

The Responsibility of Theology for Spiritual Growth and Pastoral Care

Philip Endean SJ

'It seems that theology has no significant responsibility for spiritual development and pastoral care: at best, theology is a harmless distraction which entertains some Christians endowed with certain kinds of temperament; at worst, theology is a positive impediment to proper Christian formation and growth'. So a Thomist *videtur quod non* might begin, and the documentation would be easy to find. We might, for example, quote the famous adage, 'by love he may be caught and held, but by thinking never'¹. We could reflect on how pastoral supervisors often try to get trainee ministers to respond to 'what is really going on', and not to think too quickly in terms of articulated theology. Again, many of us will know good priests who will tell us that seminary training in theology was something they survived. They began real learning on the job, on the basis of simple goodness and common sense. Theology is something of which they are in awe, or nervous, or suspicious; it remains remote from their awareness.

Sed contra: we should always be able to provide 'an accounting for the hope that is in us; the bishop, the prime pastor,' must have a firm grasp of the word that is trustworthy in accordance with the teaching' (1 Peter 3:15b; Titus 1.9). We need therefore a *responsio* that engages with the objections, admitting their force, but somehow suggesting a more positive account of what theology might contribute to good pastoral practice.

Ministry and Relationship

I begin with a story. Some years ago, I spent a few months in Germany, working in a home for people with learning difficulties. One of my tasks was to preside at a Sunday liturgy open to all the residents, and I found myself using all the latitude allowed by the *Directory for Children's Masses* and indeed a little more. Homilies and instructions required me to be inventive: they had to be interactive, concrete, visual. Abstractions did not work, as I discovered one Advent liturgy when I asked the assembly who they thought Jesus's father might be. I was regularly reduced to beginning the liturgy by asking the question, 'what colour clothes have I got on today'. Towards the end of my stay, I found

myself sharing a public bus with one of the young adults in the home. When he saw me, the young man began, unstoppably, on a loud rendition of material from my homilies. One part of me, amid the embarrassment, was flattered, in that there was not much I had said over the four months I had been in the home that did not come into the recital somewhere. But all the gimmicks were completely mixed up: he had retained no sense whatever of the instruction those gimmicks had been chosen to promote.

There is a certain sort of piety that would interpret this incident in terms of the foolishness of God being wiser than human wisdom: here is the theologian being subjected to some chastening realism about how little their learning actually achieves. But such an interpretation is superficial, and does not do justice to what was happening. The young man's response to me, translated into more polite speech, might come out like this: 'don't get any ideas that you actually managed to teach us anything, because you didn't: but we can see you tried hard, we acknowledge that, and we appreciate that; it was good you tried'. If that is correct, then the young man was affirming the responsible use of theology. Those liturgies happened in the way they did because of an effort of theological reinterpretation. They were informed by a sense of how this congregation was different from other groups, in ways that needed to be reflected in its celebration. The Church's law, informed by good sacramental theology and catechetics, makes generous, if little-known, provision for such groups, and we had availed ourselves amply of it. The young man was acknowledging that the faith had been brought to him in a way that recognised his difference, and consequently he was able to participate in that faith in his own distinctive, bizarrely endearing, way.

The responsibility of theology towards spirituality and pastoral care is only secondarily a matter of providing content to be learnt and understood. Theology's primary responsibility in these contexts is to the unpredictable, uncontrollable realities of grace and discipleship which the gospel and Christian tradition catalyse. Theology services pastoral care and spiritual development responsibly when it helps ministers forge and maintain creative pastoral relationships, respectful of difference — relationships that enable others to appropriate their identity under God.

Quite consciously, this claim echoes a standard principle in any textbook of pastoral counselling: that the principal means through which growth occurs is the relationship, the fact that one person is simply there for another, affirming the other's reality and giving them space to flourish. The use of theological imagination is an important way in which such commitment can be expressed. Moreover, just as in

counselling any advice or instruction is far less important than nurturative presence, so in this theological case, what actually fosters growth is simply that the honest effort is being made to communicate; the content of the message is secondary.

