CHAPTER 16

The Practice of Catholic Theology

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Readers of the final chapters of the Gospel of St Luke are treated to the remarkable story of an encounter between the risen Christ and two disciples on the road to Emmaus. The two disciples do not recognize Jesus as he joins them on their journey, and are amazed at how little this stranger knows about the troubling "events of the past few days." As they walk along, they inform him of the events surrounding the trial and execution of Jesus of Nazareth in Jerusalem. After hearing them out, Jesus rebukes them for being "foolish . . . and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!" "Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Jesus asks. Then, "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the Scriptures" (see Luke 24: 13–35).

Among the many interesting features of this story, there is something particularly instructive for our purposes here. The way in which Christ poses the question and then goes about answering it sheds light on very basic elements of the field of inquiry that has come to be called theology and that is our subject in this essay.

Theology as *fides quaerens intellectum*

Why was it necessary for Christ to suffer? The question is a cogent and difficult one, and once we start thinking about it we find ourselves asking additional questions. Why did Christ have to suffer *these things*? We believe that Christ died to save us from our sins, but how does dying in this way do that? Is the shedding of blood on the Cross like the shedding of blood in the animal sacrifices recounted and prescribed in the Bible? When God is brought into the picture, as he must be, the questions multiply. If God is all-powerful, can we say that any particular course of action is "necessary" for him? If God is all-good, then how could he have allowed his beloved Son to suffer so much? And so on.

Several things about this series of questions are noteworthy. For one thing, we see

almost immediately that the initial question cannot be considered in isolation. In order even to think about it, we need to raise other questions as well. Quite significant is Christ's approach to answering the question as posed: from this we learn that the Bible is the first place to look in trying to get answers to questions like these. Fairly early in our inquiry we are likely to wonder what the Church, either in an official manner or within the broad context of her tradition, has thought and said about these questions. We find that the answers to some of our questions have already been formulated as doctrines of the Church. We recognize that our questions have been asked before by others, some of whom have had very interesting things to say about them. Eventually, we sense that questions in one area of our faith intersect with others. The question about why it was necessary for Christ to suffer is connected with questions about who Christ is, who God is, and who we are. Sometimes the questions that arise here lead to questions in other fields. We might wonder, for example, whether Christ's dying for our sake is in any way analogous to sacrificial death in other religious traditions.

Before proceeding further, we should take note of the possibility, despite the implicit scriptural warrant, of a principled objection to posing questions of this type. Someone might protest that the mysteries of Christian faith invite devotion and worship, not scrutiny. Although most Christians have taken to heart the cautionary nature of this objection, they have nonetheless been convinced that intellectual probing can itself be regarded as a form of worshipful response to the mysteries of faith. Because not only our hearts are called to adoration, but also our minds, scrutiny can be a form of worship. Because it has God and his mysteries as its object, theology can appropriately be done "on one's knees" (Balthasar, 1965).

The series of questions we have been considering shows *fides quaerens intellectum* in action. The phrase *fides quaerens intellectum* – "faith seeking understanding" – was coined by St Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), who was himself reframing some ideas of St Augustine (354–430). It has ever since been widely regarded as an apt description for the sorts of inquiries that are practiced in theology (Evans, 2000; 2004). Naturally, the phrase does not mean that raising questions of the type we have been considering automatically constitutes an inquiry as theological. The point is rather that faith by its very nature gives rise to a desire for deepened understanding, one that can, however, be pursued at a variety of levels of intensity and rigor. Built into faith is an intellectual restlessness (Cessario, 1996) and sense of wonder (Nichols, 1991) that drives inquiry.

Theology as such emerges, it seems clear, with the recognition that large bodies of questions can be related to one another and can usefully be ordered and addressed consecutively. By applying some systematic principles and careful reasoning, this kind of inquiry can provide an overall deepened understanding of the faith either for oneself or to form others in thinking about the Christian faith. Theology in the Catholic sense of the word can best be understood as an umbrella term for inquiries that pursue this deepened understanding of faith through the application of properly systematic and disciplined intellectual procedures such as are found in philosophy, in the physical and social sciences, and in history and the humanities (Congar, 1968).

Theology in Accord with Revelation

It has been precisely in connection with sorting out the similarities and differences between theology and other scholarly inquiries that its status as a distinctive field of study has come to be clarified and secured.

