

Criteria of Catholic theology

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mediation implied in Catholicism.

I am delighted to have been asked to give this lecture, because the topic is for me, and I suspect for most of us, crucially important.* If we want to belong to an organization known as "The Catholic Theological Society of America," we should be clear in our minds about whether there is such a thing as Catholic theology and, if so, how it is to be understood. How can one tell whether theology is no longer Catholic even though it may claim to be so? My contention will be that Catholic theology ought to exist, and can be identified, because faith can be identifiably Catholic and can give a special character to theological reflection.

*[This is the text of a lecture Fr. Dulles gave at a Pre-Convention Seminar of the Catholic Theological Society of America, 8 June 1995. This seminar was initiated by members of the CTSA concerned to promote authentic Catholic theology. There was an extended discussion among the hundred and fifty participants who heard the lecture. We are grateful to *Communio* for making it available to a wider audience. Given the importance of the question, the Pre-Convention Seminar will continue in coming years, following the general orientations outlined by Fr. Dulles.—Fr. Matthew L. Lamb and Fr. Robert Imbelli, Conveners of the Seminar]

Without engaging in a full discussion of the nature of theology, I shall presuppose that it is *fides quaerens intellectum*: it is a disciplined reflection on faith and is conducted in faith. The subject matter is faith in the objective sense, *fides quae creditur*. Taking its departure from the word of God (*theo-logia*), theology explores the content and implications of divine revelation. If it wishes to be Catholic, theology adheres to the faith professed by the Catholic Church. The disciplined reflection is carried on, at least normally, from within a stance of faith, which in the case of a Catholic means personal commitment to the faith of the Catholic Church. In the absence of the subjective attitude of faith—*fides qua creditur*—the theologian would lack the spiritual attunement needed to grasp the latent meanings of Scripture and tradition, and thus to interpret them according to their divinely intended sense. The tenets of faith are not isolated propositions that could be fed into a calculator to derive logical conclusions. Rather, they are aspects of a synthetic vision that does not coalesce except for those who see with the “eyes of faith.” Even in its positive phase, in which it establishes its data through biblical and historical research, Catholic theology operates by the light of faith, reading the sources from the perspective of the believing community.

With these presuppositions about the nature of theology in general, we may turn to consider the criteria of Catholic theology. They will be variously envisaged, depending on how one understands terms such as “catholicity” and “Catholicism.”

Catholicity, as I understand it, implies fullness or wholeness, both in an intensive and in an extensive sense. The catholicity of the Christian faith means its fullness of truth and goodness and its dynamic capacity to perfect and divinize whatever is perfectible in human nature and, indeed, in the universe. The catholicity of the Church is its capacity to unite and reconcile all human beings in Christ, who is confessed as the way to the fullness of truth and of life.

Catholicism, as distinct from catholicity, has reference to the order of mediation. According to what some have called “the Catholic principle” God ordinarily confers his gifts through visible structures, including the Incarnation, Holy Scripture, the sacraments, and the apostolic ministry.¹ For the-

¹Carl J. Peter, “Justification by Faith and the Need of Another Catholic Principle,” in *Justification by Faith: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VIII*, ed. H.

ology to be Catholic it must accept both the inclusiveness implied in catholicity and the specificity of visible mediation implied in Catholicism. Striving to fulfill this dual mandate, Catholic theology has a variety of characteristics, each of which can be applied as a criterion. I shall attempt to summarize the main characteristics under fifteen headings.

1. *Reason within faith*. An operative criterion of Catholic theology since patristic times has been the supposition that faith and intelligence are friends. Theology is possible because reason is by its very nature ordered to truth and because revelation is a manifestation of the truth of God.² Catholics stand by the teaching of the First Vatican Council that “there can be no real disagreement between faith and reason, since the same God who reveals the mysteries and infuses faith has also endowed the human mind with the light of reason.”³ Confident of the harmony between faith and reason, Catholic theology avoids the pitfalls of fideism and rationalism, both of which constitute recurrent temptations for theology. Vatican I gave Catholic theology its great charter of legitimacy by declaring that human reason, while enlightened by faith, can achieve some understanding, and at that a most profitable one, of the revealed mysteries.⁴ The Council spoke in this connection of the analogous knowledge of the divine.

