

THEOLOGY AT THE CROSSROADS: CHALLENGES AND ALTERNATIVES

Inaugural speech at Don Bosco Utume Theological College

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To

Rev. Fr. George Tharaniyil, Religious Superior of Eastern Africa Province and the Moderator of Don Bosco Utume Salesian Theological College (DBUSTC),

Religious Superiors and their respective councillors here present,

Rev. Fr. Dunstan Christantus Haule Director of DBUSTC whom I thank for the kind invitation,

Rev. Fr. Abel Thathi, Rector of the religious community of Don Bosco Utume and the entire formation team,

Our tireless hard-working professors and lecturers,

Our indispensable non-teaching staff and collaborators,

Our zealous and disciplined students,

Distinguished guests, clerics, religious, novices and laity, Ladies and gentlemen,

All protocols observed, Good morning!

Lieven Boeve, a Professor of Fundamental Theology at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven, Belgium, in his monograph entitled "*Theology at the Crossroads of University, Church and Society: Dialogue, Difference and Catholic Identity, 2016*", examines the place of theology in the university, the Church and society. He emphasizes that theology certainly belongs to all of these three domains as it belongs to the nature of theology to involve itself in all three spheres, especially at the crossroads where they overlap.

Boeve discusses the recent document *Theology Today* from the International Theological Commission which circumscribes theology's place and task in the Catholic Church. He discusses how the difficult relation between theology and philosophy is typical for a Church which has difficulty with the dialogue in today's world; as well as examines the relation between theology and religious studies.

Going further, Boeve offers a reflection on Catholic identity today, focusing more specifically on education. He presents four models for considering the identity of Catholic schools in the light of the changed society and argues that dialogue in a context of plurality and difference can lead to new, fruitful ways to shape even the Catholic identity.

He emphasizes the need for the Catholic Church to convert itself before it can call the world to do the same.

Not so long from now, in fact two years to be exact, one theologian LLuis Oviado, specialised in Fundamental theology, from the Pontifical University of Antonianum in Rome, provoked the minds of the academicians in theological disciplines in his article entitled “Fundamental Theology at the Crossroads: Challenges and Alternatives After a Long Maturation”¹. The Author claims that “Fundamental Theology has undergone a slow evolution, as many other theological disciplines, since its inception in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council (Oviado, 49). He examines several issues that could have influenced that development and offers some suggestions for advancing the field and its teaching in academic institutions.

The suggested development is by no ways easy or peaceful; a universal consensus of theologians devoted to such possible evolution is not in an immediate sight. The attempts at reforming theology today are seemingly timid and rather discrete. New challenges emerge and strong pressures are coming both from the cultural context and still more from the most recent Catholic Magisterium. Both are presenting indications that clearly affect the way we understand Theology and its program (Oviado, 50).

Theological disciplines demand a thoughtful redesign that assumes the stimuli that Catholic Magisterium has recently proposed, as well as the questions arising in the cultural environment in which faith is proclaimed and lived, a context very different from that which traditional theology knew, and even, the reflection born during the last Vatican Council, from which more than half a century has passed. The difficulties are more apparent in the educational context, where often students feel a mismatch between what is being taught, and the real problems they perceive for religion, faith and Church (Oviado, 50).

The revision task should be framed within a program that conceives theology as a dynamic project, and not just as a repetition of already acquired ideas, or just to provide comments on canonical texts from the past. There is much more that theology can do in the dialogue between faith and reason, and in updating a salvation message that must be understood in changing cultures and transmitted as something credible. Theological treatises are surely also subject to the trends of cultural evolution and the need to adapt to different and often difficult contexts, a move that demands much more flexibility and openness (Oviado, 50).

¹ L. OVIEDO, *Fundamental Theology at the Crossroads: Challenges and Alternatives After a Long Maturation* in *Scientia et Fides*, 10(1)/2022, <https://apcz.umk.pl/SetF/article/view/34292/31745> (accessed on 19.08.2024).