Although it is true that the types of interpretation and reasoning through which theology approaches its characteristic questions are like those found in other disciplines, the very fact that it presupposes faith seems to render it quite unlike other disciplines. To be sure, all fields of inquiry have to presuppose something or other in order to get started, even if nothing more than a given subject matter. But, unlike the given in other fields, theology seems to have to accept not only a particular given but what to think about this given as well. It is not only that certain materials – Scriptures, tradition, doctrines, etc. – are to be received in faith, but also that their fundamental meanings must be accepted in faith as in some sense already fixed. The very language we use betrays this: to say that we accept something "on faith" implies just the opposite of what we assume intellectual inquiries to be about – involving, as they do, an openness to finding out what is the case, rather than an acceptance a priori of some account of what is the case. Because theology seems to require as a starting point accepting beforehand an account of what is the case, it seems quite unlike other intellectual inquiries whose methodologies it apes. A more properly scientific approach to these materials and the questions they raise would be to expose them precisely to philosophical, historical, social, anthropological, and other types of inquiry – independently of the specifically religious commitments and expressions which these materials support in the life of those communities where they are taken on faith.

These issues have a modern ring to them and indeed they have been raised with particular force in modern times. But in fact, they arose well before modern times, serving to stimulate sustained reflection about the distinctive nature of theology in comparison with other scholarly pursuits. St Thomas Aquinas (1224–74) gave a great deal of thought to these issues, and his insights, at least in their essential drift, have been widely influential for all subsequent Catholic theology (Aquinas, 1964; 1986).

Presupposed to all the specific questions that reflection on the Bible and the Christian creeds elicits is a fundamental conviction about who God is and what he intends. This conviction is an essential feature of catholic Christian faith in almost all its varieties. It is the conviction that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a communion of life and love, and that he desires to share this communion of trinitarian life and love with persons whom he creates. Indeed, it would be true to say that no one has ever desired anything more than the triune God desires to share this communion with creaturely persons. God himself has disclosed to us (for how could we otherwise have known about it?) that this divine desire – more properly, intention and plan – lies at the basis of everything that God has done in creation, incarnation, redemption, grace, sanctification, and glory (Marshall, 2000).

To look at everything through the eyes of faith – to adopt, as it were, a "God's-eye view" – is to see everything in the light of this divine plan of salvation. To be able to do this is itself a divine gift involving the transformation of ordinary human capacities for knowing and thinking through what the Catholic tradition has called the infusion, at

Baptism, of the theological virtue of faith. When we look at things in faith – in the way God himself has taught us to do – we understand why we were created, why the Word became flesh, why Christ died and rose from the dead, how the Holy Spirit makes us holy, and why we will see God face to face. We were created so that God could share his life with us. God sent his only-begotten Son to save us from the sins that would have made it impossible for us to share in this life. Christ died for this, and, rising from the dead, gave us new life. To become holy is to be transformed, through the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the Church, into the image of the Son so that we may be adopted as sons and daughters of the Father. Glory is the consummation of our participation in the communion of the triune God – nothing less than seeing God face to face.

Faith, then, involves a kind of sharing in God's own knowledge of himself, and of things that he has done and is doing in creation and redemption. But it is, in a crucial sense, a *kind* of sharing. The triune God is one in being, action, *and* knowledge. He comprehends in a single act of knowledge the fullness of his Truth and Wisdom. Through the gift of faith, the believer is rendered able to participate in this divine vision, but always and only according to human ways of knowing. We know God truly, but not in the way in which he knows himself. Human understanding of the single mystery of divine truth is thus necessarily plural in structure. In this sense, we can speak both of the "mystery of faith" – referring to the single reality of the triune God who is one in being and action, and known by us through the gift of faith – *and* of the "mysteries of faith" – referring to our way of grasping the diverse elements of the single mystery of God's plan as we experience them in the life of the Church. All the mysteries of faith are facets of the single mystery of faith, which is nothing less than the triune God himself.

Catholic tradition uses the term "revelation" to describe the action and the content of this comprehensive divine disclosure. For the complex grace-enabled human response to this disclosure the specifically knowledge-related term is faith. The elaboration of this knowledge is called theology.

