁹ He goes on to say:

The will of God is not a system of rules which is established from the outset; it is something new and different in each situation in life, and for this reason a person must ever anew examine what the will of God may be. The heart, the understanding, observation, and experience must all collaborate in this task. It is no longer a matter of a person. knowledge of good and evil, but solely the living will of God; our knowledge of God’s will is not something over which we

¹⁸ For more on this topic see David Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima: What is Liturgical Theology?* (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2012). For further development of his thought, see *Consecrating the World: On Mundane Liturgical Theology* (Kettering, Ohio: Angelico Press, 2016).

¹⁹ Robinson, Op. cit., 119.

ourselves dispose, but it depends solely upon the grace of God and this grace is and requires to be new every morning.²⁰

Given our secularist context, there are some who will hear this and think it implies relativism or “situation ethics” as it was called when I sat in the chairs of this Aula. But such a reading is impossible if you take this statement in context as a description of the kind of discernment required by Bonhoeffer’s claim that “it is only through actual obedience that a person can become liberated to believe.”²¹

Bonhoeffer may be our guide in interpreting Pope Francis as articulating a vibrant orthodoxy which recognizes that the world and the Church need to act upon the truth that Jesus Christ has already redeemed the cosmos and that that redemption is in effect, whether we humans realize it or not.²² Death is defeated, sin is conquered, creation is restored – it needs only to be revealed to us by trust and obedience. If you read John 7:17 you will discover what I like to call the hermeneutic of obedience. True knowledge come only after the experience of obedience to the revelation. Jesus says: “. . . My doctrine is not mine, but [belongs to the one who] sent me, *if any one may will to do His will, he shall know concerning the [doctrine].*²³ This is where interiority and action conspire to our conversion into disciples. To understand how it is between the world

²⁰ Ibid., 116.

²¹ Ibid., 119

²² I am thinking of the confidence we read in Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*, and in his sermons during the Year of Mercy. I thought of this reading Bonhoeffer’s words “History lives between promise and fulfillment. It carries the promise within itself, to become full of God, the womb of the birth of God.” Ibid., 115.

²³ John 7:16-17 (translation and emphasis mine). See Kenneth Smith, “The Hermeneutics of Obedience” unpublished sermon delivered at the Syracuse Reformed Presbyterian Church (1999).

and the Church, and ultimately the kingdom, we must recognize the ecclesiological ethic which is nothing other than acting upon our relationship with Jesus in the concrete moments of each new day.