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The Faith of a Theologian

Avery Dulles

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Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J.

Marianist Award Lecture/2004

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UNIVERSITY of



DAYTON

THE FAITH OF A THEOLOGIAN

by AVERY CARDINAL DULLES, S.J.

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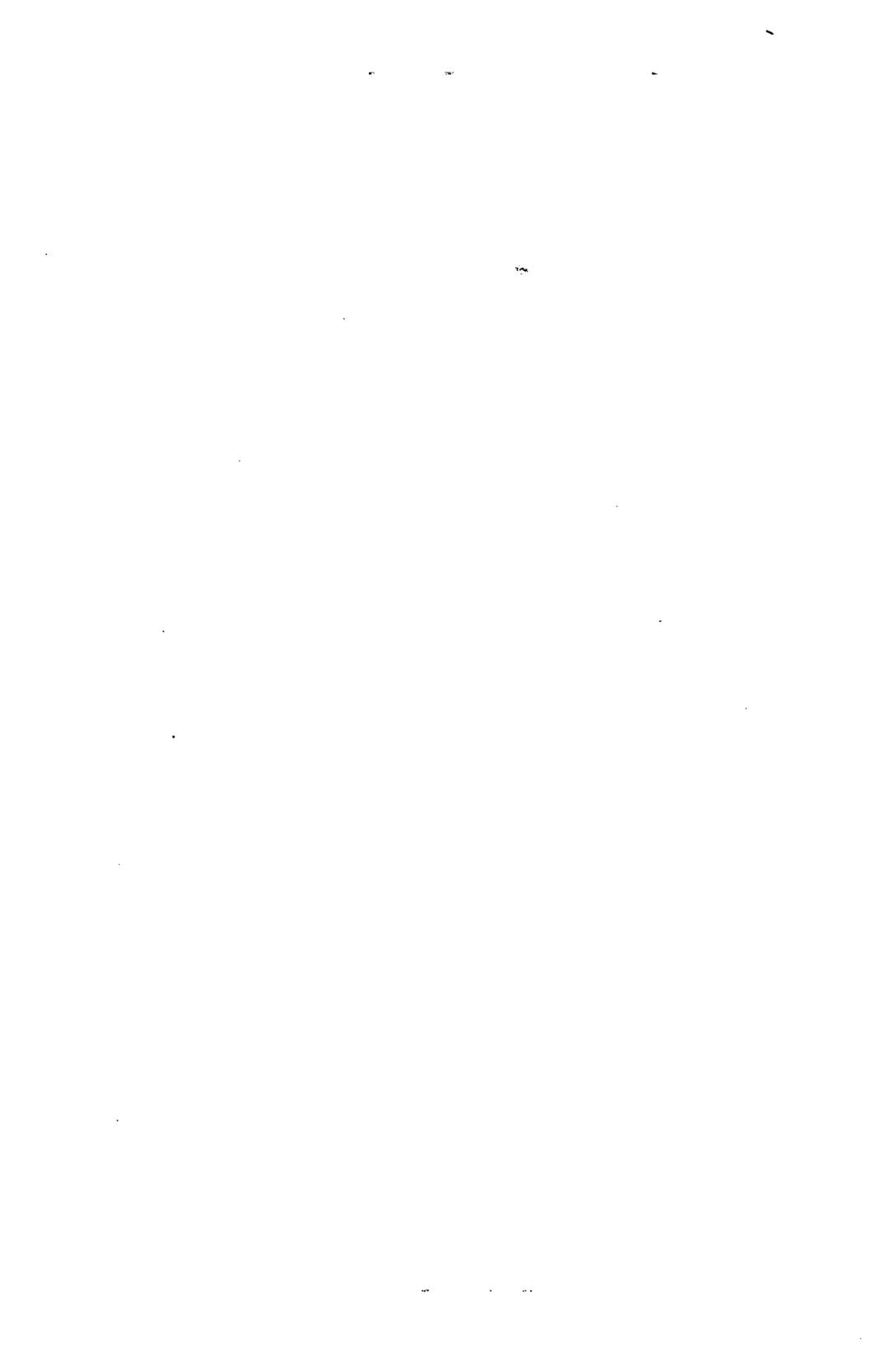
Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J., an internationally known author and lecturer, is currently the Laurence J. McGinley Professor of Religion and Society at Fordham University, a position he has held since 1988. Cardinal Dulles received the doctorate in Sacred Theology from the Gregorian University in Rome in 1960. Before coming to Fordham, he served on the faculty of Woodstock College from 1960 to 1974 and that of The Catholic University of America from 1974 to 1988. He has been a visiting professor at colleges and universities in the United States and abroad.