The existence of the body of knowledge to which revelation gives rise – sometimes called the deposit of faith – warrants the constitution of a field of study distinct from philosophy and the other cognate disciplines that typically investigate these areas of human experience (belief in God, religion, ritual, etc.). It also warrants the distinctiveness of the approach to the materials or sources in which this revelation is found, and establishes a vantage point from which to view all other fields of knowledge. The whole body of questions that can arise in theology are studied within the framework of a distinctive field of knowledge constituted by divine revelation.

According to this account, Aquinas was able to secure the scientific status of theology with reference to the model of scientific inquiry he found laid out in Aristotle's logical works (Chenu, 1959; Schillebeeckx, 1967). That theology derives its principles from a higher knowledge is not a factor peculiar only to theology. Aquinas noted that other so-called subalternated or subordinate disciplines do the same. Music, for example, depends on principles established not by itself but by arithmetic, and medicine on those established by chemistry and biology. Thus, we could say that music is subalternated to mathematics, since music depends on timing, intervals (of pitch), and other qualities which are measured by mathematics. This does not mean that doing calculus is more noble than playing the French horn, but only that musicians need arithmetic if they are to make headway in some of their own proper business, e.g., composing harmonies. Nor does it mean that one could reasonably demand that a musician answer questions about higher mathematics, nor that a mathematician must be able to play a musical instrument. It does mean, however, that one discipline depends on the other in such a way that the lower draws its principles from the higher.

According to Aquinas, the fact of such derivation or subalternation does not render the dependent science less scientific. While it is true that theology's principles are per se indemonstrable and thus not knowable in the way in which the arithmetical principles of music are, this does not rule out the scientific character of theology. Theology is like a derived or subordinate science with respect to the higher knowledge which is the *scientia dei* (God's own knowledge) as such.

For Aquinas, this permits in theology an inquiry of the highest possible degree of rigor – scientific in the sense described by Aristotle in his *Posterior Analytics*. But Aquinas' account is useful for describing the more broadly scientific or scholarly character of a whole range of practices and types of inquiry that fall under the broad umbrella of theology in its current forms. The level of conceptual precision that one is seeking in part determines the degree of rigor and the nature of the methodologies one employs in the study of the questions to which faith gives rise. Approaches that are more analogous to history, literary studies, and sociology than they are to philosophy can have a properly theological character if they are pursued within this framework of a principled acceptance, in faith, of the body of knowledge defined by revelation and thus constitutive for this field of study as such.

This account by no means excludes the possibility that the methods of philosophy, history, literary studies, sociology, or other disciplines could be applied to Christian materials independently of their status as vehicles of divine revelation. In other words, Christian materials can be considered under other descriptions – for example, as literary products or historical monuments – and can be studied with the formal interests associated with history or literary criticism. But in order for such studies to be properly theological, these materials must be viewed under a certain description – namely, as materials bearing revealed content – and with a specified formal interest – namely, as *fides quaerens intellectum*. Theology's distinctiveness as a science or independent discipline, as well as its scientific or scholarly character, are secured with reference to the body of knowledge created by revelation and in principle unknowable apart from it. While it is unlike other disciplines in taking this body of knowledge on faith, it is like many other disciplines whose principles are derived from other disciplines. In addition, it is like all other disciplines in possessing a formal interest in a particular body of knowledge and studying this body of knowledge with principles and methods appropriate to it.

Theology and Its Sources

In any scholarly discipline it is important to know where to look for the answers to our questions. Hence, in Catholic theology as in many other humanistic disciplines, the term "sources" is a handy one for designating the specific body of materials to be consulted and pondered in every theological inquiry.

If theology arises from faith in divine revelation, then it follows that its principal sources will be those in which this divine revelation is found and expressed. According to Catholic teaching, divine revelation is fully and definitively given in Christ who, as the incarnate Word, reveals God and his mystery to humankind. The Second Vatican Council states that "Christ . . . commissioned the Apostles to preach to all men the Gospel which is the source of all saving truth and moral teaching . . . This commission was faithfully fulfilled by the Apostles who, by their oral preaching, by example, and by observances handed on what they had received from the lips of Christ, from living with Him, and from what He did, or what they had learned through the prompting of the Holy Spirit. The commission was fulfilled, too, by those Apostles and apostolic men who under the inspiration of the same Holy Spirit committed the message of salvation to writing" (*Dei Verbum* §7).

