

# “Unveiling Truth to a Culture”

---

*Academic Address*

**Thomas A. Baima,  
Mundelein Seminary  
April 10, 2012**

Χριστός ανέστη! Ἀληθώς Ανέστη! (Khristós Anésti! Alithós Anésti!)

Хрісто́сь воскресе! Воистину воскресе! (Christos voskrese! Voistinu voskrese!)

Christus resurrexit! Resurrexit vere!

Christ is Risen! Truly he is risen!

With that greeting, Eastern Christians throughout the world profess the most fundamental truths of faith. Jesus, who was dead, is now alive. And that changes everything.

And yet, our ability to proclaim this to a world in need of the salvation won for it by Jesus on the Cross is impeded by the world’s inability to understand how we can say one of the words in that sentence. Alithos, Voskrese, Vere, Truly.

Truth is in dispute. And this will be the major theme of my address to you tonight. It is fashionable right now to talk about the New Evangelization. This year the Church will also celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council. These two themes, the authentic renewal of Vatican II and the New

Evangelization are the guiding themes of the faculty here at Mundelein.<sup>1</sup> They will also be the agenda for the Catholic Church throughout your lifetime. But something stands in the way. Truth is in dispute. Theology's task is to unveil truth to a culture.

I'll tell you a secret. America is not a Catholic country. No, really, ask your schoolmates who come from places with a dense Catholic culture, from Mexico, Poland or Latin America – this place, America, is not a Catholic country. What this means is that our Catholic issues, concerns and worldview does not animate the public square. Now this is not to say that America is not a Christian country. A Protestant Christian worldview is quite deeply part of our national ethos. But America is not only a Christian country. It is also a secularist country and has been since its founding. Christian and Enlightenment principles separately ground our national ethos. There is a tension, always was and likely always will be.

Hence, truth is in dispute. Unfortunately, what has developed over the decades is a typically Protestant stance of “either/or” to the question of Christian or Enlightenment values.<sup>2</sup> We find our culture in the circumstance of having reason and faith standing in opposition to one another. The Catholic insights about natural law and faith's relationship to reason could be helpful here, but we are not in the

---

<sup>1</sup> These guiding themes were articulated by Msgr. Dennis Lyle when he became rector of Mundelein Seminary in 2006. They have guided the topics of the Albert Cardinal Meyer Lecture Series for the whole period of our preparation for the anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council.

<sup>2</sup> Calling this approach “Protestant” comes from a dialogue between Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar in which Professor Barth chastises the Catholics for trying to hold competing elements together with what he termed “the Catholic *and*.” His concern, of course, was to protect the Protestant notion of *sola Scriptura* against the Catholic assertion of Scripture *and* Tradition. As I apply it here, however, it more refers to the insight of the Catholic tradition that faith and reason are not mutually exclusive. Rather, faith *and* reason mutually inform each other. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007).

conversation. At the extremes we find skepticism and fundamentalism, neither of which have the capacity to deal with the dispute over truth.

That said, America is also a religious country. Ask Father De Gaal about the secularization taking place in Germany. Ask Father Geoffrey Kerslake about the secularization of Canada. The very Protestantism that invests America with its non-Catholic ethos is also the line of defense which has protected us from that secularism. There are secularizing tendencies in America, but they are opposed and with some effect by a vital Protestant Christian community which is more and more including Catholics as fellow Christians.<sup>3</sup>

All of you, whether you are in the M.Div. program preparing for priesthood, in the Liturgical Institute training for leadership in the liturgical movement, or in the Pontifical Faculty preparing to be teachers and theologians in the Church, the dispute over truth will affect you. Consequently, I want to offer two points tonight on how we might prepare to minister in such a context. I will also offer a view of the kind of theology that is needed to do this effectively.

Let me illustrate what I mean with two stories. Both are stories about Eastern priests. One is about persecution and the other about monastic renewal. The first is the story of a man who confronted the challenge of secularism and relativism with the Gospel.

---

<sup>3</sup> See Francis E. George, *Inculturation and Ecclesial Communion: Culture and Church in the Teaching of Pope John Paul II* (Rome, Urbaniana University Press, 1990).

