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# **ON WRITING A HISTORY OF THE COLLEGE THEOLOGY SOCIETY: REVIEWING FIFTY YEARS OF THEOLOGICAL CONVERSATIONS**

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The historian remains in many an imagination nothing more and nothing less than the purveyor of facts about the past. The historian's task appears simple, straightforward—to report the facts accurately. According to the logic of this image, once one has “the facts” about a selected topic, then the history nearly writes itself. Fortunately for the historian, even the most focused historical study demands more than setting the events in their proper order. I write “fortunately” because if the historical task were as straightforward as just described then a single history written by no particular historian would suffice on any given topic, and historian unemployment rates would rise even higher than they are now. Though most contemporary academics know the subtle and complex influences of social location, those whose work is other than historical tend to exempt history from such influences. They have little reason to ponder the many variations possible in constructing a historical narrative nor to consider the merits of each variation. The historian, on the other hand, must consider as many variations as possible in trying to figure out what story to tell about the given subject and how best to tell it. Even writing on a relatively focused topic like the fifty-year history of the College Theology Society requires careful reflection on exactly what story is to be told and numerous choices on how best to tell that story.

To convey to students what writing history entails, I often ask them to imagine producing a history of the preceding day as each of them lived it. Most immediately understand that even to write such a limited history would demand choices not only in terms of details to include and omit but also in terms of organizing those details within a framework selected to provide a particular view of the day. A single event or a special relationship might frame the narrative. Then again, a series of interconnected events organized conceptually might create the intended effect. Audience shapes these choices. Students admit that their narratives would change if the audience shifted from peers to parents. Such an admission leads some to recognize that as readers of history

they are dependent upon the historian's judicious use of the sources in creating a narrative that is a credible account of any given topic, and that the historian's choices are made in anticipation of the readers she hopes to engage.

This exercise assumes that the students are the experts on their topic. In this case, primary sources reside in memory, an important but not always reliable historical repository. Perhaps they are fortunate enough to have corroborating written or pictorial accounts of the day, but such sources do not render a history in and of themselves. Students also quickly discover the difficulties in containing even a single day's history to that day. To communicate an event's significance often requires accounts of preceding events reaching back a week, a month, a year. The permeability of those firmly drawn chronological boundaries becomes clear. To write a history even of a single day still requires a complex interpretive process. Ultimately, the interpretive work that produces a history proves to be as much an art as a science.

Composing the history of a person, a place, a historical movement, an institution is more often than not a daunting task. Even learned societies like the College Theology Society have life stories that requires more than a chronicle of events. To capture the story in all its liveliness requires some sense of the story to be told so that the research has both direction and certain limits. Such a focus on "this" rather than "that" means, however, that the final product tells "this life story" rather than "that life story." My research on the College Theology Society, for example, includes a careful review of the archive collection held at the Catholic University of America but very little review of similar materials of the Catholic Theological Society of America or the archive collections of other learned societies like the American Academy of Religion. So, rather than placing College Theology Society in a broader history of similar professional organizations or providing comparisons and contrasts with other societies, this history has as its primary focus the Society's internal life—highlighting its particular origins and *modus operandi* and examining the changes as well as the continuities in its own understanding and expression of its work as a society.

After drawing the boundaries, the historian faces still another, equally daunting challenge—locating and assembling the so-called historical data. At this juncture, another important aspect of history writing becomes crystal clear. Historians are first and foremost dependent on the sources available. One hopes that the search for sources produces a wide and varied repository of materials. Exploring the territory even for a project with clearly defined boundaries usually uncovers areas where the quantity of resources is vast, and other areas where

primary sources are almost non-existent. Overabundance requires difficult choices concerning inclusion and omission, and the gaps leave questions that remain unanswerable unless one has the rare good fortune of discovering data previously unknown.

The sources available for writing the College Theology Society's history are numerous and varied. They include archival materials such as board meeting minutes, regional meeting materials, and correspondence among members and with a variety of others outside the Society. Another rich source is the Society's publications beginning with the *Proceedings* of the first national meeting and subsequently in the thematically organized annual volumes. Other publications include newsletters, a few special publication projects, and, of course, *Horizons*. Oral history provides yet another perspective on the extant written material and enriches the narrative with the textures of memories. These multiple sources provide a rich abundance of details especially for those interested in examining the changing understanding of theology as an academic discipline and an ecclesial activity. Needless to say, far more will be excluded from the fifty-year accumulation of sources than included in the completed history of the College Theology Society. I can only hope that my efforts to make judicious choices of inclusion and omission are evident to the reader of the final narrative.