The author of over 700 articles on theological topics, Cardinal Dulles has published twenty-two books including *Models of the Church* (1974), *Models of Revelation* (1983), *The Assurance of Things Hoped For: A Theology of Christian Faith* (1994), *The New World of Faith* (2000), and *Newman* (2002). His book *The Splendor of Faith: The Theological Vision of Pope John Paul II* was revised in 2003 for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the papal election.

Past President of both the Catholic Theological Society of America and the American Theological Society, Cardinal Dulles has served on the International Theological Commission and as a member of the United States Lutheran/Roman Catholic Dialogue. He is presently an advisor to the Committee on Doctrine of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. In 2001 he was created a Cardinal of the Catholic Church by Pope John Paul II, the first American theologian who is not a bishop to be named to the College of Cardinals.



The following lecture was given at the University of Dayton on the occasion of the presentation of the 2004 Marianist Award to Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J., September 8, 2004.



THE FAITH OF A THEOLOGIAN

In the letter inviting me to accept the Marianist Award for the year 2004, your President, Dr. Curran, suggested that I might take the occasion to speak of the relationship of faith to my own scholarly work. The proposal immediately captured my fancy since faith and theology have been, so to speak, the two poles of my existence. The subject, besides, has considerable importance for our time and place, because many of the difficulties we experience in Church and society are due to the impoverishment of faith or to theology that is not in harmony with faith.

From their first beginnings my religious convictions have been intimately bound up with my intellectual life. In my prep school days, whatever faith I had was eroded by instructors, assigned readings, and personal study. The evidence available to me seemed to indicate that if God existed at all, there was no real function for such a being. Everything seemed to be explicable in principle by natural causes and human agency. The study of human and cosmic origins, I believed, had done away with any need for the hypothesis of a Divine Creator or of a Provident Governor of the Universe. The materialistic evolutionism that captivated me in those years is still widespread in our day and seriously harmful to faith.

In my first years in college the question that continually haunted me was whether my life had any real meaning. Were human beings with their rationality misfits in the universe? Was reason a source of alienation in a universe that existed without meaning or purpose? I was almost prepared to admit that it was foolish to ask the question why anything existed, since objective reasons were a figment of the mind. But my study of Greek philosophy rescued me from this dismal conclusion. Plato gave good grounds for holding that mind, not matter, was at the origin of all things. Aristotle made it clear that the laws of reason were in conformity with those of being. What was absurd in logic was impossible in reality. From this it followed that there was a correlation between being and intelligibility. The more being a thing had, the more intelligible it was. Matter, as the lowest grade of being, was only minimally intelligible. In this way I was able to turn materialism on its head.

I was particularly concerned with the moral order. Was it reasonable to respect the rights of others when it did not suit one's own convenience? Could I be morally obliged to sacrifice my own advantage and even my own life for the sake of some higher good? Plato convinced me that such sacrifices could be commend-

able and indeed mandatory. It was always better, he said, to suffer evil than to do evil. As soon as I accepted that principle I became convinced that the moral order had a transcendent source. An absolute obligation could come only from an absolute being. And it seemed reasonable to hold, as Plato surmised, that virtue would be rewarded and vice punished in a future life. The logic of Plato's position pointed to something very like the Christian God. Right reason therefore opened up for me the path to faith.