Theology in general is struggling today before a serious dilemma: whether to become a private discourse within the Church, aimed at the formation of ministers and pastoral agents; or whether to assume the challenge to become a public discourse, connected with other academic disciplines and with the cultural environment, subject to scrutiny

and discussion not only internal, but also external, and attentive to the features and trials of our own time, and our own cultures. Obviously, the first option implies somehow a withdrawal and a disengagement, and surely moves away from the ideals proposed by the last Popes, urging us to engage in the dialogue between faith and reason, between Gospel and culture. However, the second option entails many risks and a huge effort. It places theology in a more relational and less self-referential style, something quite hard and uncomfortable, and requiring us to pay attention, study of, and exchange with foreign knowledge or sources relevant for theology's own development (Oviedo, 51).

Pope Benedict XVI at one point in time affirmed that morality cannot be systematically built on the basis of Scripture; or, in other words, that Revelation is not enough to provide a convincing ground to moral theology. The Pope's affirmation seemed something obvious among some moral theologians, since several moral questions had arisen in recent decades, especially in the bioethical field, which had no reference in the Bible, and whose treatment had to resort to other sources for plausible arguments (Oviedo, 54).

Now the big question is, if we accept that diagnosis and assume that Catholic moral theology cannot be based only on Revelation, how far can this perception go? Does it affect other theological treatises, or is it limited to moral theology, and possibly other practical theologies? In a minimalist view, it could be said that the consequences are very limited, and that this opinion does not have to touch other theological treatises, which would be strongly rooted in Biblical Revelation. If given an intellectual in-depth coated with realism Pope Benedict's criticism has more serious consequences for the whole theological field, and that many other treatises can become involved or somehow be suspicious, in the sense that Biblical Revelation would only provide a partial contribution for the updating efforts aimed to show the credibility of Christian faith and its contents. In fact, it is likely that the scope and reach of Biblical Revelation must be resized at this stage, in which the Biblical text continues to be an essential source of inspiration, but at the same time, other sources of human knowledge are required as a necessary complement. This is especially the case at the current time, where new criticism and an expanded scientific view impregnate the ambient cultural (Oviedo 55).

By extension, if Fundamental Theology must consider the relationship between Revelation and theological elaboration, then it cannot be indifferent to these developments, and the meaning and scope of Revelation must be rethought within a

broader scheme in which other sources of knowledge come into play, perhaps in a different way. This is something we learn from contemporary hermeneutics, which has matured for several decades along this line, showing the enormous complexity that presides the relationships between ancient texts, history, cultural environment, and personal and community reception (Oviedo, 55).

It is one thing for theology to be a “theory of revelation”, and quite another to become the meeting place between faith and reason. In the first case, theology is conceived as an effort to update the contents of canonical revelation, which sets the orientation and also determines the language, the keys and even the style of theological discourse, which in the limit becomes an intra-textual exercise close to biblical theology (Lindbeck 1984). In the second, theology takes seriously both its own tradition and the impulses from reason, not only its historical expressions, but, above all, contemporary ones, to show how faith is a reasonable option, and to fertilize, and if necessary correct, from that standpoint reason and its main expressions. The second model focuses more on dialogue and the ability to assume the stimuli and objections coming from culture, philosophy, and science (Oviedo, 56).

The Constitution *Veritatis gaudium* proposes a model, or even a new theological style quite different from what we were used to. That document insists on interdisciplinary practice and a format open to alternative expressions of reason and rational or scientific enquiry. Theology is seen as a process that conforms to the truth ideal and that assumes guidelines in its development aimed at keeping rigorous standards and the expected demands proper of every academic activity.

To this extent, the manualist studies of Revelation, its transmission and reception, and the presumption of Christian faith and its credibility rooted on Christology, Mariology, Ecclesiology, etc., demand an informed review compatible with a reasonable reality. Indeed, if living witness is the key to credibility, and therefore the need for practical theologies, such as pastoral and spirituality, there is no doubt that our biggest challenge is that churches need to cope more and more with many anti-testimonies, outweighing positive or constructive witnesses; indeed, too many scandals shake faith at its roots and its practical plausibility (Oviedo, 58). In other words, theology must respond adequately to hard problems or challenges such as secularization, cultures of unbelief, the pressing presence of other religions (4000 sects banned in Rwanda and the Shakahola religious opium in Kenya), historical errors with all their negative load, the current scandals, and the growing impact of science. All these points deserve a specific treatment to provide good argumentative resources, especially for those students who must exercise a ministry and will face these harsh questions in their praxis or in simple terms must educate young generations with their many questions and scarce religious interest (Oviedo 58-59).

