

PASTORAL IS NOT WHAT YOU DO BUT WHAT YOU BECOME

By

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Just yesterday I received a group of German visitors who were eager to ask questions about theology as it is done in the Philippines. Their visit came close upon the heels of another visit by a Belgian theologian who also was greatly interested to find out about theology in our local context. Time and again knowledgeable visitors have come to our country and gone, convinced that the most exciting and the most lively theological issues are being argued and discussed in the Philippines today. This morning, at the Mass of the Holy Spirit, Fr. Quevedo showed clearly in his homily how theological reflection in the Philippine Church is anything but academic. With your indulgence I would like to follow up by continuing this morning my series of reflections started three years ago on the meaning of theology in the Philippine context.

After three years in office I am convinced that there is really only one perennial problem in the teaching of theology: the tension between identity and relevance. There is, first, the need for *identity* in what is taught, that is to say, continuity of doctrine. Theology must faithfully reflect the life of the Church which it serves. Just as the Church is not completely born afresh in every age but remains in continuity with the apostolic Church; just as Christian existence is not totally created anew in every era but passed on in its basic features from one generation of Christian to the next; so theology must not only be in touch with contemporary events but also be in continuity with tradition. Then, there is also the need for *relevance* to the real life of the Church today and, hopefully, in the future. Theology studies tradition not for its own sake but in order to discern what the Spirit asks of the Church now and later (insofar as this can be foreseen).

This morning I would like to focus attention on the meaning and significance of the desire for relevant theology. In the past few years I have seen various approaches to the problem.

At one time relevance meant chiefly the justice and liberation currents of theology. With not a little noise, anger and impatience it was urged that any theology worthy of the name must grapple with the situation of poverty and injustice, specifically in our country and in the Third World. Those were troubled and difficult times, as any teacher or administrator will attest. For my part, I believe in the substantial validity of that particular demand for relevance, although I must declare that with it came not an insignificant dose of anti-intellectualism. This first approach to relevance is still present even to this hour. It still constitutes a powerful expectation on the part of the students and continues to challenge the presuppositions, the methodology and the flexibility of the faculty. It may be said, however, that the voice of criticism is not as strident as before (or so it appears, at least for the time being) and that there seems to be a little more patience for the business of scholarship.

Relevance can also be understood in terms of the need for inculturation. Basically, this is a call for theology to be true to the logic of the Incarnation, an insistence on the finality of theology as service to the local Church. It is really hard to see how any theologian who has accurately understood what inculturation means could quarrel with it. If one did, he or she would in any case be fighting a losing battle against the clear discernment of the magisterium and of a growing number of theologians that inculturation is both desirable and inevitable.

Today, it seems that "pastoral" is the new name for "relevant." The approach to relevance is made through the demand for a theology that is more pastoral. Just as I affirmed my conviction in the substantial validity of the themes of liberation and of inculturation, so I also affirm my belief in the need for a more pastoral theology. Unfortunately, there are those who have largely an unexamined notion of "pastoral." Using the term as a slogan, they oppose it to what they label as "academic." Let us take time to reflect on this matter and try to show how a superficial understanding of pastoral theology can be very dangerous and can lead to a short-changing of one's theological formation.

Let us assume that theology is systematic reflection on human history in the light of revelation. Reflection is the work of the mind; theological reflection essentially involves mental activity in relation to Christian faith and praxis. True, we reflect on action; but reflect we do just the same. One goes,

then, to a school of theology in order to think — and to think adequately — about the realities of faith. One who theologizes must conceptualize. Theology is not for those who have no patience for careful thinking. When our thinking, our conceptualization, our reflection becomes an end in itself (theory for the sake of theory), then our theology may rightly be called “academic.” But when our theological reflection or conceptualization truly reflects the contours of human existence, discovers its underlying laws and principles and, thus, enables us to actuate the potentialities of faith, i.e., live the Christian promise, in the world, then our theology is “pastoral.”

Notice that it is not reduced content or less rigorous conceptualization that makes theology pastoral. No, rather, it is reliability and effectivity in interpreting (and transforming, if you will) reality and history which is the decisive factor. If anyone thinks that such a theology can be bought at a cheap price he or she is gravely mistaken. A truly pastoral theology is not won on the merits of an allergy to academics.