The man is Father Mychailo Havrilyu.<sup>4</sup> Mychailo was a pious young man who lived in Soviet Ukraine. He discovered that he had a vocation to the Catholic priesthood, but his church, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, had been suppressed by the Soviets. To claim you were a Ukrainian Catholic brought about one of two fates. Either you were declared to be insane and sent to an asylum (since there was no such church you must be delusional to claim to belong to it) or declared an enemy of the State (since claiming a Ukrainian identity apart from the state sponsored Russian Orthodox Church was clearly a politically-based opposition).<sup>5</sup>

Mychailo belonged to the Underground Church. They met in forests and apartments in secret. At one point this was the largest underground religious movement in the world with 5-7 million members. When he manifested his desire to become a priest, the underground bishop made the decision that he should “hide in plain sight.” He sent Mychailo to the Leningrad Theological Academy run by the Orthodox Church to study for the priesthood. The plan was simple. Mychailo would study as an Orthodox seminarian. He would be ordained an Orthodox deacon and

---

<sup>4</sup> Mychailo Havryliv, *Every Person is First of All a History: The Autobiography of an Underground Ukrainian Catholic Priest in Contemporary Ukraine* (Rome: Ukrainian Press Service, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted here that the Russian Orthodox Church was faced with the same dilemma as the Ukrainian Catholic Church at the time of the revolution. This resulted in a schism between those who wanted to follow the path of resistance and those who accepted a reduced existence in order to have some public presence. Patriarch Tikon, who was presiding hierarch at the time of the revolutions, argued that the Church was for the weak of faith as well as the strong. Consequently, accommodations were made to maintain some presence. Much of the tension after the decisions comes from the fact that the Russian Church materially benefited from the suppression of the Ukrainian Catholic Church, receiving their church property, etc. History will ultimately judge the soundness of either decision. What is important to realize is the complexity of concerns which faced the bishops at the time of the revolutions. See Dimitry Pospelovsky, *The Russian Church Under Soviet Regime, 1917-1982* (Chrestwood, New York: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984).

priest and then, one day, he would simply “disappear” into the forest and re-join the Underground Catholic Church.

Upon arriving at the Leningrad Theological Academy, which was one of the truly great seminaries in the Orthodox Church, Mychailo wrote in his secret diary “The Lord revealed something to me today. He showed me the great treasure of learning which was this seminary and its library. I realized that if I followed my vocation as planned, that the whole of my priestly life would be spent without these resources. I realized that all I would have to give to the people was what I could carry in my mind. That day I made a solemn resolution not to waste a moment of my time in the seminary. Each day I would imagine the people of Ukraine, yearning so much for the Gospel. Their image in my mind would motivate me to use my time well.”<sup>6</sup>

Father Mychailo realized one of the most basic truths about seminary. Interestingly, it was the same motive which Cardinal Mundelein had in mind when he re-founded Saint Mary of the Lake. The insight was to recognize that seminary is a unique and privileged moment in life. A priest has only one chance to receive this gift.

The second story is about Mount Athos. Most of us, I assume, have heard of this famous Christian site. Actually a peninsula in northeastern Greece, Mount Athos is a place where for centuries men, and only men, have gone to flee from the corruption of the world and seek God through the monastic discipline.

Unfortunately, where you have men (or any humans really) you have imperfection. And that imperfection can develop into attitudes which can corrupt even

---

<sup>6</sup> This is related in Fr. Havryliv’s book, *op. cit.*, but I am quoting it from memory.

a holy place like Athos. Such was the condition in two ancient monasteries, Stavronikita and Iveron.<sup>7</sup> But first to one and then the other, the Lord called a holy priest, Vasilios (Gondikakis), to lead a renewal on the Holy Mountain. A holy man and a theologian of some profound depth, he almost single handedly reformed these two once great monastic houses to their former glory. He has been called by Metropolitan Kalistos Ware one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> Metropolitan Kalistos makes this claim because Archimandrite Vasilios' approach to reform is based on a return to the patristic sources, much as was the goal of theologians in the West such as Joseph Ratzinger.

Archimandrite Vasilios would be surprised to know that I am holding him up to you as an example. You are a community of Catholic seminarians and graduate students, and he is not at all open to ecumenism. Like most of the monks of Mount Athos, he is suspicious of Western Christianity. But I would argue that his suspicions are based on impressions from either liberal Protestant theology or an old-style scholasticism, both of which he rightly sees cannot confront the crisis of truth facing the world today.

