

“WHY THIS WASTE?”:

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE “WORTHWHILENESS” OF THEOLOGY

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As I was preparing these remarks that I was “commanded” to share with you today on the inauguration of this impressive new building, I found that some words from the Gospel of Matthew kept coming back to me like an insistent refrain. “Why this waste?” the disciples asked when a woman poured expensive ointment on the Lord’s head on the eve of his passion. “It could have been sold for much and the money given to the poor.” (Mt. 26: 8-9) Why this “waste” indeed? Why, in a country where so many are poor, at a time of economic instability, political uncertainty, and environmental crisis, spend over thirty million pesos on a new building for a school of *theology*? Is thinking and talking about God, which is what theology essentially is, worth so much?

I think that our festivities today invite us to pause and take stock of our personal sense of the worth of theology. Your pres-

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ence here this morning, of course, suggests that you believe that this apparently impractical discipline called theology is important: worth the generous sharing of your resources, if you are a benefactor; worth encouragement and support, if you are a friend; worth at least a few years of intensive study, if you are a student. However, the question, especially for our students, remains: *why*? Why do you think theology is worthwhile? Why have you, who have felt in some secret place of your heart, the call to serve God in his Church, come here? Why does the study of theology matter for you personally? Or, in all honesty, *does* it matter?

You will be relieved to know, that, this morning, I will not attempt a long, systematic response to these questions, particularly since it has already been a long morning for most of you, and, more significantly, a good lunch, complete with *halo-halo* bar, awaits us. More seriously, I am convinced that we must search for the answers to these questions together, as a community, here at LST. If all I will have accomplished therefore is invited you to take these questions seriously, and awakened in you a desire to begin next school year with a discussion, not of *how* to do theology, but *why* do theology at all, I believe I will have already accomplished something.

What I hope to do instead is to take advantage of the opportunity very kindly given me by our President, Fr. Tabora, to offer a personal, but indirect response to the question of why theology is worthwhile. I say "personal," because, not being an official personage of this institution, I do not feel it is my place to pronounce official utterances on the future of LST. Thus, I will speak simply for myself, the youngest member of the faculty, who, please God, will probably be teaching here for many years—dare I say, decades?—to come; and, who, believe it or not, is *grateful*—most of the time—to have been called to this ministry by Jesuit superiors. I say "indirect" because I would like to share a bit of what I try to do in the classroom as a teacher of theology; to offer a glimpse, especially to our guests, of what actually goes on within

these LST buildings, and in this way, to indicate, somewhat obliquely, my sense of the value of the theological enterprise.

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I am a teacher of theology. What is it I try to do when I teach?

First of all, I attempt to communicate to my students my conviction that what we are handling in lectures and discussions, in papers and exams, is not just knowledge useful for ministry, but, rather, the very Word of Life (1 Jn 1: 1) uttered by God for the salvation of the world. In Jesus Christ, God has given the world, in an unimaginably costly way, not just a word of interesting information, but what Vatican II, following Trent, has rightly called *veritas salutaris* (cf. DV 7), saving truth. This is what we, students and professors, often so thoughtlessly, so casually and irreverently, handle: the saving truth that can bring about that which no other human learning or knowledge, however worthy and useful, can accomplish: the world's lasting liberation from meaninglessness, lovelessness, and death. This Word must be preserved and transmitted, in its purity and its fulness, for the life of the world, and this is what I hope to do in my teaching of theology. I make my own the words of Karl Rahner who said in an interview in 1982: "A Catholic theologian ultimately cannot strive to be particularly original: to say something which no one else has said. Rather, the theologian's obligation, duty and intent aim at guarding and interpreting the message of Jesus, the revelation of God . . ."¹

Secondly, I try to invite my students to discover the depths of this saving truth by drinking at as many sources of the Church's living tradition as possible. The Word of Life in Christ is, to bor-

¹ Paul Imhof and Hubert Biallowons, eds., Karl Rahner in Dialogue: Conversations and Interviews 1965-1982, trans. Harvey Egan (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 353.