The incident also illustrates a principle that is more distinctively theological. The reality of ministry, the action of God through ministry, involves not only what the minister does, but also how the 'recipient' responds. The point is an extension of familiar principles: the connections between a Christology focussed on Jesus of Nazareth and a universal theology of grace, between the sending of the Son at one point in history and the action of God's spirit throughout the creation. Neither can rightly be understood except in the context of the other.

Documents such as the *Directory on Children's Masses* are often understood as exercises in strategies called 'adaptation' or 'accommodation'. Such language needs to be interpreted carefully. It can easily suggest that the existing and established expressions of Christianity are privileged: any change in these provoked by human need is some kind of concession to weakness. The truth is otherwise: the central focus of our fidelity is not what is already established, but rather the catholic unity that will come into being when God is all in all. We only understand our tradition aright when we see it as pointing us towards a reality that is ever greater. 'Adaptation' and 'accommodation' are legitimate terms only if understood purely pragmatically or pedagogically — what we adapt are the conventional patterns of response and expression that we have hitherto developed. The criteria for pastoral judgments must be predicated on an understanding of Christianity as, in its very essence, permanently generative of new response; our primary responsibility is to the new. Our fidelity to existing tradition, however absolute, is always only in function of that primary responsibility.

Openness and Self-Effacement

This responsibility of theology to God's action among us might be specified further in terms of two attitudes, attitudes which might seem to be in contradiction, but which are in fact complementary. I name these *self-effacing openness*, and *self-reflective fidelity*. The requirement for what I am calling self-effacing openness follows from the principle that Christian communication demands a response, and remains theologically incomplete unless and until that response occurs. Vatican II's decree *Sacrosanctum Concilium* describes the liturgy as 'the high point towards which the activity of the Church is directed, and the source from which all its power flows out' (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n.

10). We have all suffered from liturgies in which the presider's convictions and spirituality have been too obtrusive. Good liturgical ministry demands a style that makes others feel at ease, and consequently a restraint of one's own devotional enthusiasms, however good and healthy these latter in themselves might be. The same can be said, *mutatis mutandis*, of the theologian's contribution to the Church's ministry.

Moreover, in presenting the liturgy as the primary means of Christian communication, the council is also privileging a style of proclamation that leaves the process open-ended, inviting continuation. Vatican II's famous 'participation' must be interpreted not just as an exhortation to join in the singing, but in terms of this rich theological vision: what is at stake is a participation in the mystery that is not just 'aware', but also 'active' and 'fruitful' (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, nn. 6, 13). This participation will normally take the form, not of a repetition of doctrine, but rather of an enriched moral and imaginative life.

Some other manifestations of this attitude are obvious and do not need to be laboured, such as clarity in communication, and the avoidance of unnecessary jargon. A text of Ignatius Loyola's, however, in which he is describing how seminarians should be trained in 'helping their neighbours' adds a further point:

Just as with what has been said one's neighbours are helped to livewell, similarly one must try to understand what helps to die well, and the way of conducting oneself at a point so important for obtaining or losing the ultimate end, eternal happiness. (*Const IV.8.7* [412]).

This explicit mention of ministry to the dying is at one level merely pragmatic: prospective priests should know how to behave themselves at a deathbed. But it can also be read as making a deeper demand. Knowing how to die well is something we can never grasp in advance; we can only try to understand it. Death brings us up against our personal incompleteness; for people of faith, it demands a complete surrender of self to a reality we cannot control, and it is because of this symbolic significance of death that it is 'a point so important for obtaining or losing the ultimate end, eternal happiness'. All too easily a commitment to religion, especially an intellectual commitment, may serve as a subtle defence against this ultimate vulnerability, in ways that are spiritually corrosive both for ourselves and for those to whom we minister. Theologians have a particular responsibility to practise asceticism against that unconscious tendency, to cultivate in advance the trust in God that marks a good death, and to let that trust become habitual, part of their identity. Otherwise, we may hinder rather than promote the

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work of God.

