

The Iconic Splendor of Truth

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For many enterprises, we can demarcate two limits: the limits that define what it is to be one involved in the enterprise and the limits of excellence attainable therein. For instance, what it is to be a chess player includes minimally that one understands the basic movements of the various parts and recognizes the ultimate aim of the game. It seems, however, that upward excellence in chess knows no bounds. John Paul II has shown, similarly, that the Christian way of life has two limits: a lower limit to fall beneath which is to alter one's ultimate aim and an upper limit which involves an ever deepening friendship with Christ and ever deepening love of neighbor.¹ Decidedly, of these two limits the upper one suggests itself as the prize. Indeed, it would be an odd thing to define oneself as a participant in some enterprise and yet not to share a desire for excellence therein. On the other hand, clarity on the defining limits is crucial to any enterprise lest confusion reign. That any creaturely excellence can always be outdone does not alter the significance of lower limits.

To comment with any remote adequacy on what makes for a Catholic University would be impossible in such short time. I suppose that, since such an enterprise necessarily consists in both a variegated set of rational inquiries and attempts at faith seeking understanding, both the lower and the positive limits would have a complex and delicately woven twofold character. However, I wish to reflect on some features of my own enterprise, theology, not pretending adequacy here either. (Hopefully, lack of adequacy will not be tantamount to inaccuracy.)

Of course, as many recognize, at this moment in western intellectual history, it is often difficult to identify the defining limits and even the prized excellence of the practice of any discipline.² Today's is a time rich in data but stammering in insight. Many of us academics are bewildered when asked (especially by the non-academic), "What is it you *do*? What are you aiming at?" Theologians, too, share this perplexity.³ Theology is the discipline of faith seeking understanding, and in this effort theology draws on the enterprises of rational inquiry, especially but not exclusively on those that consider man globally (man *qua* man), such as philosophy, literature, history, psychology, etc.⁴ If then these disciplines are in flux, theology cannot but be affected.

¹ *Veritatis splendor*. Lower limits are constituted by "negative moral norms", actions that can never have any objective justification: the directly intended taking of innocent life, the directly intended interruption of the procreative dimension of sexual intercourse, homoerotic acts, etc. It seems that further acts could be specified in the same spirit: hatred of one's neighbor, blasphemy, omission of an act both dreadfully urgent and possible of performance, etc.

² See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990) and *God, Philosophy, Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009).

³ See Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, *Foundational Theology: Jesus and the Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1985).

⁴ By no means is this list exclusive. One thinks, presently, of the great importance of biology, both in terms of the pseudo-controversy over evolution and also in terms of grave ethical issues concerning certain lines of research. (I say 'pseudo-controversy' because the proper place of a theologian in the 'debate' over evolution ought to be that of a spectator, unless he happens *also* to be a biologist. It seems to me that the discussion of evolution is a

But sheer flux without insight, what John Paul II called a “maelstrom of data” (John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, art. 81) does not seem to satisfy the appetite for intelligence. It seems that the human longing is for something penetrating and not merely phenomenal, something enduring and not merely ephemeral, something embracing and not merely specialized. Genuine insight would not be untrue to the phenomena – otherwise it would not be insight – yet neither would it rest therein. It seems that these considerations among others led John Paul to encourage philosophers to strive again for a comprehensive account of the whole, for an account that aims to be true, for an account of that which *is* (*Fides et ratio*, arts. 81–83). Precisely by these characteristics, such an account is attuned to three questions that man asks through the ages: who am I, where did I come from, and where am I going (*Fides et ratio*, art. 1 and passim).

Theology, too, can benefit by a return to these three questions. For the theologian has a great responsibility, being somewhat of a custodian of the Divine Truth, a saving truth, a truth to meet these enduring, these deep, these all-embracing questions. In the midst of the chaos in which theology almost necessarily finds itself today, John Paul’s exhortation to philosophers seems apropos, and theologians would be wise to benefit from and themselves undertake (insofar as this is possible for them) a rational inquiry aimed at a true and comprehensive account of what is. In taking up this exhortation, the theologian has a priceless resource on which to draw – his faith. Despite the chaos of the rational disciplines, there still rings out clearly the basic message of Christian faith, handed on through the ages.⁵ This basic message helps further clarify certain defining characteristics of the Catholic theological enterprise. An embrace of the principles of faith constitutes the minimally defining characteristics of this enterprise. Such an embrace is eminently personal, both in its interior spirit and in its object.

Now, to choose to opt out of one or more of these principles of faith is to choose to opt out of the very discipline itself; it would be analogous to choosing to move the chess pieces whithersoever one wills regardless of the defining characteristics of the game. Such a choice casts a double shadow on the Treasure of which theology is a servant custodian. The Word made flesh is that infinite yet astoundingly particular treasure, a truly infinite treasure. To embrace the principles of faith is, ultimately, to rest one’s mind on his merciful bosom, for these principles are the articulation of the Mystery which he is in his person, in his words, and in his actions (*Dei Verbum*, art. 4).⁶ So, to choose to opt out of one or more of these principles is, ostensibly, to cast

properly biological, paleontological, and also philosophical matter. The theologian who is not a fundamentalist understands that the biblical authors had no interest *qua* biblical authors in such questions; rather, they are interested in ascribing the ultimate causality to God and, to man, the character of being in the image of God, being the beloved of the Divine. There are, to be sure, a few matters of theological concern touching on evolutionary issues, though not on the core issue: the origin of the soul and the original unity of the human race. Catholic faith holds that the soul itself is the product neither of evolution nor of sexual intercourse. Further, at least presently, it *seems* that the biblical revelation teaches the original unity of the human race in a single pair, but this observation of Pius XII, *Humani generis*, is not *eo ipso* an infallible judgment.)

