

TEACHING THEOLOGY TO THE LAYMAN

Several weeks ago, when mentioning to a fellow priest that I was having trouble with this paper, he said: "Well, it shouldn't be too difficult. You know what theology is, and what a layman is." That is true. Everybody here knows what theology is, and what a layman is, but like sauerkraut and corned beef, we seldom put them together in our minds. Corned beef calls for cabbage and theology seems to call for the clergy, not the laity.

After some investigation, however, it seems that more and more today, theology and the layman are coming into closer contact, or at least, there is considerable striving in that direction. Strangely enough, much of the initiative is on the part of the laymen who are seeking out theology and looking to theology for something that is essential to their Catholic life and action.

Less than ten years ago, Etienne Gilson wrote: "(Theology) alone can teach us what is the ultimate purpose of nature and intelligence, putting before our eyes the truths that God has revealed, truths that enrich with most profound perspectives, those other truths that science teaches....I would even say, he continues, a man could become a scholar, a philosopher, an artist without having studied theology, but without theology, he could never become a Christian scholar, philosopher or artist. Without it we could well become on the one hand Christians, and on the other, scholars, philosophers or artists, but never without theology, will our Christianity descend into our knowledge, philosophy or art to reform them inwardly and to revivify them." (1)

Gilson then goes on to explain that we here face a new problem.

In the Middle Ages the sciences were the privilege of the clerics who also had a good grasp of theology. Their knowledge was thus balanced and well ordered. But today, by reason of a long evolution of secularism, those who follow the sciences do not generally learn theology as a part of their intellectual formation, and most theologians are not well versed in the secular branches of knowledge.

Gilson deplores this secularized state of affairs and affirms that theology must be brought to those who wish to consecrate their intelligence to the cause of Christ the King -- in the sciences, in philosophy, in the arts. He says, "to select the basic principles, to organize the teaching, to give it to those whom she judges worthy-- that is the work of the teaching Church." (2) But he insists that the laity, the learning Church, can at least make known their needs, as he so eloquently does.

Much more recently than Gilson, just two years ago to be exact, Jacques Maritain said much the same thing at Yale. Speaking to a predominantly non-Catholic audience, Maritain affirms quite fearlessly: "Now these who share the Christian creed know that another rational wisdom, which is rooted in faith, not reason alone, is superior to the merely human wisdom of metaphysics. As a matter of fact, theological problems and controversies have permeated the whole development of Western culture and civilization, and are still at work in its depths, in such a way that the one who would ignore them would be fundamentally unable to grasp his own times and the meaning of its internal conflicts....No one can do without theology, at least a concealed and unconscious theology, and the best way of avoiding the inconveniences of an insinuated theology, is to deal with theology that

is consciously aware of itself. Liberal education cannot complete its task without the knowledge of the specific realm and concerns of theological wisdom.

"As a result" he concluded, "a theological course should be given during the last two or three years of study of humanities(3)....such teaching should remain thoroughly distinct from the one given in religious seminaries, and(should)be ~~adjusted~~ adapted to the particular needs of laymen; its aim should not be to form a priest, a minister, a rabbi, but to enlighten students of secular matters about the great doctrines and perspectives of theological wisdom."(4)

I have quoted these two great Catholic layman at some length, because of their high qualifications to speak on this subject, both as intelligent laymen and zealous Christians. Moreover, their words state rather clearly, the basic issues involved in this question of teaching theology to the layman. Being philosophers, they have resolved the problem into its two ultimate postulates:

- 1)Why the layman needs theology today, and
- 2)What kind of atheology he needs most today.

This too shall be our order of development.

# I

## Why teach theology to the layman

This question is the more speculative of the two, yet it has this practical aspect, that we cannot begin to discuss what procedure should be followed in teaching theology to the layman, unless we are first agreed that there is some reason for teaching him theology at all.

There is no one who has argued more logically and more conclusively for the teaching of theology to the layman, than Cardinal Newman. It would be difficult to measure the broad influence of his reasoning in the

IDEA of a University. His argument is basic. He does not appeal to Divine Revelation, Holy Scripture, or the decisions of the Church to support his case. He merely reasons from the notion of what a University purports to be, and what theology is in relation to the function of a University.