One manifestation, therefore, of theological responsibility in pastoral care is a cultivated awareness that our teaching can never be more than part of what God is doing in our encounters. Another lies in an awareness of the variety of God's action, as a means of promoting openness to new possibilities. For Ignatius, an apostle, dealing with 'so great a diversity of people over such diverse areas', must have thought beforehand about what helps and hinders ministry in different situations:

And although this is something which only the anointing of the Holy Spirit, and the prudence which God our Lord imparts to those who trust in his divine majesty, can teach, at least the way can be opened with a few hints, that are helpful towards, and dispose people for, the effect which divine grace has to bring about. (*Const* , IV.8.8 [414])

The principle can also be suggestive as regards theology's responsibility to articulate Christian possibilities. The study of Christian history can remind us of how things have at other times been otherwise — a reminder that makes it easier for us to overcome our inertia, and to counteract our tendency to make an absolute of the familiar. Moral theology and canon law, if we are committed enough to look, provide us with a tradition of sensitive casuistry empowering us to respond to people whose situations are difficult, or for whom standard responses are inappropriate. Theology can also serve to cultivate our sense of Christianity's universal import, our awareness of how Christian truth must in principle be distinguishable from locally conventional forms of expression, from this particular culture's sense of the religious.

Fidelity and Reflectiveness

This paper draws on therapeutic concepts in order to interpret pastoral ministry and spiritual development. There is no question here of a full defence of that strategy against the charges of implicit decadence and self-indulgence. But what I have to say about the second key virtue I want to highlight, that of *self-reflective fidelity*, may allay some of the concerns informing such charges. What, in a secular context, we term the counsellor's unconditional regard can appear insipid and lax. Within a Christian pastoral context, however, this helping stance appears as unambiguously demanding, as a love filled with Christian significance, as an expression of God's irrevocable acceptance of the human, symbolized in the cross. Ministry mediates an empowering affirmation, and as such the only basis on which challenges to heroic risk and self sacrifice can be issued and heard healthily.

It follows, therefore, that authentic pastoral care presupposes an

unconditional trust in the power of Christian tradition to mediate life to the world. Consequently, one of theology's responsibilities regarding pastoral care is to maintain integral and uncompromising witness to the faith handed on. Heard in the context of the helping relationship which is Christian ministry, this talk of absolute and integral fidelity no longer appears constricting or naive, but rather as a pointer to an indispensable enabling condition for any Christian growth. The relationships between fidelity and creativity, between the word of doctrine and the response which is holiness of life—between rootedness in tradition and sensitivity to the other — these are relationships of mutual dependence, not of conflict. We are faithful to the word entrusted because, — perhaps only because— it guarantees a divine action at work in all who might hear it; conversely, it is only an unconditional fidelity to tradition that can open us to the realities of grace beyond conventional boundaries.

Such fidelity to tradition, however, also has a critical element. The selflessness which pastoral care demands should never be simple self-forgetfulness. If it is to be truly self-giving, it should generally be supported by an ascetical self-reflection, raising awareness of how good will can be masking inappropriate forms of unconscious self-centredness. Thus the confrontation with human reality experienced in pastoral ministry becomes a means through which the minister also grows and matures: as Ignatius puts it, the new confessor should normally, having heard a confession, reflect on himself, to see if he has been lacking in anything and so as to help himself move forward (*Const.* 4.8.D [407.4]). What begins as a reticence about one's own convictions for the sake of the other's freedom can become a pedagogical means through which those convictions are purified and deepened, and through which discipleship grows.

Even in the individual context envisaged by Ignatius, theological reflection plays a part in the process; moreover, once again, the point applies more widely to the Church's mission as a whole. As the Church's message interacts with a bewildering range of wisdoms developed outside formal Christianity —modern historical awareness, science and technology, the critiques of religion arising from the great masters of suspicion, other religious traditions— we are challenged to renegotiate our appropriation of Christian tradition. The famous distinction between the substance of faith and its conditional expression can never be made exhaustively; such talk, rather, points us towards a permanent process of discernment, improvisation, and reinterpretation. Here theology has obvious responsibilities, even though we can never specify in advance how they are to be exercised.

