

COLLEGE THEOLOGY SOCIETY PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

A Theologian's Call

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“Theology is Taught by God, Teaches of God and Leads to God.”
(*Theologia a Deo docetur, Deum docet, et ad Deum ducit*)

—Thomas Aquinas

IN 1972, I was twenty-two years old and had recently made my first vows with the Sisters of St. Francis.¹ The sisters gave me a New American Bible; I had never before owned a Bible, and I promptly put it in my storage trunk for the move to my new mission to teach fifth grade in Minneapolis. Once I arrived, the Bible remained in the trunk.

I was soon involved in a local charismatic prayer group where I met a Lutheran woman who shared the music ministry with me. One day, she appeared in my classroom at the end of the school day. She asked if we could talk, and then proceeded to tell me that when praying for me “God put it on her heart to tell me to read Isaiah 30.” I must admit that no sister or friend of mine had ever spoken to me as she did, and no one had ever directed me to a biblical passage in this manner.

That evening I retrieved the Bible from my trunk (it was under my snow boots) and looked up the passage. Admittedly, I was a little nervous about what it might say. A number of the verses spoke to me, like verse 15, “By

¹ The following is the presidential address delivered at the 2019 College Theology Convention banquet on Saturday evening, June 1, 2019, at Holy Cross College, Notre Dame, South Bend, Indiana.

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waiting and by calm you shall be saved in quiet and in trust your strength lies." When I reached verses 20 and 21 my heart and soul opened:

The Lord will give you the bread you need and the water for which you thirst.

No longer will your Teacher hide himself, but with your own eyes, you will see your Teacher, while from behind, a voice shall sound in your ears: This is the way; walk in it!

It was several years before the formal opportunity to study theology became a reality in my life, but the hunger for the Word and a desire to know God more deeply blossomed within me. I truly began to feast on the bread and the water of God, and my life transformed.

What is your story? When did God call you to this great honor of being a theologian? I feel certain that there was no coincidence involved, but rather the hand of God was upon you. Your life changed. In an article titled "The Vocation of the Theologian," Sandra Schneiders shared her experience of being asked the question, "How old were you when you first knew you wanted to study theology?"² Her response, after some reflection, was "I never began, because I really could not remember a time when I was not involved in theological exploration."³ It is true that we have all been involved in questions about God and God's actions in our lives since we were children.

The call to be a theologian is at once an invitation to personal holiness and to the ministry of the Word. It demands a "yes" to the risk of personal transformation and the discipline to engage in rigorous intellectual conversation and study, while simultaneously deepening one's faith and prayer life. Theology is done "primarily for the sake of the whole community of faith and, beyond that, for the wider human community."⁴

Vocational Call

Theology as a true vocational call invites us into the deepest desires and questions held in the hearts and minds of people, questions that they may not even know how to form. We have the opportunity to offer new insight, consolation, and ways to look to the tradition to find the answers they seek. As the study of how to speak about God, theology provides us

² Sandra Schneiders, IHM, "The Vocation of a Theologian Begins with an Invitation," *America: The Jesuit Review of Faith and Culture* 219, no. 7 (2018): 36–40.

³ Schneiders, "The Vocation of a Theologian Begins with an Invitation," 36.

⁴ Richard McCormick and Richard McBrien, "Theology as a Public Responsibility," *America: The Jesuit Review of Faith and Culture* 165, no. 8 (1991): 189.

with knowledge needed to enlighten others, to empower them, and to call them into a more profound relationship with God.

A call elicits a response. Our yes to God breaks open a completely new world of understanding and transformation. Recall the heady experience of your first classes in theology. Think about the professor whose words and example captivated or challenged you. What were the early questions that you longed to have answered? Remember the scary but exciting feeling of being open to new ways of thinking and understanding. We have witnessed it in our students. Suddenly, a light comes on and understanding dawns. For some it is a moment of incredulity when they realize that something they have believed all their lives, others have understood from a very different perspective.

God calls theologians to seek the truth about ultimate reality. It is a vocation to know and speak of God. It involves thoughtful reflection on our existence through reflection on our relationship with God, and our primary resource is our experience. This kind of engagement with God risks personal transformation.

When Jesus called his disciples, they dropped everything to follow him. They left behind what they knew and launched into an unknown world. Their lives, like our own, were forever changed by this relationship with Jesus. The disciples could not have predicted how their lives would be transformed or what would be asked of them. They surrendered to the call and allowed themselves to be swept up in the wonder and the danger of following Jesus. Dare I say this is exactly what happened to us? God called us and we responded. Hebrews 5:4 says, "No one takes this honor on himself [or herself], but receives it when called by God."

The Call to Teach

For the majority of us, choosing theology means the opportunity to teach.