Although I took several philosophy courses in college, I was not a philosophy major. My field of concentration was the cultural history of medieval and Renaissance Europe. This branch of study made me conscious that all the cultural and political institutions of the West were deeply indebted to the great Christian civilization of the first millennium. That civilization was built on two pillars: the natural wisdom of Greece and Rome and the revealed religion of the Bible. The combination of the two was immeasurably richer than either taken in isolation. Biblical revelation in many ways completed and confirmed the philosophical probings of Greece and Rome. Conversely, the early Christians, seeking to understand what they held by faith, received inestimable help from the wisdom of pre-Christian antiquity.

During my four years in college I did not take a single course in religion or theology, but I learned a good deal about both through history, literature, and the arts. I found deep spiritual nourishment in reading Augustine, Bernard, Thomas Aquinas, and Dante. In my senior year I wrote a thesis that was published the following year as my first book: a study of the Italian lay theologian, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, in relation to the Scholastic tradition.¹ As I did my research for this thesis I found myself bitten by the theological bug. My supreme interest would never again be anything but theology.

Attracted though I was toward the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, I had to admit that the past could not be resurrected. But I was thrilled to discover that it had never really died. Much of what I admired in pre-Reformation Europe was still present and vibrant in the Catholic Church. As a college undergraduate I discovered the writings of Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain, two living French Thomist philosophers. I read as many books by each of them as I could find, sometimes in the French original before the translations were available. Shunning antiquarianism, these two thinkers were well versed not only in medieval but also in modern and contemporary thought. They pointed out how modern philosophy had lost its way and fallen victim to individualism and skepticism. I came to look upon Immanuel Kant as the crucial figure who marked the death of metaphysics and the birth of the positivism, historicism, pragmatism and subjectivism of later centuries.

Harvard College, where I was studying, was in no way a Catholic institution, but the professors under whom I studied did not disguise their admiration for figures such as Gilson and Maritain. Gilson had taught at Harvard several years earlier and had delivered one of the principal lectures at the University's tercentenary celebration in 1935.

Gilson and Maritain were only two of a great cloud of witnesses. To my delight I discovered a Catholic bookstore and lending library where I was able to find an ample supply of literature, especially by writers of the Catholic Renaissance that had been thriving in England since the days of G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc. Each weekend I would borrow an armful of books by authors such as C. C. Martindale, E. I. Watkin, Ronald Knox, Martin D'Arcy, and Arnold Lunn. They convinced me that the wisdom of Catholicism could make a much needed contribution to the world in our day.

In addition to my historical studies at Harvard and my personal reading in contemporary Catholic thought, a third stream fed into my conversion: the actual life of the Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The Catholic parishes were bustling with activity. Sunday Masses were crowded, and weekday Masses early each morning were well attended by ordinary people on their way to work. Special occasions such as Holy Week were celebrated with great solemnity - conducted, of course, in Latin. I vividly remember one Sunday evening when I stumbled by accident upon a service that turned out to be the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. A large congregation of working-class people was singing Latin hymns such as the "*O Salutaris*" and the "*Pange Lingua*," which I recognized as the work of Thomas Aquinas. Here, most evidently, was the Church to which I must belong!

I have spoken at greater length than I intended of the process by which I came to the Church, but those years were formative in a way that no others could be for me. For most of us, I suspect, our attitudes and convictions are basically formed by our experiences before the age of 22. However that may be, I must say that my own perspectives on faith and reason were shaped during my undergraduate days. I do not see how I could give a proper account of my theological orientations without reference to this background.

Bypassing my time in law school and the Navy, I pass now to my years as a Jesuit, which fall into two segments: before and after my completion of graduate studies. I studied philosophy from 1948 to 1951 and taught that subject at Fordham University from 1951 to 1953. The philosophy that I learned and tried to teach was a form of neo-Thomism not unlike that of Gilson and Maritain. As a philosophical system it was closely correlated with Catholic faith. This harmony strikes me as a strong asset, since as a believer I could not appropriate any philosophy

that did not mesh with my religious convictions. I could not have accepted idealism, materialism, atheism, agnosticism, or pragmatism as a philosophical base for my thought, although I might be able to learn something from these systems.