Beyond Idealism

So far, then, I have tried to sketch a vision of theology's responsibility to pastoral care that presents fidelity to the tradition and openness to new forms of its development as complementary aspects of the one reality. What I have said shares a weakness common in writing inspired by Ignatius: a tendency to present him as holding contradictory values together, in a style that can come across to contemporary readers as triumphalist and alienating. There is a sharp question to be addressed regarding how theology can responsibly help a predicament often faced by people of pastoral sensitivity: that of a conflict between their own best sense of how to minister and the directives of authority.

The conflict arises because we are all too easily captivated by positivistic approaches to truth. So often, theological sanity appears as an unstable, insipid, liberal compromise between absolute obedience to an obscurantist authority and common sense. We have to refuse these dilemmas, and promote instead a vision in which the poles of these conflicts appear complementary. Thus, a major responsibility of theology today is to uphold the priority of the relational in our understanding of knowledge, truth, and reality. If feminism, postmodernism's critique of the Cartesian ego, or Vatican II *communio* ecclesiology help us to recognise this responsibility, well and good. But the central point derives quite simply from a jargon-free doctrine of God as creator. If God is creator, then relationship to God must be the primary category in any metaphysical account of any creature; and if God is creator of all things, then nothing, ultimately, can be understood except in relationship to everything else. The point applies to Catholic dogma. The theology of original sin, for example, can never be a matter of playing off the findings of modern science against mainstream Church tradition: rather, it involves the permanent quest for modes of understanding that enable us to hold together truths of different kinds and to leave space for further, at this point unimaginable, development. By the same token, when our ministry leads us into situations where we feel trapped, say between a firm directive that women should not give a homily, and a congregation for whom this directive appears sexist and demeaning, at least we should recognise that the conflict is not between fidelity and openness, but between two different aspects of Catholic fidelity. Fully Catholic loyalty involves other things besides respect for due authority.

More generally, just as our Christological proclamation proscribes understandings of the divine and human as mutually exclusive, so the dynamic, missionary nature of the Church must lead us to articulate visions of respect for authority and openness to human reality that are

compatible, indeed mutually conditioned. Self-effacing openness may lead us to make common cause with many groups that in one way or another are marginalized, but this openness, radical and revolutionary though it may sometimes be, must be motivated by a desire to enhance and extend Catholic *communio*, a condition which proscribes, say, collusion with racism or with versions of liberation theology that deny the trustworthiness of any human social organization whatever. Conversely, fidelity to authority is conditional on that authority effectively mediating God's life-giving acceptance of human beings, and nourishing the life of grace. Once again, we can quote Ignatius, this time in a letter to Jesuits who would have to deal with Protestants:

They should defend the Apostolic See and its authority, and attract people towards true obedience to it, in such a way as not to lose credibility, as 'papists' ,through ill-judged partisanship. On the contrary, their zeal in countering heresy must be of such a quality as rather to reveal love for the heretics themselves and a compassionate desire for their salvation.²

What are our responsibilities when we suspect that authority is failing to meet the conditions implied here? Nothing is served by a version of love for the Church which prevents us, *a priori*, from acknowledging that its actions may be doing real harm, and simply assumes that there is something wrong with our perceptions. On the contrary, loyalty in such situations involves doing whatever is possible to stop the harm. In practice, this is likely to entail a tentative middle course between confrontation and keeping the relationship open, depending on obligations to other parties, marked by an acceptance that there are limits to what can be done. We also need to keep hope alive. If the gospel is true, life in the Church of Christ can never, however painful it might feel now, be permanently intolerable. Moreover, the reign of God, assured though its coming may be, cannot be understood except in connection with the messy human reality which is the ambiguous Church of today. Maintaining hope in such a vision may, on occasion, become very difficult, but it is also a Christian obligation. Theology has a responsibility to help Christians meet that obligation, not least by upholding relational approaches to truth and reality rather different from those prevalent in mainstream Western culture.