Why I am holding him up to you is that there is much we can learn from him. He offers a truly fresh approach to theology. Archimandrite Vasilios' most basic claim is that theology is really the *song* of dogma. It is the *vocalization* of the lived experience

---

<sup>7</sup> By "corruption" I mean laxity in monastic discipline, not moral corruption. Specifically, the symptoms were a lack of vocations and decline of the quality of monastic life.

<sup>8</sup> For those readers not familiar with Orthodoxy, Metropolitan Kalistos of Diocleia (Timothy Ware) is Titular Metropolitan of Diocleia. Professionally he was Fellow of Pembroke College and former Spalding Lecturer of Eastern Christian Thought at the University of Oxford.

of the Trinitarian life discovered in the theanthropic mystery of the Church. His basic claim is that “divine action summarizes theology.” Listen for a moment to him:

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 opinion 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 the roundtable for discussion, it is wrong and untenable to say that this is “the truth.”<sup>9</sup>

Instead, Archimandrite Vasilios proposes Liturgy *as a way of knowing*. This corresponds to what the great 20<sup>th</sup> century Dominican philosopher, Father Herbert McCabe described when he called Liturgy “the first instance of tradition.”<sup>10</sup> Father Vasilios writes: “[patristic] theology is a different matter from beginning to end. It does not assert a proposition, it bears witness. It is not contradiction, but confession.”<sup>11</sup>

The hermeneutic of reform called for by Pope Benedict seeks this same goal. Mundelein Seminary’s focus on the authentic renewal of the Second Vatican Council and the New Evangelization unify *ad intra* and *ad extra* goals for Christians of the New Millennium. Inwardly, they must be theologians of the sort Archimandrite Vasilios called forth in the renewal of two of the most corrupt monasteries on Mount Athos.

---

<sup>9</sup> Vasilios of Stavronikita, *Hymn of Entry* (Crestwood, New York: Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984), 32.

<sup>10</sup> Hebert McCabe, *The Teaching of the Catholic Church: A New Catechism of Christian Doctrine* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1986).

<sup>11</sup> Vasilios of Stavronikita, *Op. Cit.*

Outwardly, they must be missionaries of the sort Father Mychailo sought to be as he prepared to serve heroically in the Underground Church of Ukraine.

All of this points to an apparent reversal of the normal expectations . If we listen to the lessons of these two priests, then this chapel will become your studium. And the library will become a holy sanctuary. Then you will fulfill the maxim of the Christian East: "To be a theologian you must pray and anyone who prays is actually a theologian."<sup>12</sup> Archimandrite Vasilios writes:

When a man comes down the mountain of his experience of the Liturgy, of participation in that which truly exists, he goes about his business in the created world in a different way. He does his service in time differently. He is a dynamic presence, like the grain of the mustard seed: a witness to the Kingdom.<sup>13</sup>

To the deacons and students in the final year of your programs, in four weeks you will gather in the Cardinal Mundelein Auditorium to be proclaimed masters, licentiates, and doctors. This will not be a moment of ending but of commencement. You will then go out into a world in dispute of truth. Your training here has not been to give you a credential, but to change you into a person who knows the truth and can witness to others. A master of divinity is not someone who has mastered God. Even the sound of that is ridiculous. No, a master of divinity is one who has mastered himself so that he

---

<sup>12</sup> Evagrius Ponticus, "Treatise on Prayer," 58-61 (PG 79:1180 A-B) cited from Jeremy Driscoll, *Evagrius Ponticus' Ad Monacos: Translation and Commentary* (New York/Mahwah: The Newman Press, 2003), 339.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

might know God. So also for anyone who earns a theology degree. Reformed in this way in yourselves, you are sent to witness to the world.