Being *invited* by the College Theology Society to write its history certainly makes identification of an audience relatively easy. To honor the Society in its fifty years of existence, however, I am crafting a narrative that is intended for a broader audience including those curious about developments in Catholic higher education, the teaching of theology to the non-specialist, and the development of theological and religious studies as a university discipline. Admittedly, the primary reading constituency, the College Theology Society members, remains always in the foreground as I write.

My awareness of those readers further complicates my struggles to write a satisfactory history. To clarify, let me invoke a teaching situation once more. In explaining to my students the primary focus of my work, I often say, only partly in jest, "I study dead people." The advantage in writing about dead people is that they ordinarily protest very little about how they are represented historically. Now the fact of the matter is that many of those who appear on the pages of the College Theology Society's history are still very much alive. Their memories of "how things happened" or "what was really important" may not coincide with any particular chapter's historical account. And while consultation with "those who were there" is certainly part of the method used in writing this text, the final written form reflects this author's perspective—always limited even if well informed. I anticipate some

disappointment especially in what or whom I fail to include or how my interpretation contradicts events and persons remembered fondly or otherwise. Disappointing people, particularly friends and respected colleagues, is not at the top of my list of enjoyable things to do.

This desire to write a compelling, insightful, and interesting historical narrative is certainly not a new attitude that I bring to my work. Yet, this particular project holds a unique place in my psyche. My nearly two-decade participation in the College Theology Society adds another layer of complexity to the historical task. To invoke the term “participation” hardly reveals my association with the Society in which I have found an academic home. The annual meeting has granted me the opportunity to meet colleagues who have over the years become among the friends dearest to my heart. To acknowledge my long-term relationship with the College Theology Society and my affection for so many members does not in my estimation diminish my ability to produce a credible history but certainly does operate in how I have drawn the boundaries and what details I have chosen to highlight.

So what is this history of the first fifty years of the College Theology Society to be? To those familiar with the standard categories of historical studies, this particular account most resembles an intellectual history though I hope that lessons learned from social and cultural historians are evident in this text. Still the primary focus in this history are ideas. With the very first national meeting of the Society of Catholic College Teachers of Sacred Doctrine to the most recent meeting of the more nominally diminutive, College Theology Society, participants have come for the theology that they learn from and discuss with their colleagues. The earliest conventions featured a handful of presentations before all meeting attendees. Members heard about a limited range of methods for teaching undergraduate theology effectively and about the training necessary to form a competent Catholic college teacher of Sacred Doctrine. Brief discussions immediately followed each talk. The focus of these plenary addresses quickly expanded to include special presentations on current theological research in Scripture, systematic theology, and historical studies. Now the plenary sessions are overshadowed by the familiar format of concurrent sessions with multiple papers in areas of research specialization. This format developed gradually and reflects the increased number of members who want or need opportunities to present their current research to colleagues or to discuss their own pedagogical successes or problems in teaching theology to undergraduates. Expertise has become much more widely distributed across the membership. I think a history of the College Theology Society ought to provide some account not only *that*

these discussions occurred under changing formats but also *what* these discussions identified as theologically significant.

As with any intellectual history, several challenges present themselves in trying to convey the changing theological content that captured the College Theology Society's attention in any given year. The most obvious difficulty is related to the sheer quantity of material and displaying in the final narrative a reasoned selectivity to reflect the more significant trends in the Society's theological engagement. A more elusive task is determining the influences of and on these theological discussions in the wider discourse. A danger in focusing on theological content as it changes over time is to present ideas as if they develop and change in a vacuum—hence the need to stay attuned to the lessons from cultural and social history. Finally the enormity of shifts in theological studies in method and thus content have precipitated strong feelings of support as well as rejection. Giving an account of the changes and their reception tempts the historian to construct either a historical account of progress or one of declension. In other words, either theology is getting better and better every day in every way, or theology reached its peak in some past golden age and now is in a slow or rapid downward spiral. I find neither particularly useful since both approaches obscure the changing contexts in which the theological discourses arise as well as the multi-dimensional strengths and weakness of most theological positions within their given contexts. To the best of my ability, I give each theological consideration highlighted in the history its due as part of its own time and place.