row John Henry Newman's words, "a deep matter—you cannot take it in a teacup."² It has a boundless store of "dangerous memories" and liberating possibilities. It cannot simply be reduced to three or four statements concerning the "core of the Biblical faith"; nor can it be adequately grasped by simply memorizing a few numbers from Neuner-Dupuis. Thus, in humble imitation of my personal heroes, the great pioneers behind the renewal of Vatican II, Henri de Lubac and Yves Congar, I attempt in my modest way, to help my students practice *ressourcement*, a return to the sources. We read the inspired Word of God, Holy Scripture; we consult the Fathers of the Church; we listen to the teaching of Councils, Bishops' Conferences, Popes, ancient and modern; we learn from the wisdom of the great theologians like Augustine, Aquinas, Newman, Rahner, Lonergan; we reflect on the Church's liturgy and the devotion and piety of the faithful; we study the history of praxis and ideas in the Church; we contemplate those whom Von Balthasar called "volcanoes pouring forth molten fire from the inmost depths of revelation,"³ the saints: Therese of Lisieux, Richie Fernando, Bobby Gana, the Blessed Virgin Mary. All this we do, seeking to know and experience the limitless depth and breadth and height of what God has revealed in Christ.

Third, I try to keep as the constant horizon of all our study the real world that hungers, whether it knows it or not, for the light, love, and life of God's saving word in Christ, particularly the concrete worlds of society and Church in the Philippines and Asia. These are worlds filled with much light because of the workings of the Spirit who "blows where he will" (cf. Jn 3:8), but also with much hollowness, hatred and pain, because of the density of darkness in the human heart. The Word of Life is for the illumination, healing and liberation of these, not some imaginary or no longer

² The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman, vol. 11 (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 110.

³ Quoted on the frontispiece of Hans Urs Von Balthasar: His Life and Work, ed. David Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991).

existent, worlds. Thus, I seek to ensure that the promise and the pain, the light achieved and the abysses of darkness and hopelessness in the Philippines and Asia suffuse all our discussions; lend fire and urgency to all our investigations. The loneliness at the heart of each human being; the sufferings of the poor and the groaning of ravaged creation; the struggle for the dignity of women in the Church and society; the promise and the challenge of dialogue with the great religions of Asia; the crisis of truth, the growth of religious and ethical relativism in an increasingly globalized, pluralistic Philippines and Asia; the call to build a more participatory, democratic political culture; the ongoing struggle of reforming a Church that often fails to be the "sacrament of salvation" because of the venality, ambition, and authoritarianism of its clergy, and the passivity and the merely cultural Catholicism of its laity: these are some of "joys and hopes, grief and anxieties" (GS 1) I seek to bring into—hopefully—life-giving, light-producing encounter with the Word of Life.

Fourth, I try to promote thinking. Edward Schillebeeckx once remarked that what he learned from the great Marie-Dominique Chenu was simply this: "that 'to think' is sacred."⁴ Chenu was right. In the classroom, I openly declare myself the enemy of what I have called *orthophony*: the practice of mindless memorization of "what the Church teaches," coupled with a total inability to offer any explanation of how "what the Church teaches" could possibly be a life-giving word for anyone! This is not orthodoxy, but *orthophony*: merely *sounding* correct; and it is a description unworthy of anyone who seeks to serve the Church as a pastoral minister. I declare myself too an avowed enemy of that shallow and dangerous anti-intellectualism which regards "ideas" and "concepts" as mere "words"; which dismisses any kind of technical theological discourse that is not immediately understandable by the man or woman in the street as irrelevant and ivory-towerish.

⁴ Edward Schillebeeckx, *I am a Happy Theologian*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1994), 91.