Intellectual formation has as its primary purpose preparing you to fulfill the command of Jesus inscribed over the main entrance to the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception. *Euntes Ergo Docete . . .* "Go therefore and teach . . ." Of course, the entire quote is:

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20)

Blessed Pope John Paul II has interpreted this command of Jesus in the following way:

- To proclaim the gospel with the aim of conversion
- To baptize and form Christian communities
- To humanize culture<sup>14</sup>

This is what the study of theology is really for. I would suggest that to renew the Church we need the attitude of Archimandrite Vasilios – that the source of all renewal originates in the Liturgy and the access to the Trinity which it brings. And I would suggest that to engage the New Evangelization, we must have the attitude of the

---

<sup>14</sup> See John Paul II, *A Catechesis on the Creed, Vol. IV: The Church: Mystery, Sacrament and Community* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1998). See also Thomas A. Baima, "Afterword" in *What is a Parish? Canonical, Pastoral and Theological Perspectives* (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2007), 195-200.

Eastern underground priest, that every resource placed at our disposal must be acquired for the sake of the people we will one day serve.

Theology's task is to unveil the truth to a culture.<sup>15</sup> Study in this chapel. Worship in the Library. In this way, God will equip you to bring the truth of Jesus Christ to a skeptical world.

**Academic Address**  
**"The Nature of Theology"**  
**The Very Rev. Thomas A. Baima, S.T.D.**  
**University of Saint Mary of the Lake**  
**Mundelein, Illinois**  
**April 10, 2013**

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

---

<sup>15</sup> See Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam: The Encyclical Letter on the Paths of the Church* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1964).

intuition called *sobornost* through Sophiology.<sup>16</sup> 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."

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:

---

<sup>16</sup> See *On Spiritual Unity: A Slavophile Reader – Alexi Khomiakov, Ivan Kireevsky, with essays by Nikolai 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).

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.”<sup>17</sup>

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.”<sup>18</sup> 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

---

<sup>17</sup> Archimandrite Vasileios (Gondikakis) of Stavronikita, *Hymn of Entry: Liturgy and Life in the Orthodox Church* (Chrestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984), 18.

<sup>18</sup> St. Gregory the Theologian, *Letter 101: PG 37:181C*.

theology which is the manifestation of the struggle for and the fact of salvation in Christ.<sup>19</sup>

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.”<sup>20</sup> Such are the words and 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.”<sup>21</sup>

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.”<sup>22</sup> The saints are theologians who have undergone deification,<sup>23</sup> and they open up the way to untaught knowledge, they pour out the grace of the Holy Spirit.<sup>24</sup>

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

---

<sup>19</sup> Vasileios, *Op. cit.*, 23.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* See also the *Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom*

<sup>22</sup> 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.

<sup>23</sup> 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

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

on character – *the pure in heart* see God.<sup>25</sup> Sanctification, or theosis is what Father Vasileios calls, the “maturity of repentance.”<sup>26</sup>

Repentance is required of everyone who becomes a member of the Church. And thereafter, maturity of repentance is inevitably revealed as transfiguration; an involuntary change coming from without and a spontaneous testimony to the fact that God saves the man who approaches him.<sup>27</sup>

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.”<sup>28</sup> 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

---

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

<sup>26</sup> Vasileios, Op. cit.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> 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.

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:

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.<sup>29</sup>

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

---

<sup>29</sup> Vasileios, *Op. cit.*, 25.

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 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."<sup>30</sup>

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."<sup>31</sup>

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

---

<sup>30</sup> Vasileios, *Op. Cit.*, 23-24

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

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 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.”<sup>32</sup>

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,

---

<sup>32</sup> Vasileios, op. cit., 32.

his spirit and his body. What is required . . . is to approach . . . holy texts with the fear in which we approach and venerate [the saints] holy relics and holy icons.<sup>33</sup>

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.<sup>34</sup>

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

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 34.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 36.

proclamation of the Church's life whose aim is to incorporate the whole rational nature of men in the "strange divination."<sup>35</sup>

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.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Archimandrite Vasileios (Gondikakis) of Stavronikita, *Hymn of Entry: Liturgy and Life in the Orthodox Church* (Chrestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 18.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Barron, *The Strangest Way: Walking the Christian Path* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002).