Another challenge is trying to capture in a historical narrative the dynamic quality, the give-and-take of the original discussions. The Society's leadership sought from its beginnings to provide members with opportunities for active engagement in important discussion on the latest developments in theology for the college teacher. Sister Mary Rose Eileen Masterman, C.S.C. proposed the founding of the society after attending a 1953 Catholic University of America workshop where she experienced "the stimulating and profitable exchange of ideas concerning the common objectives, the diversified procedures, and multiple problems of the departments of Theology in our undergraduate colleges."<sup>1</sup> From the beginning, this exchange was to include as many members as possible. The regional meetings were a genuine attempt to foster the "grassroots" character of the Society of Catholic College

<sup>1</sup>All quotes are taken from the document entitled "Notes on proceedings compiled by Reverend Gerald Van Ackeren, S.J., Workshop on the [sic] Theology and Social Sciences in Catholic College Programs" Catholic University, Washington, D.C., June 1953 [Social Sciences was crossed out and Theology and Social Sciences written in] CTS collection, Box 2 Archives of the Catholic University of America.

Teachers of Sacred Doctrine. Regions functioned as a kind of adaptation of the principle of subsidiarity to organizing the teaching and study of theology. The historian's challenge is to describe how the Society created opportunities to encourage widespread active engagement and how these efforts affected members in their words and actions. I see this challenge as similar to that of the good novelist whose effective use of dialogue and description invites the reader into the story's unfolding. Yet, unlike the novelist, I am not free to create dialogue, and, as we know, some of the best theological exchanges never appear in print. Here is one of those gaps in the resources that in all likelihood will never be overcome.

This last observation in no way minimizes the importance of the printed material. The Society's commitment to publishing usable material even when the volume was simply the *Proceedings* has produced an incredible historical repository that serves as a window through which we can view, as already noted, a period of tremendous upheaval in the study and teaching of theology. The convention themes and titles of annual volumes alone reveal the Society's ongoing attempt to keep pace with developments in theological studies. Examining the annual volumes' content opens one to an amazing world of the myriad changes and developments in theological studies that have occurred over the last fifty years.

I feel a serious obligation to utilize these resources to the best of my ability. Writing this history provides a rare opportunity to survey theological sensibilities as they have developed, changed, and transformed over the last fifty years. Many of these theologically informed concerns relate to the nature and role of theology itself and the work of the theologian as teacher-scholar in relationship to the college/university, the society, the church, and the world. To give a compelling account of these theological sensibilities and concerns requires capturing some of the dynamic interchanges that in many cases leave only their traces in the annual volumes and *Horizons* articles. At the risk of exaggerating the task, it is like trying to convey to students that Thomas' *Summa* reflects the vibrant theological scene of the thirteenth century.

Yet, I am writing the fifty-year history of the College Theology Society, not a history of the last fifty years of theology. The Society is the occasion for the theological discussions. It is a social entity with no single geographical location, no national headquarters. Somewhat like Brigadoon, it appears once a year (instead of once a century) in its national convention with brief, more circumscribed manifestations at board meetings and as already mentioned in publications. Perhaps one might argue that the list-serve now offers a cyber-presence that extends its existence throughout the year, though the percentage of members

who regularly engage in discussion is relatively small. Yet to suggest that the College Theology Society must be equated with the annual meeting hardly captures its spirit that lingers long after the convention ends.

I have thus far offered the reader some of the standard disciplinary categories of history—intellectual, social, and cultural to explain how I am conceptualizing the history of the College Theology Society. These categories, while useful, fail to capture the spirit of the Society that lingers. In reading through the materials, the image that has emerged and remains uppermost in my mind is that of “conversation.” What I have been examining in archival materials and published works is nothing more and nothing less than a fifty-year-long conversation about practicing the theological arts through teaching, research, and service. Lest one reads this image as diminishing the work of the College Theology Society, let me invoke a person whose works have granted me hours of conversation at College Theology Society meetings. At the very end of her 1952 autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*, Dorothy Day states quite matter-of-factly about the Catholic Worker Movement: “It all happened while we sat their talking, and it is still going on.”<sup>2</sup> I find it fascinating that Day identifies talking as a main activity of a movement known for putting faith into action especially through the Works of Mercy.