The Sacred Scripture is "the message of salvation" as committed to writing and comprises, as earlier chapters of this *Companion* recount, the books of the Old and New Testaments. "Tradition" is a term used in an active sense to describe the handing down or transmission of the revelation received by the Apostles, and in a passive sense to describe everything that is transmitted in the creeds, institutions, liturgy, and other constituents of the Church's life.

In the Catholic view, Scripture and Tradition emerge from the same divine source and are inseparable. They are not two parts of a whole revelation, but rather are both faithful witnesses to the one revealed Word. The Apostles handed on "everything which contributes toward the holiness of life and increase in faith of the people of God; and so the Church, in her teaching, life, and worship, [by the help of the Holy Spirit] perpetuates and hands on to all generations all that she herself is, all that she believes" (*Dei Verbum* §8). But the Bible, relative to the continuing oral and practical tradition, is fixed in a way that the latter is not: the text of the Bible is inspired and authored by God (even though he uses human beings as instruments). Scripture is the *norma normans non normata* of Christian faith and practice, and thus the rule or measure for authentic Christianity. This does not mean, however, that the Bible is "self-interpreting" or revelatory on an entirely literal level. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it, "the Christian faith is not a 'religion of the book.' Christianity is the religion of the 'Word' of God, a word which is 'not a written and mute word, but the Word which is incarnate and living.' If the Scriptures are not to remain a dead letter, Christ, the eternal Word of the living God, must, through the Holy Spirit, 'open [our] minds to understand the Scriptures'" (§108).

According to Catholic teaching, Scripture and Tradition make up one deposit of revelation, entrusted to the whole Church. The authentic interpretation of this deposit belongs to the Magisterium of the Church. In this context, the term "Magisterium" (derived from the Latin word *magister* or teacher) designates the official teaching authority of the Church, exercised by the Pope and bishops who are the successors of the Apostles and who determine that what is proposed for belief or practice accords with revelation in Scripture and Tradition. This authority is exercised in the name of Christ. The position of the Magisterium with respect to revelation is thus one of service. The Magisterium "listens devoutly," "scrupulously guards," and "faithfully explains" the Word of God, and "draws from this fountain of the living word everything that it proposes to the belief of the faithful as divinely revealed" (*Dei Verbum* §10). Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium "are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others" (*Dei Verbum* §10).

It is not hard to understand, then, why we can say that the primary sources of Catholic theology are Scripture and Tradition, as interpreted by the Magisterium. We will have more to say about Scripture and the Magisterium in the following sections of this essay. At this stage, some general comments about the sources of theology are in order.

Among the principal witnesses to tradition, Catholic theologians generally concur in listing the following sources: the Fathers of the Church; ecumenical and local councils; papal Magisterium; liturgy and Christian art; the leading doctors, theologians, and canonists of the Church past and present; and the sense of the faithful. Among the non-theological sources which can be consulted, it has been customary for Catholic theologians to include natural reason, the works of philosophers and jurists, and, more broadly, history and human tradition.

The breadth and comprehensiveness of this traditional list of "sources" suggest something of the wide-ranging character of the Catholic conception of theology. Revelation and everything else viewed in the light of revelation: these are the materials to be studied and pondered by *fides quaerens intellectum*. These sources do not of course each possess equal weight or authority in theological inquiry and argument. As the primary vehicles of divine revelation, Scripture, and Tradition, as interpreted by the Magisterium, are the privileged or primary sources of all theological inquiry.

The task of determining what the primary sources have to tell us about the particular set of questions we may be considering has, since the seventeenth century, been termed "positive theology" to distinguish it from the task of reflecting on these data in a systematic way in "scholastic" or "speculative" theology (Latourelle, 1979). While this terminology is no longer widely used, what might be called the "positive function" of theology remains a fundamental one. An essential phase of every theological inquiry is to establish what the primary sources have to say about the questions that are being addressed. The degree of comprehensiveness and precision that is being sought in the outcome of a particular inquiry to a certain extent determines how extensive this "positive" phase of a theological inquiry needs to be.

"Historical theology" or the "history of doctrine" are the terms normally used to designate the study of the witnesses of Tradition. This is a vast field, comprising many different historical periods and a wide variety of scholarly specialties. Earlier chapters of this *Companion* provide some indication of the range of materials in this phase of theological inquiry. The terms "biblical exegesis" or "hermeneutics" designate the positive phase of a theological inquiry which has Sacred Scripture as its object. Let us turn to that now.