This is one of the greatest joys of my ministry, for it means assisting students to think about their faith. Indeed, "It is about helping others seek life-giving answers to the really important questions of human existence."⁵

You know when you have encountered a truly great teacher. That teacher has the ability to share ideas and to expand thinking in authentic and challenging ways. It is immediately apparent that a teacher of integrity has wrestled with the ideas and challenges of faith. Such a teacher is open to all aspects of truth and all ways of knowing and has the skill to lead others toward an in-depth examination of their own beliefs, while throwing open the window to new

⁵ Schneiders, "The Vocation of a Theologian Begins with an Invitation," 37.

ideas. Teaching is a mission that is as much about what one knows as who one is.

An academic theologian has several important roles to play: serving as a mentor, remaining engaged in the discipline of conversation, and assisting in ongoing discernment that leads to understanding and clear faith. Mentoring is a process that always involves communication and is relationship-based, acknowledging that the mentor has the experience and expertise to guide and direct another. In the case of theology, this involves the integration of faith and values. Students look for a consistency in message and life. Teaching theology is a vocational call; it demands a commitment to truth and to engaging in rigorous examination of Scripture and tradition. We have the privilege of participating in the journey and the formation of our students. Our language and our lives function and therefore communicate to them the meaning, hope, and joy of discovering God's universal call to holiness.

Simply put, David Tracy would say, "Theology is conversation."⁶ As professors of theology, we invite students to engage in conversation. We all seek answers to the fundamental questions of life. Entering into conversation with society, the church, and the world requires an openness to all reality. Good teachers of theology help students to learn the art of conversation, which involves both speaking and listening. This enables students to participate in conversation about great human problems such as war, oppression, and poverty. We teach them to draw upon the paradigms of the past in order to find guidelines for today's dialogue. The believer, in this case the students we teach, has the means to examine the issues of today in light of human experience and faith, and then to participate in conversation with others to gain new insights and the ability to think and examine concerns from a variety of perspectives. Students learn from this kind of communication, and as facilitators and models for the art of conversation, we enrich their experience and help them to bring their faith and values to bear on the questions of the day.

The method of theological conversation is predicated on the ability to engage in theological reflection, which leads to ongoing discernment toward a well-developed and grounded faith. The initial conversation, then, is three-way; we dialogue with the tradition and ancestors of the faith, with our own everyday experience, and with God.⁷ One of the greatest gifts we offer to our students is the ability to reflect theologically on life and God, the skill to talk with others in order to gain wisdom from the faith community,

⁶ Stephen Okey, "Saint Leo's Three Minute Theology on David Tracy," May 5, 2017, podcast, <https://stephenokey.com/2017/05/05/three-minute-theology-on-david-tracy/>.

⁷ Roberta Bondi, "Theological Reflection—What Others Say," https://divinity.vanderbilt.edu/academics/fielded/fielded_theologicalreflection.php.

and the habit of bringing faith to bear in all situations in their lives. We help them to know God's grace, to recognize the Spirit, and to call on God for all their needs.

The Call to Proclaim

Sandra Schneiders claims that the vocation of doing theology is "intrinsically kerygmatic."⁸ It is a call to the ministry of the Word. Scholars define the term *kerygma* to mean the core of the early church's oral tradition about Jesus. The early apostles and Paul, in particular, spread the message of the good news by means of preaching and storytelling. Filled with the power of the Spirit and grace, their preaching and the strength and conviction of their message roused people to give themselves over to the good news of Jesus. They changed lives through their ministry of the Word and emboldened others to speak in Jesus' name.

God calls us to share the Gospel, and that happens not only in the classroom but also from the pulpit. Through the ministry of the Word and sacrament, theologians help people to make the truth of God's word fruitful in their lives. We have a prophetic role to play. Like the prophets of the Scriptures, God challenges us to read the signs of the times and to help the community of believers to interpret God's message. Prophets speak in God's name, and the message incites the listeners to respond, to change, to act, and at times to rebel and to resist. Here is where compassion plays an essential role. As preacher and prophet, we witness the experience of the people through the eyes of God. Love and compassion dictate our words and our actions. We console, cajole, challenge, encourage, and empathize with the people of God. It is our vocation to challenge prejudices and assumptions and to assist others in opening their minds and hearts to the richness of God's love and grace. We walk the journey with the community of faith and witness by our lives the gracious goodness of God.

It is often through storytelling that we reach people. Consider the parables of Jesus. They were drawn from the lives and experience of the people he addressed. They were often intended to shock people into a new discovery, a heuristic moment leading to new ways of thinking and acting. A Samaritan is a neighbor; a father forgives the unforgivable; perseverance in prayer changes lives. We can bring the Scripture and tradition to life for God's people. Our enthusiasm for the Word and our understanding of the traditions of our faith touch people's hearts and transform lives. Ours is a vocation that both forms and transforms ourselves and the lives of the people of God. May we be worthy of the call.

⁸ "Schneiders, "The Vocation of a Theologian begins with an Invitation," 37.