⁵ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, capable of the utmost refinement and nuance, points to the simple faith of the people, a “common knowledge, which comes from baptism, [and] is not subject to a higher interpretation” (see his essay “Questions about the Structure of Theology,” available in Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987], p. 330).

⁶ That he is God stretches me up to heaven, that he became man dumfounds me and consoles me, that he died for my sins as an expiation in his blood brings me to tears of repentance and joy, that he breathes out his forgiving Spirit refreshes me, that he rose from the dead and left the tomb empty of bones astounds and buoys my

a shadow on the One whom one is to disclose by words. Less ostensibly, so to chose casts a shadow on the very manner of disclosure intrinsic to the enterprise. For faith comes by hearing not by rational inquiry, and what is heard is the truth proclaimed throughout the ages: God so loved the world that he gave his only Son as an expiation in his blood for our sins, so that whoever believes in him may journey towards salvation and sing to the Father's glory that Jesus Christ is Lord. If I cast a shadow on this manner of disclosure – the handing on and hearing of the rule of faith – I choose to control the one who gave himself to me as Gift. The fabric of this Gift, then, is threatened through and through because, if man is the measure of all things, then how can a transcendent standard remain to protect this fabric from being torn asunder when it is out of season? The fabric is especially threatened since it is not woven of evident reasons. The necessary truths of which it treats far exceed the limits of human thought, and the entire economy of salvation is a matter both contingent and *sui generis*.

Suffice it to say, the double shadow cast by such a choice serves as a reminder to theologians to press their ears to the chest of Jesus Christ and to listen to his marvelous voice. This very act promises to be the beginning of life, since what dawns on the mind thereby is the deep mercy of God in the infinitely rich simplicity of the man of Galilee. Contemplating this wonderful face, the theologian is called to disclose this mystery through the use of human reason in its manifold pursuits.

Disclosures that remain true to the defining characteristics of the discipline add light to light though different they be, *because* different they be.⁷ Moreover, if they are marked by a comprehensive view that penetrates to the Sacred Heart of the matter, they allow Christ himself to appear in his genuine truth. Now one disclosure, now another and another. When light adds to light, each leads back to the Father of lights from whom they came, and everything that rises must converge. This is why, I suppose, John the Evangelist was not anxious about the veracity and fruitfulness of his Gospel when he admitted, "The world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (Jn 21:25) if every truth about Jesus were written. For John, it sufficed if he portrayed enough to disclose Jesus Christ in his greatness and lowliness as manifest through the disclosive windows of pericopes. The Gospels themselves in their selectivity and style show us the limits of human speech. Notwithstanding, as Vatican II teaches, they "firmly, faithfully and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures" (DV, 11). In fact, the Scriptures, in their combination of truthfulness and selectiveness, in some sense mirror the iconic character of the face of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, the Word through whom the world was made, took on *one* human face, lived in *one* place, say with *one* pair of eyes, and worked with one set of hands. Infinite truth spoken concretely. This icon could not but speak more eloquently than in the death by which he purchased life for us sinners; here, displaying the divine love and offering up the price of our salvation, the icon itself breaks apart – It can sustain no more (Hans Urs von Balthasar). Scriptures are the manifold tracings of this living icon, and theologies are the manifold tracings

hope, that he lays out for me the *way* of following him (Mt 5–7) challenges me. No doubt few if any theologians explicitly know all that the Church has taught. There is a difference between (a) not explicitly knowing and (b) denying or even refusing to affirm. Further, it would seem that it is the theologian's responsibility to inform himself about the explicit contours of the "simple faith". After all, "It is your face that I seek" (Ps 27:8).

⁷ See Robert Sokolowski, *Christian Faith and Human Understanding: Studies on the Eucharist, Trinity, and the Human Person* (Washington: The Catholic University of American Press, 2006).

of scriptural tracings. Everything is in order if, in the grace of the Spirit, it leads back to this living icon of the invisible God and Father of us all.

As the Christian moral life is suspended between two limits, a lower limit constituted by negative moral norms and a higher limit constituted by the upward call in Christ, the beauty of the theological enterprise is suspended between two limits, the articles of faith and intelligible articulation of the divine mystery. Because this mystery is both simple and yet infinitely variegated – for the Word became *flesh*, and man is a microcosm of all that is created, and what is created is infinitely analyzable – the theological task is by definition impossible of exhaustive completion. But if St. Bonaventure is correct, the final task of theology is the stilling of one's soul, the setting aside of all articulation, the silent gaze of the soul in absolute darkness, the awaiting of the Only Word that fully speaks the Father's truth.⁸ It is here that all the varied activities of the theological enterprise find their final rest. It is here, too, that one finds the ultimate reference point in that laboring love of the poorest neighbor that *must* flow forth from a faith that is genuine, from a faith that does not make the believer a liar. It is here, too, that the three urgent questions that arose from my particular vantage point but that speak to all men of all ages – who am I, where did I come from, where am I going – find true and lasting peace. Here, the fire and the rose are one.

⁸ See Bonaventure, *Journey of the Mind to God*, and Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1989).