**Academic Address**  
**“Initiation into Truth”**  
**The Very Rev. Thomas A. Baima**  
**University of Saint Mary of the Lake**  
**Mundelein Seminary**  
**April 2014**

One of the most influential book in my own intellectual development was Jean Cardinal Danilou’s *The Bible and the Liturgy*. I read this book while I was still an undergraduate working in philosophy and religion. Danilou was different than any author I had read, precisely because of his almost total lack of interest in philosophy. I had never encountered a theologian like him before. I did not know it at the time, but it was my first introduction to the *Ressourcement* movement and it would open my mind for when through Dr. Charles Ashanin I encountered the Neo-Patristic School of Orthodoxy, which shares a similar methodology with *Ressourcement*.

Danilou describes the awesome initiation rites of the early Church. His descriptions are dramatic and I found them captivating. It was so different from the logical teaching of someone like Saint Thomas Aquinas or later commentators on his work, or the Catechism, which, while a profound work in its own right, is a step away from the profound reality described by Danilou. The reality I am speaking of is the Holy Spirit, sacramentally present in the initiation rites, who brings about an initiation into truth.

Initiation into truth is the theme of my academic address tonight. As Christians, we are standing at a moment in history at the junction between the modern and the

post-modern, between the rational and romantic, where the restriction of truth to the measurable and scientific has given way to the deconstruction of truth into mere “truth claims” with support from “culturally specific narratives.”

You have been called by God and by your bishops to prepare for priesthood in this moment of history. Father Barron has spoken to you many times about the new elements of the New Evangelization. He has told you time and again that there is a new situation, where obstacles stand in the way of even approaching Christianity. There is a hostility to Christianity which must first be overcome before proclamation can be heard. I want to argue tonight that one of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council provides us with an important component of the New Evangelization. And I want to explore one aspect of this reform as a way of beginning to understand a dynamic of the new evangelization which will be necessary to confront post-modernism. The reform of which I am speaking is the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.

During the thirteen years I served in full time parish ministry, I was always involved with the RCIA. Some of the older priests I was assigned with would question the need for the liturgical dimension of the rites. They were of the old school of convert classes. In their minds, conversion was about intellectual ascent to information – to truth as a proposition. If you believed right, everything else would follow.

Now, I agree that you have to believe aright. But the approach of conversion as intellectual ascent to information assumes that truth is a proposition. But what the great minds of the twentieth century, Balthasar, Congar, Danilou, de Lubac, and Ratzinger have shown us is that truth is first of all a person, Jesus Christ. Propositions

are important, but they come later. Before all else, as Cardinal Dullas has noted, is a personal adult encounter with Jesus Christ in the Church.

Consequently, truth is something we are initiated into before it is a proposition to be believed. Indeed, you can legitimately read the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed that the Holy Spirit speaks through the prophets and one holy, catholic and apostolic church. You can also read the Creed in such a way as to say that it is “in one holy, catholic and apostolic church that you confess one baptism and await the life to come.”

My point is that we are initiated into truth by our incorporation in the Church. Archbishop Arthur Roche, who recently delivered the Meyer Lectures, noted that the liturgy is an icon of the heavenly reality, which is to say, an image of the perfected Church. And that church of heaven is nothing other than life in the mystery of the Trinity. So, the sacramental “structure of the Church [is] an initiation into the mystery of the Trinity.”<sup>37</sup> Maximos the Confessor puts it well when he writes that “the holy Church is an icon of God, for it brings about among the faithful a unity the same as that which is in God.” Archimandrite Vasileios of Stavronikita goes deeper with this idea:

The church has a mission to bear witness to unity, because in it God is known not simply as sole ruler, but as a perfect communion of three persons . . . . [The Word] becomes flesh in order to demonstrate the spiritual mission of the flesh,

---

<sup>37</sup> Vasileios of Stavronikita, *Hymn of Entry: Liturgy and Life in the Orthodox Church* (Chestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984), 41.

and to show how everything has come into being and increases and is transfigured through the unity and fecundity of the Trinity.”<sup>38</sup>

The unity and fecundation of the Trinity is revealed in the Rites of Christian Initiation. I still remember the first time I saw this happen. One story will make my point. I was parish priest at Our Lady of the Wayside in Arlington Heights. A number of you have done field education there or been interns, and, of course, Father Barnum was pastor there, but after my time. I was directing the RCIA and had been working with the class at understanding the doctrine of the creed on the church. Even then, ecclesiology was my favorite subject in dogmatic theology. But try as I might, I could not sufficiently explain the idea that the diocese was the particular church and not the parish. the candidates just were not getting it.