Theology and Scripture

The Second Vatican Council described the relationship of theology and Scripture in words that every theologian would embrace: "The study of the sacred page [Sacred

Scripture] should be the very soul of theology." Theology is "powerfully strengthened and constantly rejuvenated" by the Scripture "as it searches out, under the light of faith, all the truth stored up in the mystery of Christ" (*Dei Verbum* 24). A central task in every theological inquiry is the determination of what the Scripture has to tell us about the particular question or set of questions which we happen to be addressing. Because our inquiry is a theological one, our reading and study of the Scripture proceeds "under the light of faith," assumes the revealed and inspired character of the passages under consideration, and views them within the perspective of a tradition of doctrinal formulation, theological interpretation, and liturgical usage.

The Catholic Church has generally understood the word "exegesis" to refer to scriptural reading and interpretation conducted within this perspective. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* provides a handy summary of the Catholic understanding of the kind of interpretation of the Bible which serves properly theological inquiry. It involves using the best critical tools and methods available, and reading the Scripture within the context of the Catholic faith. According to the *Catechism*, the hermeneutical criteria proposed by Vatican II for genuinely Catholic theology are as follows:

1 *Be especially attentive "to the content and unity of the whole Scripture."* Different as the books which comprise it may be, Scripture is a unity by reason of the unity of God's plan, of which Christ Jesus is the center and heart, open since his Passover (§112).
2 *Read the Scripture "within the living tradition of the whole Church."* According to the sayings of the Fathers, Sacred Scripture is written principally in the Church's heart rather than in documents and records, for the Church carries in her Tradition the living memorial of God's Word, and it is the Holy Spirit who gives her the spiritual interpretation of the Scripture ("according to the spiritual meaning which the Spirit grants to the Church") (§113).
3 *Be attentive to the analogy of faith.* By "analogy of faith" we mean the coherence of the truths of faith among themselves and within the whole plan of revelation (§114).

In summary, then, the theological interpretation of the Bible must take account of its unity, divine authorship, or constant reference to Christ.

This ecclesial kind of reading has been rendered more difficult and complex by the emergence in roughly the seventeenth century of a style of historical-critical interpretation that has come to be seen with hindsight as an alternative way of reading the Bible (Kelsey, 1975). As we have understood the matter so far, the theological way of reading the Bible can be described as an endeavor to read it precisely as *Scripture* – as God's word heard and read in a community of faith. Historical-critical forms of exegesis, on the other hand, are best described as part of an endeavor to read the Bible as *text* – as a literary product, considered independently of its status as the Church's Scripture, whose historical sources and diverse meanings are susceptible of study and interpretation according to the same scholarly methods as are applicable to other ancient texts.

> A properly theological exegesis needs to be distinguished from two other kinds of inquiries identified by the term "exegesis" – historical and literary exegesis. Historical exegesis is essentially reconstructive. Adopting critical methods applicable to texts of all kinds – not just the Bible – the aim is to identify the events and sources *behind* the text under examination. The main emphasis of this kind of criticism is historical, and its practitioners are concerned with establishing, by the standards common among modern historians, what realities *probably* gave rise to the text being studied. Literary exegesis, on the other hand, aims to establish what the text means *as written by its author.* This includes establishing what its author may have *meant* to convey to his contemporaries to whom he wrote.

Together these types of exegesis yield literary and historical judgments about the biblical texts *without* reference to the status of Bible as Scripture, understood as inspired by God and containing the revelation he intends to be received by the Church. Ordinarily, literary and historical exegesis enhance one another and influence the third type of exegesis, which is properly theological and which considers the text at hand not simply *as text* but precisely *as Scripture*. Theological exegesis takes cognizance of the text as identified by its place, not only within the whole scriptural corpus, but within and according to patterns of interpretation which logically and imaginatively *precede* commentary on that text *as normative for the community*. Thus, theological exegesis examines texts inasmuch as they relate to faith, doctrine, theology, and liturgy (Fowl, 1997).