Perhaps I should have first invoked David Tracy who has written much on “conversation” *per se*. In *Plurality and Ambiguity*, he writes of conversation as “a game where we learn to give into the movement required by questions worth exploring.” His description continues, noting that conversation is “a rare phenomenon . . . not a confrontation . . . not a debate . . . not an exam. It is questioning itself. It is a willingness to follow the question wherever it may go. It is a dialogue.”<sup>3</sup> I here invoke David Tracy and Dorothy Day because they normally appear at very different sites on the U.S. Catholic landscape. I invoke both Day and Tracy because both assume that their conversations have some greater purpose, a *telos*, if you will. For Tracy conversation offers “. . . an exploration of the possibilities in the search for truth.”<sup>4</sup> Day wrote of “round table discussions for clarification of thought.”<sup>5</sup> The “conversation” I have in mind is not idle but purposeful, and for that very reason must at times become an “argument” as truth and clarity are sought. The Society exists as a conversation among

<sup>2</sup>*The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day*, with an introduction by Robert Coles (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1980 [1952], 286.

<sup>3</sup>*Plurality And Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion and Hope* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 18.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>5</sup>Day, 172-173.



members who sometimes agree, sometimes argue, and on occasion come to some resolution of an argument. For those who remain active members, it is the conversation that brings them back as new questions arise and further clarity is sought on the theological issues that emerge in research, in teaching, and in conversation.

As I read board minutes, *Proceedings* essays, annual volume articles, I am amazed that the Society's members never seem to tire in attempting to answer certain questions—here distilled to their most basic forms. Who are we? Are we primarily teachers, theologians, members of the academy, members of the Christian community—the Catholic Church—or perhaps some combination of these? What do we do, and how do we do what we do most effectively? Do we form students or inform them? Is our task primarily intellectual, practical, spiritual, religious, ecclesial, or some combination? How does teaching take into account the changing student, church, world? Why are we? Why do we continue to exist as the College Theology Society? Why do we continue to teach undergraduates? Why do we engage in the theological enterprise? Other forms of the questions could be listed but the basic sense of the conversation is suggested in these few listed here.

To borrow a phrase associated with Karl Rahner's theology, the College Theology Society provides the condition for the possibility of this conversation to occur. It has done so through the annual national meeting beginning in 1955 at Trinity College, Washington, DC when the group bore the name, the Society of Catholic College Teachers of Sacred Doctrine. It also organized and supported regional groups, many of whom were quite active for a number of years. A couple remain active to this day, meeting once or twice between national meetings. The Society's board of directors and officers have been and continue to be an important locus of conversation. They oversee all the Society's activities, and both reflect and shape the wider conversation within the Society and those with other entities including the U.S. Catholic hierarchy and other professional academic societies. Over the years, all the boards have been instrumental in the Society's production of a phenomenal amount of publications related to college theology, beginning with the *Proceedings* that eventually became the theme-centered annual volumes. The board has also ensured the production of periodicals from the less formal in-house newsletter, *Magister*, to one of the premier theological journals, *Horizons*. All that I have described from board meetings to formal publications I here consider to be integral to the conversation.

At the 2002 meeting at Saint John's University, Jamaica, New York, I held an informal discussion with those members who wished to offer their insights into what ought to be included in the Society's fifty-year

history. I had just spent ten days reading what I can only describe as mind-numbing minutes of board meetings. The gathering at Saint John's reminded me of what I had forgotten—what these seemingly endless board meetings make possible. Teachers of hundreds of undergraduates in required theology courses are able to come together with other teachers of hundreds more undergraduates in what were then required theology courses to remind themselves why they had gotten into this work in the first place and why their continuing to do this work is so very important for those students, for their schools—whether small liberal arts colleges or large universities—not to mention the wider academy, the society, the church. Most leave the annual meeting refreshed and renewed, ready to tackle one more semester teaching a classroom full of those wonderful, exasperating students.