Scholasticism in its various forms had been built up by generations of Christian believers, among whom Thomas Aquinas holds a preeminent place. His philosophy, of course, is not beyond criticism. No philosophical system can be made a matter of faith. But no other philosophy has rivaled his in its fruitfulness for theology.

As a theologian I make use of elements from several philosophical systems: St. Thomas, in my opinion, did the same. He could write at times like a neo-Platonist and at other times like a strict Aristotelian. He could also borrow ideas from Stoics and from Jewish and Arabic philosophers when they served his purposes. I have found it possible to adhere essentially to the metaphysics of St. Thomas, modifying it to some extent to make room for the personalism of modern Thomists such as Jean Mouroux, W. Norris Clarke, and Pope John Paul II. For epistemological questions I draw freely from the work of John Henry Newman and Michael Polanyi, while amending them to make room for a stronger metaphysical realism than theirs.

I began my formal studies in theology at Woodstock, Maryland, in 1953. Our courses in dogmatic theology were based predominantly on the work of twentieth-century Jesuits of the Roman school, who followed Suarez, de Lugo, Bellarmine, and other Jesuits of the baroque period. Heavily influenced by Thomas Aquinas, these theologians did not hesitate to go beyond the letter of his teaching in grappling with questions that he had left open. This style of theology has gone somewhat out of fashion since Vatican II, but I am grateful to have been immersed in it. It gave me a thorough exposure to the classical theological questions and debates.

For me and my fellow students at Woodstock the classroom instruction was not the centerpiece of our theological education. The mid-fifties, when we were privileged to study, were the perhaps most exciting years of the century for Catholic theology. In France de Lubac, Daniélou, and Congar, among others, were developing the theology of *ressourcement*, sometimes labeled *la nouvelle théologie*. In Germany Karl Adam and Romano Guardini were at the height of their careers. Karl Rahner, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Bernard Lonergan were achieving prominence. Like many of my fellow students, I eagerly devoured the writings of these thinkers. And at Woodstock, I should add, we could not avoid some involvement in the issues of Church and State, since John Courtney Murray was in residence as editor of *Theological Studies*.

Other aspects of the theological renewal after the Second World War should be mentioned in this connection. The biblical movement was thriving, with the Pontifical Biblical Commission relaxing the old anti-Modernist prohibitions and opening the way for source criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism. The catechetical movement was vibrant, inspired by the kerygmatic theology of Jungmann and Hofinger. The theology of the laity was getting off to a strong start, led by Yves Congar and Gustave Thils. I personally developed a strong interest in the ecumenical movement, which was beginning to capture the interest of Catholics in Western Europe and even in the United States. A year after being ordained I briefly visited Paris, Louvain, and Innsbruck, and then spent the year in Germany, where I was able to make contact with many of the leading ecumenists, both Protestant and Catholic. Then I went to Rome in 1958 for my doctoral studies, and wrote a dissertation on the ecclesial status of Protestant churches according to Catholic theology - a theme that prepared me well for the Second Vatican Council.

If time permitted, I could say a great deal about my work as a theologian and teacher in the last forty years of the twentieth century. To be as brief as possible, I would say that my work was centered on Vatican II. By 1960, when I started teaching theology, preparations for the Council were in full swing. From Woodstock we followed every step in the conciliar debates with passionate interest. In the first decade after the Council I was heavily engaged in ecumenical dialogues and in interpreting the Council documents to Catholic audiences.