Newman develops his point in three logical steps.

First, he establishes the fact that a University is established to teach all sciences, and that theology is one of these sciences to which a University is by its very nature committed. His own words are more conclusive than mine. "If then, in an institution which professes all knowledge, nothing is professed, nothing is taught about the Supreme Being, it is fair to infer that every individual in the number of those who advocate that Institution, supposing him consistent, distinctly holds that nothing is known for certain about the Supreme Being, nothing such, as to have any claim to be regarded as a material addition to the stock of general knowledge existing in the world. If on the other hand, it turns out that something considerable is known about the Supreme Being, whether from reason or revelation, then the Institution in question professes every science, and yet leaves out the foremost of them. In a word....such an Institution cannot be what it professes if there be a God. I do not wish to declaim, but by the very force of the terms, it is very plain that a Divine Being and a University so circumstanced (i.e. without theology) cannot coexist." (5)

Newman concludes this first point with his usual clarity and precision: "Religious doctrine (theology) is knowledge, in as full a sense as Newton's doctrine is knowledge. University teaching without theology is simply unphilosophical." (6) "Whereas it is the very profession of a University to teach all the sciences, on this account, it cannot exclude theology without being untrue to its profession." (7)

Newman's second point is this: all <sup>the</sup> sciences are interrelated and have a bearing one on the other; hence, it is impossible to teach them all thoroughly unless all are taken into account, and theology among them. "Moreover," he says, "I have insisted on the influence which theology in matter of fact does and must exercise over a great variety of sciences, completing and correcting them; so that, granting it to be a real science occupied upon truth, it cannot be omitted without great prejudice to the teaching of the rest." (8)

His complete argumentation for this point is positively vehement in the face of a world which even a hundred years ago was becoming more and more secularized, where God and the science of God, were on the way out, under the influence of such popular thinkers as Bentham, J. Stuart Mills, Darwin, Spencer and Auguste Comte. Newman recognized the fallacy of their half knowledge that cramped the vision of men. He presented the teaching of theology to laymen as the antidote for this half knowledge, since theology insures depth of vision, completeness of knowledge, and a divine hierarchy of values.

He recapitulates it thus: "If theology be a branch of knowledge, of wide reception, of philosophical structure, of unutterable importance and of supreme influence....to withdraw theology from the public schools is to impair the completeness and to invalidate the trustworthiness of all that is taught in them" (9) "In a word," he concludes, "Religious Truth is not only a portion, but a condition of general knowledge. To blot it out is nothing short of....unraveling the web of universal teaching." (10)

Newman's third and last point on the necessity of teaching

theology to the layman is nothing short of prophetic. He says that, "supposing theology be not taught, its province will not simply be neglected, but will actually be usurped by other sciences which will teach, without warrant, conclusions of their own in a subject matter (i.e. of theology) which needs its own proper principles for its due formation and dispositions." (11) He clearly demonstrates how the various sciences, without theology, take it upon themselves to pronounce upon matters pertaining to sacred doctrine and morality, passing judgments contrary to divine revelation in matters that exceed the competency of their authority. We have had ample evidence of this development in our day, when a man's competence in any secular field is considered sufficient to give authority to his statements on things religious and moral.

To sum up Newman's case for teaching theology to the layman:

1) The teaching of theology cannot be excluded from the presentation of universal knowledge, for theology is the highest of all sciences, treating of God without Whom nothing else in this world is fully intelligible. 2) Theology is essential to the proper orientation of all the other sciences, since all the branches of knowledge form an organic whole, and to remove one science, so fundamental as theology is to impair the unity of the whole structure of knowledge, leaving it truncated and misshapen. 3) The failure to teach theology to the layman leaves a gap in his culture and education that must somehow be filled. It is filled when the function of divine knowledge is usurped by human science, often enough to the detriment of both human science and theology.