The history in its final form organizes the narrative chronologically with divisions approximately by decade. The account of the founding decade (1954-1964)<sup>6</sup> features discussions and concerns that both reflect the neo-scholastic theological movements and anticipate the new theological methods and concerns associated with the Second Vatican Council. In presenting the second decade (1964-1974), the focus must obviously be on the transformations in theological discourse with the reception and effects of the Council. These transformations, as others reflected in the Society's history, are examined in the light of wider cultural transformations occurring in U.S. society. Continuing the narrative into the third decade (1974-1984), I highlight further developments in the post-conciliar theology as well as the transformation of the Society's publication presence and its interaction with other learned societies. By the fourth decade (1984-1994), more attention needs to be paid to the Society's involvement in theological controversies, most notably the Charles Curran case, as well as to the initial discussions of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. Theological work also continues in the midst of these controversies. The most recent decade (1994-2004) requires a careful account of the Society's involvement in the discussions surrounding Canon 812 requiring theologians to receive *mandatum*. The last ten years also brought to the College Theology Society new conversation partners, the National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion, and continued commitment to producing quality publications in contemporary theology. Welcoming the Baptist professors into the Society's theological discourse can be seen as a sign of the continued vitality of that original vision to create a society of college theology teachers willing to engage in challenging, multi-perspective conversations in theology.

<sup>6</sup>The overlap in dates listed in parentheses reflect the limits of drawing absolute chronological boundaries in describing historical events.

I have written this article primarily as a historian reflecting on writing the history of the College Theology Society, but my training is that of a historical theologian. So I wish to make a few observations here as a theologian writing this history. I have thought a great deal about the transformations in theology that I have studied in reviewing the College Theology Society materials. I have witnessed many of these changes and been a direct participant in some of them. In the preceding account, I have granted a great deal of attention to the changes in theological content but very little about the change in those who call themselves theologians. When the Society began, those actually doing theology were primarily priests with a few religious sisters and brothers playing an important but usually secondary role. In 1954, theology resided for the most part in seminaries rather than colleges and universities. The Society of Catholic College Teachers of Sacred Doctrine served as an important agent of change both in who engages in theological studies and where the majority of their theological work is done. I must admit a real admiration for those who had much to lose in enlarging the boundaries of the theological landscape. For the most part, those who had much to lose were Jesuit and Dominican priests, many of whom were trained in the scholastic traditions. Women religious as well as brothers were among the first of the newcomers to be welcomed into the fields of advanced theological studies. A lay theologian, male or female, was a rarity in the late fifties and well into the 'sixties. The dedication of certain priests and key women religious made possible the opening of theological studies to all.

The subsequent theological work produced has been varied and vast. Reading through the annual volumes is a humbling experience in part because one realizes the fleeting quality of much of what is written in theological publications. Few essays will win the appellation, "classic." Reading through the annual volumes is humbling in another way. What becomes clear is that theology is not about that single great essay, because theology is not a solitary project but a communal one. That today the majority of the members who contribute essays to the College Theology Society's annual volume are lay men and women teaching at colleges and universities is in and of itself a theological development with far reaching implications for the life of the church. The essays taken together evoke theological perspectives that do require careful consideration. The ongoing existence of the Society has provided an important locus for the development of these perspectives extending through fifty years of conversation in pursuit of truth and clarification of thought.

To describe this work as a history of a fifty-year conversation may obscure many aspects of the Society's life history—not the least of

which is how the conversation is punctuated with celebrations of prayer and in particular the Eucharist, of good food, of late-night song-fests, and of plenty of laughter—and those of us who write and certainly those of us who grade those student papers know just how critical punctuation is for giving meaning to a conversation. Among those of us who read this history, some may wonder how it is possible that so much in our discipline has changed since that June day in 1953 when Sister M. Rose Eileen Masterman, C.S.C. proposed founding a society for those who teach college theology. Others may find themselves bemused about how little has changed especially in the challenges faced and the questions yet to be answered. I hope some of us might simply sit back and marvel as we consider the remarkable vitality of a society whose members remain dedicated to teaching that most difficult subject, college theology, and then echo Dorothy Day's words as she noted with some amazement. "It all happened while we sat there talking, and it is still going on."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Day, 286.