In all my theological endeavors I have striven to keep the relationship between theology and faith intact. For me theology depends on faith, for it is nothing other than a systematic effort to understand the nature, contents, and implications of faith. By faith I mean a free and trusting assent to the Word of God (*logos theou*). Faith is divine to the extent that it responds to that Word. Theology of any kind presupposes divine faith as the condition for its existence. Christian theology rests on specifically Christian faith, inasmuch as it recognizes Christ as the incarnate Word of God. Catholic theology presupposes Catholic faith, because it accepts the authoritative mediation of the Church with her Scriptures and traditions. Christian and Catholic theology, therefore, rest upon Christian and Catholic faith. If the faith is denied at any of these three levels, theology ceases to be Catholic, to be Christian, and even to be theology at all.

I am aware that some authors have maintained that theology can be done without faith. Nonbelievers, I suppose, could discuss what they might hold if they believed that there were a God or that he had spoken through Christ and the Church. But this would only be a kind of hypothetical discourse, based on a contrary-to-fact condition. No one but the believer is in a position to affirm

theological propositions as true. The same propositions might be affirmed by the nonbeliever on other grounds, but in their case the affirmation would not be theological. Faith is what distinguishes theology from other disciplines such as philosophy, history, psychology, and sociology, which deal with some of the same materials.

All theologians, then, must be believers, but not all believers are theologians. Intelligent believers always and inevitably reflect on their faith and in so doing engage in an informal kind of theology, but only a trained theologian can give carefully reasoned statements about matters of faith. In modern times the term "theology" has come to mean an academic discipline conducted within a community of faith. The theologian is expected to be familiar with the Bible and with the history of doctrines, to be capable of articulating the contents of faith in a systematic way, and be professionally equipped to answer questions about faith.

Whatever my merits and limitations may be, I am a theologian in the strict sense just described. My religious superiors commissioned me to engage in theological study on the doctoral level and assigned me to teach theological subjects. I am grateful to them for having done so, because in my undergraduate days, as already mentioned, I was bit by the theological bug. Since the age of twenty I have looked upon God as the ultimate source and goal of my life, and have considered my relationship to him far more interesting and important than any other relationship. What could be more intriguing and absorbing than to ponder God's message of salvation?

I can well understand that other academics might be more attracted to art, music, literature, science, history, philosophy or some other discipline. I have felt these attractions myself, but even as a theologian I can engage in them to some extent. Theology makes use of many other disciplines as aids in interpreting the Word of God and in inducing people to accept and obey that Word.

Theology, as I understand it, is not only an exercise of faith; it is conducted in the service of faith - that of the individual and of the Church as the community of faith. As the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith explains in its admirable instruction on "The Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian" (1990), the theologian's work corresponds to a dynamism found in the faith itself. Truth, once lodged in the human mind, seeks to be understood and communicated.

As a priest I have felt a responsibility to serve the pastoral mission of the Church, adapting my work to the needs and problems of the day. In the years immediately following Vatican II, the overriding need seemed to be to explain to the Catholic faithful how there could be such things as change and reform in

the Church. My principal adversary then was a static traditionalist mentality that would not relinquish the rigid and polemical attitudes that had become ingrained since the Counter Reformation. I sensed that the Church as a living community must adapt her manner of thinking, speaking and acting to the current situation, while of course preserving all that belongs to revelation itself.

The apologists for Vatican II, with whom I associated myself, won over the minds of most American Catholics. But since about 1975 an equal and opposite problem has arisen. Under the pressure of the historical and cultural relativism that dominates the secular culture of our day, some Christians and Catholics have lost confidence in the permanent and universal value of revealed truth. It has become necessary to insist against this trend that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and that the contents of Christian and Catholic faith, definitively taught by the Church, are infallibly and irreformably true.

The current trend toward historical and cultural relativism is a much more serious threat than the immobilism of the traditionalists. The traditionalists, while they were in error theologically, had unquestioning faith in the word of God and in the creeds and dogmas of the Church. Relativism, however, treats every proposition as if it were valid at most for its own time and place. For this reason it directly challenges Christian and Catholic faith, which adheres to the dogmas of the Church as abidingly valid truths. Relativism is also an obstacle to evangelization, which several recent popes have ranked as a high priority. For the relativists, Christian believers may call on Jesus as their Lord and God, but they dare not claim that he is Lord of all. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith clearly pointed to the pitfalls of relativism in its Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, issued in 2000.