But then came Lent and it was time to go to the Cathedral for the rite of election. Cardinal George know what I am about to say from the many times as a bishop that he celebrated this rite. What they could not understand intellectually from my teaching, they received from the rite itself. The Church of Chicago was revealed to them. Being received and elected by the bishop, they came to see the bishop not only as the pastors boss, in other words as an administrator, but as a principle of unity among all the parish churches. And they saw that it was the same for the whole Catholic Church under the ministry of the Pope. The nature of the church was revealed to them in that liturgical rite. And they came to realize that though they were only a few people from Arlington

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

Heights, they were part of a multitude across the archdiocese. Thousands of adults were finding their spiritual home in the Catholic Church. They were not alone.

And knowing that they were not alone changed everything. Six weeks later when they were baptized and confirmed, though they were only five in Arlington Heights, they knew that they were in communion with nearly three thousand other adults across Chicagoland. While I could teach them the doctrine intellectually, until they experienced it liturgically, they did not really know it.

*Communio*, then, the central concept of the *Ressourcement* theologians is, as Vasileios would put it:

. . . the center and principle of the world both visible and invisible. There is one way to true unity and existence: the way of life of the Holy Trinity. And this is what Jesus asks of the Father, that the faithful may be united even as we are, that they may be united because we are united; and there is no other way to authentic and fruitful living. . . . [this is]the Trinitarian basis of ecclesiology”<sup>39</sup>

This fruitfulness is revealed in the attractive power of adult conversions. If you want to be effective new evangelists, you need more than apologetic arguments. You need to study contemporary conversions. I specifically say contemporary conversions because there is a specific dynamic to the movement of the Spirit in the post-modern age which is different from earlier times. In the modern period, most conversions involved people who were already believers of some sort who needed to be accompanied into the full expression of Christianity which is the Catholic Church. But the post-modern convert is

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 43.

different. The reason is the need to overcome hostility to religion itself which has developed as a result of secularism and relativism. I want to share some of unscientific findings with you because knowing the experience of post-modern converts will allow you to take from your studies here at Mundelein what will be most helpful in the new evangelization. I call them unscientific because the sample is too small to make wide ranging claims. What I am going to describe are patterns or stages of which I have observed in the testimonies of a few post-modern conversion and then highlight approaches to minister to people at each stage. Finally, I will relate this to the theology I have been developing in this address thus far.

Based on these few testimonies from post-modern converts, I can see certain patterns emerging in the journey they make from hostility to Christianity to faith in Christ.

1. Little or no childhood formation in faith-life.

The first element of the emerging pattern is that these individuals had little or no childhood formation in faith-life. If they were baptized, it was not followed by any kind of catechesis. Perhaps more importantly, their home life was lived without reference to God.

2. An adult turning away from religion and the development of a hostile attitude towards religion in general and Christianity in particular.

Another element of the pattern seem to be that upon reaching young adulthood, by which I mean the college years, there was a conscious turning away from religion. Religion in general as a category of thought was rejected and Christianity in particular

was seen to embody all of the qualities which a right-minded person needed to reject. This element of the pattern is what is distinctly post-modern, for what is being rejected intellectually are the universalized truth claims of religion and the exclusive behaviors which result from them.

3. An experience of Christianity as a contrast to dominant society

The converts next tell of how they lived their lives happily without God or religion. Indeed, they often conceived themselves a more moral persons than Christians, whom they perceived as openly intolerant. They were “good without God” meaning that they thought themselves moral, indeed exemplars of morality because of their inclusive attitudes.

But they also report that some event occurred in their lives where they saw a different side to Christianity. They saw Christians living as a contrast society, to borrow a term from Avery Dullas. Now, listen closely, they did not agree with the contrast (indeed, in most cases they found it repellant), but they were able to admire the persons living that contrast.

4. A dialogue period

All of the people whose testimonies I read report that the experience of Christians as a contrast to society led them to enter into a friendship. That friendship became a dialogue of life. Two things are important here. The dialogue was not directly about the issues which separated them. Indeed, in the testimonies I read, if the Christian had tried to share the gospel or invite the secularist to church, it would have

driven them away. No, the dialogue period, which in all the testimonies lasted two or more years, was entirely experienced as the establishment of human communion.