Last year, one of our professors insisted that the fruits of theology should be "personal holiness and social commitment."⁵ I could not agree more, but with this important qualification: I believe that the first fruit of theology should be *theology*: sound thinking; an accurate, deep, critical understanding of the Word of Life. Real, burning, complex questions are being asked, which deserve careful, considered, nuanced responses. Consider the following questions: Why should the Philippine Church be as deeply involved as it is in the 1998 elections? Is Christ the savior of all peoples, even of the great majority of Asia's population which is not Christian? What is the role of women in the Church according to the plan of God? Can one still speak of an objective truth in religion and ethics in a globalized, culturally pluralistic, post-modern world? How should the Church fulfill its mission of justice building in a post-ideological, neo-liberal world? What does it mean to be a priest in a Church in which the laity are all called to ministry? Where is God in Cebu Pacific Flight 387, in El Niño, in battered wives and addicted youth? These are important questions, and simplistic, sloganish answers, pious platitudes will not do as responses.

Thus, I believe that thinking, while it is not the most important form of service in the Church, is nonetheless an indispensable service. I envision, perhaps immodestly, my theology classes as occasions when the Church does her thinking. I do not apologize for teaching and demanding an intellectual, technical theology. I hope to foster in students habits of theological inquiry as well as the capacity for intelligible, coherent discourse concerning the Word of Life. I try to promote historical exactitude, conceptual clarity, illuminative value, argumentative rigour. I hope thus to form students who will be able to respond to the hard questions that are raised by our time and culture, with the solid, satisfying theological answers they deserve.

⁵ Carlos Abesamis, S.J., "Ano Po ang Laman ng Mangkok? How [not] To Do Theology in Asia Today?" 11.

Fifth, I attempt to inspire praxis in the Church and the world, toward the building up of God's Kingdom of Life. The powerful Blanco painting that now graces our lobby perhaps expresses best what I want to say. Mr. Blanco depicts one of our most beloved traditions: the *Salubong*, the encounter on Easter morning between the Risen Lord and his sorrowing Mother. But he depicts more than that. Before you leave this building, stay awhile in front of the painting, and pay attention to its details: the glowing faces that cover that entire lower third of the painting, all so different, so individual—a toothless old woman here, a beaming Fr. Joel Tabora there—all so unmistakably Filipino, and all so luminous; the riot of cherubim in various attitudes circling the statues; the lovely profusion of chrysanthemums adorning the carriages of Jesus and Mary; the gathering light of the Eastern sky behind the statue of Jesus. All this celebrates what happens when God's life-giving Word is received by a people by the power of the Spirit (note the dove at the center of the painting!). What happens? Darkness gives way to light; listlessness, anxiety and pain are transmuted into radiant joy; divided humanity is healed into community. This is what I try to communicate, less expressively I know than Mr. Blanco, in my classes. The Word of Life that we study is God's Word for the transformation and healing of our real world; and if we proclaim and practice it—a proclamation and praxis that will always, if it is authentic, go by way of the cross—then, this world can, by God's grace, be "a place, not of chaos, of unmeaning, arbitrary violence, but a place of peace, and sense, and friendship."⁶ What then shall we do, we who have been given the privilege of growing in our understanding of the mysteries of who God is, of who Christ is, of what grace is, of what the Church is: how shall we walk, what word shall we preach, what service shall we render, what kind of Church and society shall we labor to build in Sawata and Kolambagan, in Ormoc and Cabanatuan, in Yogyakarta and Seoul, or wherever the Lord calls us to ministry?

⁶ Nicholas Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 72.

Sixth, and finally, I hope I lead my students to glimpse even a bit of the transcendent, beauty of God's truth, a beauty that I pray awakens in their hearts delight, worship, love—in short, a transformed existence. One of my most consoling experiences as a teacher of theology is watching fourth year seminarians prepare for comprehensives, slowly putting the varied pieces of their years of study together, and seeing these emerge as a beautiful, coherent, mysterious whole. In the past two years, I have often heard the words "*Ang ganda pala ng ating pananampalataya*." These are the moments, I must say, a teacher lives for: when, for his students, the texts, the dogmatic pronouncements or Biblical passages, suddenly become transparent, no longer simply words to be read or ideas to be analyzed, but windows into the heart of reality, through which one glimpses—through a glass darkly, to be sure, but glimpses truly, nonetheless—that the heart of this bewildering, heartbreaking universe is a mystery of unfailing Mercy and unutterable Love. At such moments, the words fail, the concepts are cast aside: there is only mystery, beauty, presence, silence, repentance, delight, worship, hope, love. In the *Summa*, Aquinas describes wisdom in an unforgettable phrase: *cognitio producens amorem*, a knowledge that produces, that awakens, that impels to love.⁷ This wisdom is ultimately what I hope to foster when I teach theology.