The Call to an Intellectual Enterprise

Our vocational call has another important aspect we must consider, for it is faith seeking understanding. Do you remember thinking that you would never complete your dissertation? When I was writing, a friend of mine said, "Remember, the best dissertation is a finished dissertation." That was twenty-five years ago. The study, writing, and reading have never stopped. They are part of the joy of answering the call to serve as a theologian. If theology is indeed "faith seeking understanding," then that means we must continually be involved in rigorous critical reflection. There is a reason they call it a discipline. In her 1987 Presidential Address to the Catholic Theological Society of America, Monika Hellwig names theologians as fools, myth-makers, comforters, builders, archivists, critics, archaeologists, and ghosts.⁹ Each of these roles depends on continuous engagement with tradition, history, experience, and shifts in thinking and acting that are a natural part of the evolution of life. It is the theologian's task to evaluate, consider, and interpret the shifts that take place in our world in the light of faith and to guide the community of believers. The theologian, aware of shifts taking place, makes them explicit, and then offers reasons to accept or reject the shift based on criteria drawn from Scripture and tradition. The theologian helps people to see the action of God in the events of their lives and in the life of the church. Hellwig notes, "When we study the traditions and the cumulative wisdom of the past, it is with a view to evaluating how the past serves the needs of our present."¹⁰

An important element of this analytical enterprise is the employment of intellectual humility in our teaching, preaching, and writing. Sally McFague talks about her constructivist theology by making use of the metaphor of a quilt. Each of us, she suggests, contributes to the whole through the addition of a thoughtfully designed and prepared square. This square contributes to the beauty of the whole but is only one portion of the finished quilt. Part of our task as theologians is to add beauty to the fabric of our faith using the colors and the designs that emerge from our past and speak to the present and the future of our faith.

The Call to an Ecclesial Vocation

One of the most important yet daunting tasks of our ministry as theologians is our call to an ecclesial vocation. "Theology exists to serve the life of the

⁹ Monika Hellwig, "Presidential Address: Who Is Truly a Catholic Theologian?" *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 42 (1987): 93. Also available at <https://ejournals.bc.edu/index.php/ctsa/article/view/3432>.

¹⁰ Hellwig, "Presidential Address," 98.

Church. It lives to assist the people of God in their journey of faith.”¹¹ This places our ministry at the heart of the church. A theologian's primary role is to conserve and defend orthodoxy that is the faith inherited by those who have gone before us. However, thoughtfully constructed and carefully articulated theology stretches beyond traditional formulations.¹² The core matters of faith transcend the limits of language. Theology serves the church, and therefore it is essential that theologians deal with the real church, engaged in the real world. Jesus used parables and miracles to communicate faith and in doing so brought people to belief. He met them where they were and spoke their language. Combining teaching and preaching, he captivated their hearts and their souls. So it is with us—we help the people of God to interpret the experiences of their lives and to address difficult issues through the lens of their faith.

Not only are theologians ambassadors of the Scriptures and the wisdom of tradition, we also serve as the conscience of the institutional church. A primary task of theologians is to identify the theological issues that are at stake in any situation. This leads to discernment and the important action of helping the people of God to grasp the significance of their decisions and to cling faithfully to the Gospel values. Theologians have the responsibility to call the church back to its focus and respond in truth when leaders discriminate or censor a particular point of view.¹³ Theologians, in many ways, are the bearers and shapers of tradition. With this very important mission, above all theologians must be men and women of prayer.

Prayer Is the Lifeline of Theology

Marilyn McCord Adams titles her insightful article “Prayer as the Lifeline of Theology.”¹⁴ She identifies the thesis of the article this way, “Before writing—theologians should get to know their subject matter.”¹⁵ Personally, I had a number of reactions to this statement. The obvious was, of course we know our subject matter. This led me to consider what it means to know. In Mary's response to the angel Gabriel, she speaks of a particular kind of knowing—an intimate sense of the other. That kind of knowledge does not come from books but is developed over time through a relationship. Our perception of God is understood only gradually. Our

¹¹ Tim Huffman, “Living, Dying and Being Damned: Teaching Theologians and Controversial Issues.” *Trinity Seminary Review* 29, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2008): 107–24.

¹² Huffman, “Living, Dying and Being Damned,” 111.

¹³ Huffman, “Living, Dying and Being Damned,” 118.

¹⁴ Marilyn McCord Adams, “Prayer as the Lifeline of Theology,” *Anglican Theological Review* 98, no. 2 (2016): 271–83.

¹⁵ Adams, “Prayer as the Lifeline of Theology,” 271.

regular attention to prayer leads to a deeper understanding of the divine and ultimately a friendship with God. I have said to my graduate students, “A theologian who does not pray is an oxymoron.”

Prayer is a way of being in the world with God based on personal encounter.

It is our job to pray as much as it is to study and profess. Our personal transformation is at the heart of prayer. It is through prayer and trust that we come to know and understand the truth. The Holy Spirit fills us with wisdom and grace and guides our thinking. Prayer awakens our spiritual senses and enables us to listen to God’s voice and to live in God’s will.

By our baptism, we are invited to journey in spiritual pilgrimage throughout our lives. In answering the call to serve as theologians, we accept a particular form of journey that requires us to always be in touch with our God. At all times and in every circumstance give thanks, for we have been called by God.