The conclusion for us is quite inevitable. If we want complete

Christians in the world today, we must present them with a completely Christian view of life. Otherwise there will be, as in fact there are today, Catholics who are great philosophers, great scientists, great artists, great business men, great politicians, but not at the same time great Catholic philosophers, scientists, artists, business men and politicians. G. Howland Shaw, the Laetare Medalist for this year, lamented this fact to me several months ago, and attributed it to the neglect of theology for the laymen. In most of our colleges and universities, even Catholic, many laymen have been taught philosophy, science, art, business and politics without the <sup>complete</sup> vision of theology. As a result, Their knowledge is truly profound in the field of human knowledge, but in the field of divine knowledge they have never progressed beyond the Baltimore Catechism.

This picture is largely negative, but it is a fitting introduction to the second point of this paper

## II

What kind of theology does the layman need most today

When we speak of theology, especially of teaching theology, most of us are inclined to think of Tanqueray and Moidin. Possibly too, most of us find it difficult to fit the layman into the picture of our four years in Washington. If we pursue this trend of thought, it may lead us to conclude that Gilson, Maritain, Newman, Shaw and the rest of them dream beautiful dreams, but are due for a rude awakening if they try to realize them. I would agree with this if we must think of teaching theology to the layman in precisely the same terms as teaching theology to the seminarian.

It is true that theology is theology, but there can be a different approach to its truths, a diversified emphasis on its various branches,

a varied order of presentation to meet a new situation. Nor is this a twisting of the science of divine truth to fit our plans. It is merely viewing theology as what it is in the Church--a functional science, dedicated to the service of the Church. It does not detract from the queen of the sciences that it should be considered and taught and learned not only for its own sake, but <sup>also</sup> for the service of Christ, cui servire regnare est.

It is in the Church and in the service of the Church that theology has flourished. It has ever been essential to the intellectual training of the cleric because he is dedicated to an active part in the mission of the teaching Church. Now if the cleric's course in theology is adapted to prepare him for his function in the life and work of the Church, it seems logical to propose that the layman too should have his own particular and special course in theology, since he too is called upon, more and more today, to assume an active role in the life and work of the Church, a role specifically different than that of the cleric. Because his place and function in the Church differs from that of the cleric, the layman should not be given a seminarians' course in theology. The layman's course, like the clerics, should prepare him for his <sup>particular and providential</sup> role in the life and work of the church.

This reasoning, of course, brings us to the very practical question: What is the layman's part in the life and work of the Church? The answer to this question is not open to speculation, since the recent popes have authoritatively declared their minds on the subject. They wish the layman to participate actively in the two great actions of Christ's Mystical Body--in the inner action of public prayer through active participation in the official liturgy



of the Church, and in the outer action of apostolate through active participation in the hierarchical apostolate. It is evident that some knowledge of theology is necessary if the layman is to take an intelligent part in these two great manifestations of the Church's life and work, by liturgical and Catholic action. It is also clear that the knowledge of theology required<sup>for this</sup> is not the same as that demanded of the clergy who have a deeper and broader part in these actions of the Church.

So while there is agreement among most men that the task incumbent on the laity in our secular world today does require some grasp of theology, there is considerable discussion upon the matter of where to place the emphasis, and precisely what kind of a theological course to teach. In a negative way, we can at least say that those elements of theology that are specifically aimed at preparing priests, for example, the casuistic emphasis in moral theology geared to confessional practice, should be eliminated from the layman's course in theology.

To go beyond this negative consideration, and to outline<sup>difficult</sup> a layman's course in theology is a more difficult proposition. We<sup>do</sup> know fundamentally what we want. As the eminent modern theologian, John C. Murray puts it, the course in lay theology "must have a characteristic and conscious orientation towards the development in the student of a completely Christian personality, imbued with the total ideal of a Christian lay life, and dedicated to the full vocation of the contemporary Christian man." (12) Murray thinks that one could not give such a course unless well versed in dogma, scripture, liturgy, history, ascetical and mystical theology and the social doctrine of the Church, particularly the papal doctrine on Catholic Action against the background of modern culture.