The problem of dissent became acute after the publication of *Humanae vitae* in 1968. I never dissented from that encyclical nor, if my memory serves me, from any other Catholic doctrine. But I tried to explain to orthodox believers how it was possible for a Catholic, without rejecting the faith, to dissent from certain noninfallible teachings. Such dissent, I maintained, must for any good Catholic be rare, reluctant, and respectful. I never associated myself with collective protests in which the teaching of the Church was publicly denied. Such actions, I believe, inevitably harm the Church by discrediting the magisterium.

In what precedes I have tried to show how theology in general, and my theology in particular, depends on faith and is in service to faith. Faith is the *sine qua non* of theology. But questions can still be raised about whether theology supports and strengthens faith, or on the contrary challenges and weakens it. Even at its best, theology encounters difficulties in its effort to master the truth of revelation,

because the mysteries of faith so exceed the capacities of any created intellect that they tend to baffle and disorient the mind. Every theologian, I suspect, experiences moments of perplexity in trying to construct a rationale for Christian faith and give a coherent interpretation to doctrines such as the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. But in the end it is possible to attain a synthesis between faith and reason in which the mind can rest peacefully.

The First Vatican Council teaches that reason illuminated by faith can achieve by God's grace a very fruitful though limited understanding of revelation. This understanding, it declared, rests on the connection of the revealed mysteries with one another, on the analogy between them and the objects of natural knowledge, and on the connection of the mysteries with the last end to which the human spirit is oriented.² Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical on Faith and Reason, points out how faith reinforces reason and enables it to discover horizons that it could not reach on its own.³ This expectation is not unrealistic. Our Catholic tradition affords splendid examples of such theological achievements.

Theology, however, can go astray. Most of the great heresies have grown out of theological errors. Even when orthodox, theology can be less than helpful. Over the centuries, theologians have stirred up controversy and dissension in the Church. They have frequently fallen victim to a *rabies theologica*, a kind of theological fury, in attacking one another. The most orthodox theologians have sometimes engaged in savage polemics. In their zeal for truth they tend to disregard the Christian virtues of tact, civility, and charity.

Even with the best of intentions, theology can put difficulties in the way of faith. I experienced this in one of my courses as a student. In apologetics we were taught that our faith rested upon the Gospels, which could not be defended unless they could be shown to be strictly historical documents and to contain eyewitness reports of the words and deeds of Jesus. The proofs offered for these theses seemed very unconvincing, at least to me. Fortunately, however, I learned in Scripture courses that the Gospels, composed a generation or two after the death of Jesus, were theological documents attesting to the faith of the early Church. Reliably communicating what it was important for the faithful to know about Jesus, the Gospels were not to be read as if they were verbatim reports. In this way my Scripture courses spared me from undergoing a crisis of faith.

In a wholly different way, certain more recent trends in contemporary Catholic theology may be corrosive of faith. Ecumenical and inter-religious dialogues have sometimes led theologians into the trap of dogmatic compromises. Liberation theology, while it could be authentically Christian and Catholic, sometimes took over too much of the social analysis of Marxism.

I should like to call special attention to the problems inherent in the so-called “theology from below” that is sometimes practiced in Christology and ecclesiology. While the term means different things to different authors, such theology often confines its vision to purely human and historical phenomena. In Christology it concentrates so intensely on the humanity of Jesus that it puts his divinity in brackets. The method tends to dismiss on principle those passages in the Gospels that would be incredible if Jesus were a mere man - some of his miracles, for example, and his divine claims. Walter Kasper puts his finger on the difficulty when he writes:

‘ A Christology purely “from below” is therefore condemned to failure. Jesus understands himself “from above” in his whole human existence. The transition from anthropological to theological viewpoint cannot therefore be carried out without a break. A decisive change of standpoint is required.’⁴