Responding to the Objections

The Thomist structure of this paper requires us to take up once again the 'objections', the voices suggesting that theology has no significant responsibility to spiritual development and pastoral care. Three sorts of

example were named in the opening paragraph: the spiritual teacher who denies our power to know God; the pastoral supervisor who claims to encourage her students to unlearn theology; and the experienced pastor whose experience of theology has been neither personally nor professionally helpful.

It is common for spiritual authors, even responsible ones, to downplay the importance of knowledge. The precise interpretation of such claims depends on context, and is often controverted. (For a fine example of the lively contemporary discussion on this issue, see Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, Cambridge University Press, 1995). Minimally, however, such claims in general are reminding us only that there is more to the Christian life than reflective assent to truth; the author of *The Cloud* is not denying the importance of doctrine, nor the possibility that reflective theology might foster rather than constrict openness to the mystery of God's action among humanity.

Appropriate pastoral care depends on accurate and sensitive perception of situations, a skill which the academic study of theology might have left underdeveloped, or even harmed. When responsible supervisors speak of getting their students to 'move beyond theology', their language is imprecise. They are not in fact denying that Christian tradition provides an ultimate and definitive resource for interpreting human life; rather they are striving to overcome the limitations, which may be structural, of how clerics or academics typically appropriate that tradition. Theological resources never provide us with all we need for theologically responsible interpretation and action, and religious professionals will always need help in perceiving this fact. Nevertheless, theology in the narrow sense remains responsible for providing a distinctive, inalienable, and necessary contribution.

As for the pastors who claim to have been effective despite rather than because of their academic training in theology, it must be said that they probably remain hampered by a conventional theology. Either their care is in reality less flexible and less accommodating than it should be, and under pressure they are reduced to peddling the catechism when something more flexible is required. Or their sensitivity to particular situations is accompanied by a nagging and false feeling that such sensitivity is not theologically legitimate, a guilt that might have quite significant negative effects, and all the more so for being unrecognised. Or again, they may be expressing a disillusion, not to be disallowed *a priori* as manifesting a lack of faith, at how authoritative statements can seem insensitive to the needs of the people they serve.

Bread for the world

For the last word, I return to a child with learning difficulties. Ralf was 11; he was rather brighter than the other children in the unit, and we had evolved a ritual whereby once a week he would come with me to explore parts of the home he would normally not be allowed into, culminating with a visit to my flat. As his first communion was impending, it was suggested that on one of these excursions I should take him into the sacristy: 'Show him what you do. Try and get him to understand a bit about it'. So, when we got to the sacristy, I opened a box of hosts, and said, 'here's some bread'. 'Bread', he replied. 'Now, when we come to Church, and when I say those special prayers over it, it's not really bread anymore', I continued hopefully. 'Bread', came the reply. 'It becomes Our Lord, it becomes Jesus', I tried. 'Bread', once again. At this point, I gave up with a sense of duty done. I sent him out to the main chapel to explore the organ, and packed things up. But as I emerged from the sacristy myself, I found that he was not fooling around with the organ at all, but that he had grasped the lectern, and was saying quite loudly: 'Gott, Kreuz, Gott, Kreuz, Gott, Kreuz'.

Perhaps Ralf was just playing an imitation game; in pastoral care we never know what effect our words have had. Equally, pastoral care also involves an openness to God's action in others that can cut right across all our expectations, just as Jesus's cross permanently subverts our sense of who God might be. A responsible theology is at the service of a divine subversion, a subversion drawing us always into new forms of *communio*.

- 1 *The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works*, translated by Clifton Wolters (London: Penguin, 1978), ch. 6.
- 2 *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* (hereafter *Const*), IV.8 [400–414]. Translations from this work are my own, but with help from the published renderings into English by George E. Ganss, and into German by Peter Knauer. This text may be the only example of an author whose primary interests were in spirituality and pastoral care seriously addressing the question of what a university theology can contribute to these enterprises.
- 3 Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Personal Writings*, translated and edited by Joseph A. Munitiz and Philip Endean (London: Penguin, 1996), 234.