This is not to say that theological interpretation is properly separable from historical or literary study. On the contrary, historical and literary exegesis serve to ground and limit theology's historical and literary assertions about a given text and influence the theological interpreter's rational and imaginative construal of revelation as a whole. Yet whatever impact literary or historical studies may have on theological exegesis as such, it is not the case that they supply a hermeneutical context sufficient for the task of theology. The use of Scripture as a rule or authority requires (absolutely speaking) an interpretive horizon or principles by which the reader can sift and make sense of the texts at hand. All Christian communities share a conviction that the theological exegesis must take as authoritative the trinitarian, Christological, and soteriological patterns discernible in the Scripture and, at least in part, formulated as doctrinal rules by the great ecumenical councils.

A book composed under the influence of the Holy Spirit is still a book, with a language, genre, historical setting, and other dimensions which cannot all be entirely accidental to the meaning of the text. It is plain that a knowledge of the "humanity" of Scripture – everything from its vocabulary and grammar to its poetic devices and the circumstances of its composition – can be helpful for understanding the biblical texts *as Scripture*. At the same time, historical and literary inquiries have an integrity and purposes of their own and exegetical studies of the Bible as *text* have a legitimacy independent of the theological uses to which their results may be put. But this implies that theological exegesis possesses its own integrity as an intellectual inquiry (or, as medieval theologians would have said, a science), with a distinctive set of principles which must guide its appropriation of the results of historical and literary studies.

Theology and the Church

With Scripture and Tradition, the Magisterium of the Church is among the primary sources for theology. The dependence of theology upon the Magisterium needs to be located within the broad context of the life of the Church. For the Church is the locus of a truth which she did not generate but which she received as a gift whose center is the truth of Jesus Christ. The function of the Magisterium is to guard and teach in its entirety this truth which the Church received as a gift and is bound to hand on. Both the Magisterium and theology are servants of a prior truth, received in the Church as a gift.

The gift of truth received in the Church thus establishes the framework for the actual practice of the discipline of theology. This ecclesially received truth, as articulated in the deposit of faith and handed on by the Magisterium, constitutes not an *extrinsic* authority that poses odious limits on an inquiry that would otherwise be free but an *intrinsic* source and measure that gives theology its identity and finality as an intellectual activity. "Is theology for which the Church is no longer meaningful really a theology in the proper sense of the word?" (Ratzinger, 1987: 323). Examined independently of the assent of faith and the mediation of the ecclesial community, the texts, institutions, rites, and beliefs of the Catholic Church can be the focus of the humanistic, philosophical, and social scientific inquiries that together constitute the field of religious studies. But Catholic theology is a different kind of inquiry. Its precise scope is to seek the intelligibility of a truth received in faith by the theologian who is himself a member of the ecclesial community that is "the place of truth" (Kasper, 1989).

A theological inquiry is thus free to seek the truth within limits imposed, not by an intrusive external authority, but by the nature of his discipline as such. "Freedom of research, which the academic community holds most precious, means an openness to accepting the truth that emerges at the end of an investigation in which no element has intruded that is foreign to the methodology corresponding to the object under study" (*Donum Veritatis* §12). The acceptance of the authority of Scripture and doctrines in theology is "not a limitation but rather the charter of its existence and freedom to be itself" (Dulles, 1992: 168). The freedom of inquiry proper to theology, is the "hallmark of a rational discipline whose object is given by Revelation, handed on and interpreted in the Church under the authority of the Magisterium, and received by faith. These givens have the force of principles. To eliminate them would mean to cease doing theology" (*Donum Veritatis* §12). The principles of theology are derived from revelation, as we have seen, and constitute the discipline as such. In accepting them, the theologian is simply being true to the nature of his subject, and to his vocation as a scholar in this field.

The Catholic understanding of theology and its relation to the Magisterium is contested wherever what has been called the "individualistic foundational rationalism" of modernity holds sway (Lindbeck, 2002: 7). But, as we have seen, the Church has a solid, well-substantiated, and historically warranted rationale for its account of the nature of theology as an intellectual discipline of a particular sort, and of the inner connection between this discipline and magisterial teaching. It is central to the convictions of the Catholic Church, and indeed of the Christian tradition as such, to give priority to a theonomous rationality – one that is exercised within the liberating order of divine truth – rather than to an autonomous rationality whose only measure is human reason. While it is true that the basis for this understanding is itself a properly theological one that is rooted in fundamental Christian convictions about the gift of truth and its reception in the ecclesial community, in the light of certain recent intellectual trends, the Church's claims for the community- and tradition-dependent character of theology are more readily intelligible (Lindbeck, 1984). Whatever other challenges it may pose, the post-liberal intellectual climate is, to a certain extent, more favorable to the defense of the principle of theonomous rationality that is crucial for the Catholic understanding of theology.