If we might venture a suggestion, I would say that however the course be formulated, the casting of the curriculum should be completely Christocentric: based on the Mystical Body considered in the complete economy of Redemption. My reason for this is that by presenting this one <sup>central</sup> ~~synthetic~~ truth, all the other truths that in any way concern the part of the layman in the life and work of the Church are unified and brought into focus in Christ. This, after all, is the method of Holy Scripture, which is unified in the presentation of Christ's life and work. The life and work of Christ are moreover, the sum and substance of both liturgical and Catholic action.

These are but a few indications of the problems involved in a discussion of teaching theology to the layman. We have only attempted to establish the need for such teaching, and to indicate the further work to be done in determining the practical content and extent of this teaching. I do not think that the problems involved should deter us from pursuing a necessary task to completion. Even Protestant thinkers are realizing the tremendous necessity of theology and religion in the world today. T. Elton Trueblood, writing in Religion and Life,<sup>(13)</sup> on the Place of Theology in a University, suggests that theology should especially be taught to the faculty and I think his words carry special weight for the lay faculty of a Catholic University. Indiana University in its News Letter for November 1942 stated as the objective of a course in religious instruction there: "To seek in all ways to make religion as intelligent as science, as appealing as art, as vital as the day's work."

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While we may not agree entirely ~~in~~ the theological experiment across the road at St. Mary's, that is, as far as content goes, I do not think we can fail to recognize the courageousness of its purpose. In the words of Sister Madeleva, it is an effort to "make

religion the strongest and crowning department in our colleges, to give wisdom its proper place in our curricula, to make our colleges literate in religion and Catholic in essence."

In conclusion, teaching theology to the layman is both a problem and a challenge. While it may, at first, seem to be purely academic and insignificant as compared to the other problems and challenges of our atomic age, I sincerely think that in answering it, we shall be providing the fundamental solution to many of the other problems. And on the basis of this assumption, I do not think that <sup>a</sup>the university will fulfil its noble task to a confused world unless it meets this <sup>fundamental</sup> problem and answers this challenge by teaching theology to the layman.

If the <sup>teaching</sup>~~neglect~~ of theology is <sup>a duty of</sup>~~inexcusable~~ in any Institution committed by its very nature to the diffusion and preservation of universal knowledge, it is <sup>both a duty and a privilege for</sup>~~particularly inexcusable~~ in a Catholic university whose specific right to existence is bound up in that word Catholic, which indicates its complete dedication to the spread of the Kingdom of God in the minds and hearts of men.

## REFERENCES

1. E. Gilson, Christianisme et Intelligence, p.163
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3. J. Maritain, Education at the Crossroads, pp.73-75
4. Ibid. p.83
5. J. Newman, The Idea of a University, pp.24-5
6. Ibid. p.42
7. Ibid. p.98
8. Ibid. p.98
9. Ibid. p.69
10. Ibid. p.70
11. Ibid. p.70 cf. Ibid. p.96
12. J.C.Murray, S.J., "Towards a Theology for the Layman" Theological Studies, 1944, p.344.
13. T. Elton Trueblood, "The Place of Theology in a University," Religion and Life, 11, 510-20.

Observations on Religion and Religious Training received  
from Notre Dame Alumni and Undergraduate GIs.

"Our ordinary Catholic student does not have too many opportunities to engage in religious conversation. By the time he gets into business, religious conversation is taboo. But the average G.I. is going to be much more aggressive. I think our teaching should be geared to that aggressiveness. My chief point is this, Father; future students must be hit in some way to realize the value of a deeper knowledge of their faith. The many arguments and 'bull sessions' about religion in the army and navy have convinced our Catholic G.I.s. of this. Unfortunately, many a weak G.I. Catholic has left his faith, at least temporarily, because he couldn't cope with questions thrown at him."

"I feel that some kind of a course could be given us men which is similar to that given a boy in the seminary, but still in line with our abilities, perhaps something like a preface to theology, with considerable outside reading, research and study. I think that if more serious emphasis were given to the religion course, students wouldn't be so ready to accept it as a 'snap' course, and we would go out a better informed and educated alumni group."