5. A subtle shift – a quiet conversion

Experiencing such human communion with Christians had a profound effect. All of the converts I read describe feeling accepted as persons, in spite of the fact that they knew their new Christian friends held beliefs and values in sharp contrast to the ones that animated the convert's life. But the acceptance, which they describe as "I could tell that he liked me, even though I held different beliefs and values" became the bridge across which they could walk in their eventual conversion.

All of the stories describe the convert coming to a point of going to church. Now again, the details are important. Their new Christian friends did not bring them to church. The converts report that they had to find their way there on their own, and it had to be this way. They had to be anonymous and unmolested in their entrance to Christian worship. Interesting word "unmolested." I think it refers to the intuition that there is something overwhelming about entering into worship of a holy God. They all report that they needed to be the one responsible for their entrance. But all report that so long as they could enter, anonymous and unmolested, enter they did. And slowly, sometimes over months, they began to pray with the assembly. And one day, they realized they were speaking to God as to a person. And they knew that they had become believers.

I use belief here in the sense of ascent. It is important to see that they gave ascent to a person, not a proposition. What *Pastores Dabo Vobis* says about priestly formation is

equally true in evangelism: human communion is the basis for intellectual and spiritual communion with Christ and the Church.

6. Dramatic life reorientation

As subtle and perhaps invisible as the conversion event was in these cases, what followed for each of the testimonies was anything but subtle. The new relationship with Christ and the Church quickly reordered all other relationships. The converts describe this period as a “trainwreck” or “worse than the worst divorce.” Relationships which were the center of their lives ended in irreparable ways and with great pain.

Post-modern conversions are costly grace. Cardinal Danilou, in his descriptions of the rites of holy week speaks about the high point of the rite being the death of baptism.

The post-modern convert would want to edit that chapter and add death is preceded by a Way of the Cross and passion which produces an anguished cry of Eloi, eloi, lama sabachtani for the depth of the convert’s being as the relationship with Christ and the Church reorders all other relationships and some relationships die.

It is in this phase that the converts report that the church is most important.

Here all anonymity and control are gone. What is needed is a kind of intensive pastoral care and community support. And it is in this phase that doctrine becomes important to the new convert. One cited the Gospel of John:

“<sup>16</sup>Jesus answered them and said, ‘My teaching is not mine, but His who sent me; <sup>17</sup>if any one may will to do His will, he shall know concerning the teaching, whether it is of God, or -- I do speak from myself. <sup>18</sup>‘He who is speaking from

himself his own glory doth seek, but he who is seeking the glory of him who sent him, this one is true, and unrighteousness is not in him . . .

You see here the paradox of the role of doctrine in the new evangelization, that its effect is posterior to conversion – it has a mystegological role.

7. Ordinary but fervent Christian living in churches which have a clear identity, a clear spirituality and a clear apostolate.

Mystegogy, the final stage in Christian initiation, is also different in the post-modern conversion. Because the church has the role of contrast society, mystegogy requires Christian communities which have a clear identity, a clear method of spirituality and a clear apostolate in order to form disciples for this age. I can prove this with two examples: religious orders which have these three clear elements are having no trouble with vocations. The new ecclesial movements also show the same three elements. They have attractive power which builds credibility before a secular world.

To conclude, let me say just a few words about the ministerial dimension. In ministry, it's not enough to be right, you also have to be effective. And being effective depends on you being that human bridge Father Barron talks about, across which people can walk to encounter the Living God. As you study theology, if you would be new evangelists, remember that in addition to learning the arguments of theologians, you must also learn the skills of pastors. Cardinal George has said over and over again to the Lay Ecclesial Ministry candidates, if you get the relationships right, everything else will follow.

Brothers and sisters, we will get those human relationships right if we understand the Church as the icon in the world of the Holy Trinity. Ecclesial reality is the relationships of persons who, by their union with Jesus Christ, are caught up in the divine life of the Trinity. Ecclesial reality is union with the Logos, rationality himself, which reorders understanding to conform it to the truth of the Trinity. Ecclesial reality is a kind of charity which correctly interprets Pope Francis' statement "Who am I to judge?"