It would be a mistake to exaggerate the singularity of the dependence of Catholic theology on the authority of the Magisterium. Authoritative criteria and professional bodies exist in almost all intellectual disciplines. Authorities function to maintain the quality and standards of many of these disciplines. "The acceptance of a certain degree of authority – which those subject to it regard as more or less legitimate, which they accept more or less easily, and which they challenge only exceptionally – is the normal state of affairs" (DeGeorge, 1985: 1). In this sense, the Catholic understanding of the relationship of theology to the Magisterium has formal parallels to other academic disciplines in which authorities serve to foster rather than undermine intellectual and scholarly integrity.

Theology and Its Sub-fields

The tendency for related questions to be considered together has been a factor over the centuries in the emergence of sub-fields and specializations in Catholic theology. The many questions concerning the Blessed Trinity, for instance, or Creation, or Jesus Christ, or the Church have been grouped and considered together (as the titles of the following chapters of this section of the *Companion* indicate). So it has happened that one set of theological sub-fields is topical, comprising the areas of Christology, anthropology, ecclesiology, canon law, and so on.

Another set is more functional, concerned with determining what the sources have to say about the main questions of theology (Lonergan, 1972). Thus, the exegetical and historical functions of theology have given rise to a number of sub-fields, such as Old Testament and New Testament exegesis, biblical theology, patristic theology, history of doctrines and historical theology, and liturgical theology. In appropriating the results of inquiries in these sub-fields, the challenge to maintain a properly theological perspective is a continual one.

It is common now for individual theologians to concentrate their work on the questions that arise in one or another of the particular sub-fields that have become stable features in the organization of theological studies, teaching, and research. With this degree of specialization, there is always the threat of the fragmentation of theology. But the unity of theology will be sustained wherever its various sub-fields are viewed not as distinct disciplines but as integral parts of a single discipline with the same principles and the same dependence on revelation and the Church. While theologians

specialize in certain groups of questions, there is a widespread recognition of the need to acknowledge and maintain the fundamental unity of the discipline.

The broadest division of labor is mapped out under the rubrics of fundamental theology, dogmatic theology, moral theology, spiritual theology, and pastoral theology. With roots in earlier periods of theological history, this division emerges clearly in the seventeenth century and reflects a natural grouping of the characteristic questions raised in theology. Some observations on this division of labor are in order.

For the most part, divine revelation in Scripture and Tradition, and thus the Church's teaching, are directed to leading us to salvation and holiness – to the present and future enjoyment of ultimate communion with the Blessed Trinity and with other persons in lives of ever-deepening charity. Through her teaching activities, the Church seeks to cultivate the intellectual and moral dispositions necessary for this enjoyment, to enhance understanding of its profound meaning, and to commend it to others. The whole ensemble of Catholic doctrine – the deposit of faith – embraces all the teachings that together serve to shape and direct our lives toward holiness. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* demonstrates, such doctrines answer questions about what must be believed, which courses of action should be pursued and which shunned, which interior dispositions must be cultivated and which avoided, and so on, in order to enjoy the life of ultimate communion to the full. Dogmatic theology concentrates mainly on questions about what Christians believe (the Creed), while moral theology and spiritual theology concentrate on questions about Christian life.

The work of *dogmatic theology* (also known as systematic theology) is chiefly to elaborate a penetrating knowledge of faith by identifying the mutual connections among the mysteries of the faith. There is a conviction at work here, as we have seen, that the entire ensemble of the mysteries and doctrines of the Catholic faith possesses an internal intelligibility which reflects the divine truth itself and which can be exhibited through contemplative prayer and theological inquiry. It is this intelligibility that dogmatic theology seeks above all else.

The task of *moral theology* and *spiritual theology* is a related one, except that it concentrates on those doctrines that concern the conduct of Christian life (holiness, the commandments, virtues, beatitudes, gifts of the Holy Spirit, and so on) and connects them with the all-embracing mysteries of trinitarian communion, incarnation, redemption, grace, and ecclesiology, as well as theological anthropology.