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I might summarize all I have said then thus: as a teacher of theology, I try to teach a theology that might be described by six adjectives: doctrinal, traditional, contextual, intellectual, pastoral, and sapiential. Put another way: I hope that what I am able to form in my students is an accurate, deep, loving understanding of the Word of Life, for our time, our people, our culture, for the sake of the building up of the Kingdom of God, and the Church as

⁷ Cf. *Summa Theologiae* 1, q. 64, art. 1.

the sign and servant of the Kingdom. To what extent I am able to teach such a theology, I leave to those who have been my students to say. For myself, I simply say that this is what I am trying to do and will continue to try to do, because I believe, I hope, I trust that forming future ministers of the Church in such a theology might contribute, even a little, to the fulfillment of God's redeeming plan for the world.

But allow me to add this. This new building is connected to an older set of buildings, built over thirty years ago. This reminds us, the present LST community, that all that we do here is built on the achievements of those who went before us. Coleridge put it memorably over a hundred years ago: "The dwarf sees further than the giant, when he has the giant's shoulders to mount on."⁸ I am personally, keenly aware that my generation of LST professors truly stands on the shoulders of giants. If the kind of theology I have described is what I am attempting to teach and "do" today, it is, to a large extent, because I have experienced and learnt this brand of theologizing as a student of Loyola School of Theology, from so many dedicated gifted scholars and teachers.

I would like to end, if I may, with a special word of tribute to a single professor among these: the modest, self-effacing giant of a theologian and teacher, Fr. Catalino Arévalo. We have already honored three men who have significantly shaped the beginnings and the initial life of this school: Fr. Horacio de la Costa, in whose honor this building is named; Frs. Francis Clark and Pedro de Achutegui, who have received the first San Ignacio de Loyola Medals and have lent an immediate prestige to the award by their gracious acceptance of it. But our celebration this morning would not be complete if we were not to honor, at least in word and with the sentiments of our hearts, the first *praeses* and dean of this school, who built no buildings, but more significantly, shaped the

⁸ Quoted by Nicholas Lash, "What did the Gospel Writers See?" in Priests and People (December, 1991): 453.

actual theological education and reflection which have gone on within these buildings for over a quarter of a century. On Fr. Arévalo's significant and enduring contributions to the Philippine, Asian and Universal Churches, as ITC member and as theological adviser to bishops, synods, the CBCP and the FABC, we shall not dwell for now. Let us today, simply honor him as a teacher of theology here at LST, who taught us, his students, a deep, loving understanding of the Word of Life, for the Philippines and Asia of our time, and awakened in us holy desires to be servants of the Kingdom and the Church, because of the clarity and depth of his teaching, and perhaps even more, because of the fire and passion with which he always communicated it. To paraphrase George Eliot at the end of *Middlemarch*, the good that Fr. Arévalo has done through his teaching of theology, is "incalculably diffusive,"— and that things are not so ill with the Philippine and Asian Churches owes much to his unwearying, unheralded years of simply teaching a theology that made us think, brought us to see reality differently, challenged us to serve, and captivated our hearts with its beauty and truth.

"Why this waste?" That was the question with which I began this reflection. Fr. Arévalo—his work, his influence on his students—answers better than many words perhaps, why theology is worthwhile. We, of my generation, hope to build on what we have received, and thus, to redeem the expense and the mighty labors of Fr. Joel Tabora and so many others, which have resulted in this fine building, for which we are grateful. Thank you and good morning.