Just as meaningful words can come only from a profound silence, so good pastoral action can come only from a sustained, often painful, encounter with theological thought. The cost of theological discipleship is never little. Serious study is always difficult. More pastoral does not mean less bother with theory. Quite the contrary. The more pastoral theology wishes to be, the more time and effort must be spent to forge a better theory, a theory that responds to life, a theory that provides an interpretative key to the multiplicity of phenomena, a theory that works. Remember what Karl Rahner said: “In matters of great importance, there is nothing more practical than a good theory.” Pastoral is constituted by choice of problematic, methodological approach and ultimate interpretative and predictive efficacy of one’s theological model. A good conceptual framework, a good theological system can give a lot more mileage and prove to be more practical and more pastoral than many well-meaning attempts at immediate relevance and concrete application.

In the end, pastoral is not what we can do with our theology but, rather, what we become because of our theological formation. For as we learn during our years of formation how the theological dimension pervades all of human life, as we learn how the Christian spirit has an ineradicable drive to discover the theological dimension of human events, as we learn

the method, epistemology and basic attitudes proper to theological discipline, we ourselves are gradually shaped into a certain kind of character and personality whose approach to reality is sensitive to the presence of God in every aspect of human existence, whose thinking and discernment are marked by intellectual rigor and spiritual insight, and whose pastoral and apostolic orientation and strategy are, therefore, effective from the Christian point of view. Theology is then pastoral insofar as it forms a person whose skills and habits of thought and reflection render him or her an apt instrument for Christian ministry.

I would urge the students to challenge the faculty to be pastoral in the authentic sense. I would have no sympathy for a demand for 'pastoralness' which is nothing more than a short-sighted desire for immediate relevance or for watered-down intellectual discipline. Cry out, then, for relevance not because you are unwilling to do hard intellectual work but because you have a burning zeal for your apostolate. It is easy to tell the difference. One who demands a pastoral theology for the right reason, when he or she is frustrated in the classroom, goes to the library to work out personally the kind of theology that is needed. But when the real motive for insisting on a theology that is pastoral is not zeal but lack of drive or allergy to scholarship, then that person chooses the simple expedient of aimless activity and involvement, seeking refuge in yet another slogan: "We do not learn from books but from life." No doubt there is a bit of truth in that, but it is not the whole truth. And thus, by a subtle mixture of half-truths one can in the name of the pastoral, effectively deprive oneself of a really solid theological formation. Let us take every care, then, never in the name of pastoral to sell our birthright for a mess of pottage.

To my fellow members of the faculty I would appeal for renewed efforts on the part of each one of us, to examine himself and be critical of his own attempts to respond to what the Church demands of theological teaching today. We are living in a world of swift and radical change when loyal and competent service of the Church requires men and women of genuine discernment. Discernment in Christian life is the fruit of a happy blending, under the guidance of the Spirit, between identity and relevance. If the service asked of us by the Church is to form men and women of discernment, pastoral theologians who embody in themselves the message that they proclaim,

then we must at all costs preserve the creative tension between these two exigencies of theology. Not identity only, for that would be to make the past an end in itself; nor only relevance for that would lead to a theology of the fad.

After all is said and done, the deepest truth about a faculty of theology is that "we teach ourselves," as our former colleague, Fr. William Malley, once affirmed. If we are men of discernment — pastoral theologians — who strive in their theology and spirituality to uphold what I have called the creative tension between identity and relevance, then can we say that theology at LST is at one and the same time professional and pastoral. For a school of theology is not pastoral because it has "decided" to be so, or because the brochure describes the courses to be so, or because that is the image the school wants to project. We are all aware that school and course descriptions are never quite the decisive factor in these matters. In the last analysis a school of theology is pastoral because there can be found members of the faculty who are capable of theologizing pastorally, or synthesizing the two poles of identity and relevance into a unity that truly speaks to us of life as it is.

My dear colleagues, how many such "just" men of theology can be found among us? A handful is all that God seems to ask in order that he may grant some blessings on the Church in our country.