Much of the present chapter has been concerned with the sub-fields of *fundamental theology* and theological methodology. Typically, the questions that get attention in fundamental theology are those concerned not with *primary doctrines* (what must be believed and undertaken in order to grow in the life of grace and charity), but with *governing doctrines* (how it can be known reliably that such things should be believed and undertaken) (Christian, 1987). Governing doctrines concern such questions as the following: Is this really a doctrine of our community? What procedures do we have for deciding? Is this doctrine more important than other doctrines? Is it consistent with them? Is it appropriate to develop understandings that seem implicit in our doctrines? Should these also be considered as doctrines? Who in the community is authorized to decide?

The history of the Catholic Church has afforded many occasions for developing and invoking governing doctrines. But in recent times the sub-field of fundamental theology, along with its close relatives, apologetics, and foundational theology, has been of increasingly prominent interest to theologians (Rahner, 1978; O'Collins, 1981). One reason for this development is that questions of the authenticity of the primary Catholic doctrines have been pressed upon the Church almost without interruption for the past 200 years. Thus, for example, more explicit attention has been devoted to the doctrine of revelation during this period than in all the previous centuries taken together. Throughout this period, the Church has gradually formulated a range of previously implicit governing doctrines to affirm that her primary doctrines authentically express what is contained in Scripture and Tradition, that Scripture and Tradition themselves constitute the single source of revelation, that revelation involves a real divine communication mediated by Christ, the prophets and apostles, that the scriptural record of this revelation is divinely inspired, that the liturgical and doctrinal tradition embodies communally authorized readings of the Scripture, and that the Church under the Successor of Peter is divinely guided in its formulation of primary doctrines of faith and morals. In addition, the increasingly explicit formulations of the doctrine of the Magisterium over the past two centuries is part of the evolution that represented a response to the growing need for a clear articulation of the governing doctrines of the Catholic faith. In circumstances in which the authenticity of Catholic doctrines was a matter of persistent and unrelenting controversy, it was natural that doctrinal developments addressing this issue should take place along several fronts at once: the nature of revelation, the interpretation of Scripture, the authority of tradition, and the scope of the Church's teaching office.

Pastoral theology is the systematic reflection on questions concerning the activity of the Church in building up the Body of Christ in society, and is thus closely related to other sub-fields like missionary theology, ecumenical theology, theology of religions, and political theology. In this connection, it should be noted that new cultural and social situations, new theories, and new scientific discoveries are among the factors that can give rise to new questions for the Church and for theologians. Late twentieth-century theology saw the emergence of many new types of theological inquiry keyed to a range of social, cultural, philosophical, and scientific contexts (Kerr, 2006). A crucial challenge for theologians who reflect on these questions in a formal way is to maintain a properly theological perspective – one that gives priority to the truth of revelation as the Church understands and confesses it (Frei, 1992).

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CHAPTER 17

The Development of Doctrine

John E. Thiel

The idea of the development of doctrine or, in Catholic parlance, the development of dogma, has appeared relatively recently in the history of Christian thought. Only in the past 200 years have theologians conceived the development of doctrine as an idea that corresponds to a historical reality and that is theologically important. Ideas, of course, are constructions of human experience that surface in particular times and places for reasons that are more or less explainable. New ideas may cause the invention of things that previously did not exist, like constitutional democracies or automobiles. Or their appearance may be explained as the conceptual discovery of phenomena that previously existed but which had eluded recognition, like the heliocentric solar system. Whether explained from inside or outside the circle of faith, the idea of the development of doctrine is an example of the second kind of idea. It was understood as the discovery of previously existing, though unrecognized, phenomena. From outside the circle of faith, these phenomena are regarded only as the ebb and flow of religious beliefs in history, which, like all things historical, are simply subject to change. From within the circle of faith, these phenomena are regarded as the believing community's revisable account of its own sacred tradition, itself a record of the Holy Spirit's presence to time and culture. In order to appreciate what this new idea conceives, let us begin by considering some examples of the fact of historical change in doctrine that Christians more recently and in faith would explain as the development of doctrine.

The Historical Formation of Christian Doctrine

Christian doctrine or "teaching" is as old as the efforts of the earliest Christians to communicate their life-transforming experience of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. First in speech and behavior, and then gradually in writing, Christians began a tradition of *paradosis* or doctrine that conveyed to their communities and to the world at large their extraordinary claims about God's saving love manifested in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Some of that teaching was imbued with the authority of God's

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