One of the ways to theological renewal or alternative as our theme suggests is to embrace the proposals of the recent living Magisterium. Both Pope Benedict XVI and Francis propose and insist on dialogue between faith and reason. A theology *on the way out* – as Pope Francis insists– needs to connect and dialogue fruitfully with other knowledge that is contiguous or relevant for theological development.

Theology should pay more attention to everything that refers to religious experience, a field that has grown a lot in recent decades, including studies on the structure and processes of believing, with highly interesting developments. To this must be added, without a doubt, the advances in the new scientific study of religion, which has expanded with a considerable production during these last years and nowadays compete with theology in trying to better understand religion.

After those general indications, several points require special attention in order to reactivate theology relevant to the society. First, an invitation to rethink the hermeneutic question and different theological styles within the epistemological section; second, a deeper study of believing, its dynamics, and its relationship with Christian faith; third, a better development of theology and faith in relation to natural and social sciences; fourth, a study able to address the objections to faith from a more practical point of view; and fifth, a security of theology and its function (Oviedo, 62).

We no longer doubt that theology is a plural discipline, where diverse styles, orientations and paradigms coexist, from its beginnings. What should concern theologians is whether such pluralism might lead to chaos or renders theology a creative exercise without controls or the possibility to verify its contents and proposals. Theology must consider its place in a culture strongly impregnated by the scientific mentality, which forces it to adapt or at least express itself in terms that can be understood within that mentality and able to draw a relational axis of reason that assumes a more pragmatic, consensual, utilitarian, empirical or formal format. All this is essential if we want to offer a more convincing discourse on faith and its credibility, and we want to go beyond the idealistic forms that have dominated much of contemporary theology, distancing it from reality and our cultures (Orviedo, 66).

Theology has been discredited in many places as a waste of time, a gratuitous speculative exercise, or even a distraction regarding the urgent duties Christians have in mind. A discourse heavily disconnected from real life and problems, too self-referential, and alien to contemporary forms of reason and science, might appear to many – believers and not – as lacking worth and interest, as something internal to a reduced group of specialists, without any practical effect (Orviedo, 69).

If theology wants to address the problem concerning the credibility of Christian faith, then we need to consider it in an eminently practical way, that is, starting from the

question: what renders such faith less credible, or which are the obstacles that prevent people from believing. What makes believers defect or disaffiliate from the Church or abandon the faith. On this latter question, I have done personal investigation and come up with two monographic publications on “Defection from the Catholic Church, 2022” and “Disaffiliation from the Catholic Church in Kenya, 2024.” You can find both the works in your library for personal critique.

We ought to be academically ambitious enough to offer matured reflection on burning questions for our own intellectual growth and the development of the society. I down my tools referring to Jim Rohn’s motivational book entitled "The Power of Ambition: Awakening the Powerful Force Within You". Rohn encourages people to **embrace ambition** as a driving force for achieving success and realizing their full potential. He believes that ambition is a powerful motivator that can propel individuals to take action and pursue their dreams with determination and passion. He emphasizes on the importance of setting clear, specific meaningful goals and having a vision for the future that align with one’s ambitions and create a roadmap for success.

Rohn encourages us to take initiative and seize opportunities in order to make our ambitions a reality. He advocates for lifelong learning as a key component of ambition and personal growth. He encourages us to invest in our education, acquire new skills, and stay curious in order to adapt to changing circumstances and remain competitive in our fields. He highlights the importance of **persistence and resilience** in the face of obstacles and setbacks. He urges how to develop **self-control**, focus, and consistency in our actions, even when faced with distractions or temptations. Rohn promotes the idea of **taking full responsibility** for one’s life and choices. He believes that success is influenced by the company you keep. He encourages persons to surround themselves with positive, ambitious individuals who support their goals and inspire them to aim higher. While advocating for ambition, he emphasizes the importance of **maintaining integrity** and ethical standards in the pursuit of success. He concludes his book with a message about the importance of **giving back** and making a positive impact on others while making the world a better place.

May the study of theology make us more credible in the community and transform us to men and women intellectually capable of maturely dialoguing with the Church and the society amidst challenging phenomena.

Thank you for listening!