"My logic and ethics courses helped me more to be a militant Catholic than the courses in religion. I knew the material of the courses before I came to Notre Dame."

"Is there any way of working out a course to train us for meeting the present so-called Protestant mind? One cannot logically explain to them certain questions which arise. Their ideas are distorted. Is it our place to learn how to straighten out these wild minds?"

"A chance to practice our faith is what we need. Going to Mass on Sundays isn't enough."

"I feel the good boys at Notre Dame need to be trained in aggressiveness, and the poor ones need a presentation of material which will convince them that they've got a good thing. After three years a graduate of Notre Dame my experience has been that the majority of Notre Dame men step right back into Sunday religion when they leave school. What we need is courses that will make leaders."

"There's not enough opportunity on campus for practical application of our religion."

"Could some course be worked out in Practical Catholic Action or Community Catholicism?"

"Our good old Church, in my opinion, isn't worldly enough to deal with the world. I can't suggest anything because I don't know enough about it. But I have a feeling we need some new methods of presentation to the Catholic and new techniques to touch the world."

"Our courses at school were good, but I think an extra course on marriage, the family, etc., could be included in the regular course to great advantage to seniors."

"There's too much faith and not enough reason; our faith would be stronger if we were shown more reasons for it."

"I feel we are particularly weak in Church History and Scripture. The Protestant knows how to quote bible texts by the hundreds, but he's all wet. We've got to know the bible, and not be all wet."

"I feel our courses so far have failed to show us or convince us that Catholic life is daily life for us. I've discovered this during my GI days."

"You're dealing with men of free will, Father. You can't expect 100%. But we could have more intelligent Catholics living their lives, if we could dig in deeper and not memorize so many facts without knowing what they mean."

"When questions arise you begin to give memorized facts - then you forget one of the answers. You're stuck now. Anyway people don't reason that way. I think a great help would be to teach our students how to work with a Protestant not at him."

"Many of our good Catholic boys kept their mouths shut because they felt they weren't qualified to answer pertinent questions. They feel it's the duty of the priest to explain. But where are you going to get enough priests to handle the situation we've been faced with?"

"I feel the religion in Catholic grade school, high school and college was good for me, but not good to help me hand it out to others. Mere memorization of a host of material without the knowledge of how I could put it to use has embarrassed me many times. One of the stock accusations we get is that our religion is nothing more than a formula for most of us. The Protestants should talk to us about formalism, but that's what they do."

"I think round table or seminar courses would help -- get everyone in the habit of thinking through a problem while on his feet. Of course that means comprehensive training before hand. We all are capable of going to a book and eventually proving the particular point, but people who question us aren't interested in our doing that. They want the answer pronto. We couldn't possibly answer them all, but with different training from what we have had, we could answer more of them."

"An additional course giving information on most of the current questions arising in our Non-Catholic friends minds would be of great help to N. D. students."

"As G.K. said, Catholicism has not failed, it has not been tried. The morals involved in the following are important, but we've got to know why more fully, not merely that something is wrong. Capital and Labor, Rhythm and Birth Control; weakness of Catholic Literature and movies (sic), peacetime conscription in the U.S., collaboration with Communists in a world government."

"The courses in college were dull. With the exception of a few things in apologetics we've had all of it before and in the same way. Now the question is; how can those same courses be changed in order to convince us of their worth, and move us to a deeper Catholic life?"

"I feel that some kind of a division should be made. The boys who have had 12 years of religious training should be organized and separated from the classes of students with no previous training. When the two groups are blended into one, the teacher has a very difficult - if not impossible - task of making the class interesting for the advanced student - yet keeping it within the grasp of the beginner."

MEMO to Theodore Hesburgh



Thanks, Ted, for letting me see these fine opera. I am using the article on "The Role of Theology in a Catholic University" in the forthcoming issue of the Bulletin. I may want to call upon some of the enclosed material later, but I thought you had better keep the manuscripts in the meantime.

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