Just as a Christology from below, taken alone, falls short of Christian faith, so does an ecclesiology from below, left to itself. Faith teaches that Holy Scripture is divinely inspired, that Catholic tradition has divine authority, that the Church is the Body of Christ, and that Christ abides with his Church and with the successors of the apostles assisting them in their mission till the end of time. These assurances enable us to find the word of God in Scripture and tradition and to trust the magisterium, confident that God will not allow his Church to betray the truth committed to it. An ecclesiology from below typically treats Scripture as a merely human document, looks upon tradition as mere folklore, and calls into question the solemn teaching of Popes and councils. Joseph Ratzinger points out a real danger when he writes:

The ecclesiology “from below” which is commended to us today presupposes that one regards the Church as a purely sociological quantity and that Christ as an acting subject has no real significance. But in this case, one is no longer speaking about a church at all but about a society which has also set its religious goals in itself. According to the logic of this position, such a church will also be “from below” in a theological sense, namely “of this world,” which is how Jesus defines below in the Gospel of John (Jn 8:23).⁵

Because I cannot accept any split between faith and theology, I have always practiced theology on the assumption that Christ is the divine Son and that he makes himself accessible through the privileged testimony of Scripture, tradition, and the living Church. To work on other principles is to violate the nature of

theology as a reflection on faith from within faith. Theological speculation that adopts naturalistic premises eats away at the faith of God's people.

Critical reasoning, to be sure, has a legitimate place in theology. But criticism itself must always be based on principles and presuppositions. In a theology from below, the critic methodologically excludes the supernatural and adopts a pre-Christian posture. This approach may be an admissible form of religious inquiry but has not yet risen to the status of theology. Catholic theology begins in the fullness of Catholic faith.

As I believe I have shown in the early part of this lecture, pre-theological disciplines can serve as pedagogues on the journey to faith. My studies in philosophy and history brought me to the very verge of faith. Conscious of this, I have retained a lifelong interest in apologetics, which aims to show the plausibility of faith to those who do not yet believe. But the apologist, to accomplish this task effectively, must be a person of faith.

Faith, then, is the presupposition and the animating principle of anything that claims to be theology. And faith is a gift. One may prepare for it, dispose oneself for it, and pray for it, but only God can confer it. For those who understand what faith is, there are only two reasonable attitudes. If they have faith, they should treasure it and pray for the added gift of perseverance. And if they lack it, they should long for the gift and pray to receive it.

Since I began to write theology I have considered nothing more important than orthodoxy. However brilliant it may be, theology that deviates from faith is, in my judgment, worse than useless. Theology is not the master but the servant of faith. Theologians should be grateful to be corrected by higher authority. They should not imagine that it is their mission to sit in judgment on the magisterium.

I cannot claim that I have completely lived up to the principles set forth in this lecture. That will be for others to judge. Not only my earlier writings but even the most recent may be in need of correction. St. Augustine in his senior years set a good example for the rest of us by writing his "retractationes." I might be inclined to follow him if only I had the assurance that I have advanced in wisdom and grace as I have advanced in years.

Notes

- 1 Avery Dulles, *Princeps Concordiae: Pico della Mirandola and the Scholastic Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1941).
- 2 Denzinger-Schoenmetzer, par. 3016.
- 3 *Fides et Ratio*, par. 67.
- 4 Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ* (New York: Paulist, 1976), 247.
- 5 Joseph Ratzinger, "Communio: A Program," *Communio* 19 (1992): 436-49, at 445.

THE MARIANIST AWARD

Each year the University of Dayton presents the Marianist Award to a Roman Catholic distinguished for achievement in scholarship and the intellectual life.

Established in 1950, the award was originally presented to individuals who made outstanding contributions to Mariology. In 1967, the concept for the award was broadened to honor those people who had made outstanding contributions to humanity. The award, as currently given, was reactivated in 1986.

The Marianist Award is named for the founding religious order of the University of Dayton, the Society of Mary (Marianists). The award carries with it a stipend of \$5,000.

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