2. *The knowability of God*. Catholic theology has a distinctive approach to the question of God, the primary subject matter of theology. In the prevalent atmosphere of metaphysical agnosticism, it is necessary to insist more than ever that the central concepts by which we know God are not mere metaphors but true analogies. The word “God” for the Catholic is not an empty sign or an arbitrary symbol. Although there is a moment of negativity in all analogies, analogous knowledge begins with an affirmative moment and is completed with the *via eminentiae*, whereby the affirmation, in purified form, is raised to a high-

George Anderson, et al (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 304-15; Avery Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 6-10, 155-66.

²On the linkage between faith and theology through truth see the “Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian” issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (24 May 1990); translation in *Origins* 20 (5 July 1990): 117, 119-26, esp. 120 (§ 10).

³Vatican I, Constitution *Dei Filius*, ch. 4 (DS, 3017).

⁴*Ibid.* (DS, 3016).

er plane. The attributes of God, although sometimes expressed by negative terms, such as "infinite" and "immutable," have a predominantly positive significance. This positive intelligibility of the divine is set forth in official documents, such as those of the First Vatican Council, which authoritatively proclaimed:

The holy, Catholic, apostolic Roman Church believes and confesses that there is one God, true and living, Creator and Lord of heaven and earth, almighty, eternal, immense, incomprehensible, and infinite in intellect, will, and every perfection. As a single unique and spiritual substance, entirely simple and unchangeable, God must be proclaimed to be distinct from the world in reality and in essence, supremely happy in himself and from himself, and ineffably exalted above all things that exist or can be conceived besides him.⁵

Since God contains in himself all pure perfections, one may speak, in a sense, of the catholicity of God.

As known through faith this God is, of course, the triune God of the creeds, majestically delineated in the Athanasian creed and various conciliar statements, such as those of the Fourth Lateran Council. The three divine persons are not parts of God but each of them has the totality of the divine being by way of identity. The eternal persons, processions, and relations within the Godhead are matters of binding Catholic doctrine. They are not mere philosophical speculations and can certainly not be brushed off as antiquated Scholasticism. The transcendent God of the Church's faith can neither be banished to the darkness of unknowability nor be degraded to some finite status, as though God were subject to the laws of the universe. For those who wish to stand within the Catholic tradition, God must be absolute and sovereign, or else not be God.

3. *The catholicity of Christ.* The presence in God of all that is true and good has important ramifications in Christology, since Jesus Christ is the Word incarnate, fully God and fully man. Here, as in the doctrine of God, Catholic theology accepts the faith of the ancient Church, as defined in the early councils. Theological proposals that depict Jesus simply as a man full of grace, and attribute to him a distinct human personality that would render him capable of sin, are simply ruled out. Divine though

⁵Ibid., ch. 1 (DS, 3001). This descriptive definition of the term "God" is not peculiar to any one theological school. It resembles Newman's eloquent presentation of what theology teaches about God in his *The Idea of a University*, Discourse III (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), 65-66.

he be, Christ is not a mere interloper in the order of creation. Given from above, through the generous self-outpouring of the divine initiative, Jesus Christ is the very centerpiece of the plan of creation. In the words of Maurice Blondel:

One cannot remain true to Catholicism and be content with a mediocre explanation, a limited outlook which represents Christ as an accident of history, isolating him in the Cosmos as if he were an episode without proper time and place. One cannot represent him as an intruder, an alien in the crushing and hostile immensity of the universe.⁶

Taking account of the biblical texts, especially in Ephesians and Colossians, Yves Congar once wrote: "Our theology of catholicity (mine in any case) is certainly too timid, insufficiently cosmic. The Pauline theology of Christ in his cosmic role and that of the *pleroma* permit and require one to go further."⁷ Building on these Pauline texts, together with others from John and Hebrews, Catholic theology acknowledges Christ as the incarnation of the Logos in whom all things were created and in whom all things hold together, the mighty Word who sustains the world in being. Vatican II, in its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, speaks of Christ as the center of human history (GS, n. 10) and as summing up all things in himself (GS, n. 45). Any theology that displaces Christ from his central and cosmic role is insufficiently Catholic.

4. *Missionary universalism.* From the catholicity of God and of Christ it follows immediately that theology works within a universal and indeed a cosmic horizon. It reflects on the universal plan of God and on the relevance of Jesus Christ for the whole of creation. The Catholic theologian is convinced, as a matter of faith, that God has constituted Christ as the Savior of the world and as Lord of the entire universe. This conviction allows no scope for the view that he is the Lord only of the Western world or of the Christian community. Theology should be alert to detect signs that Christ in some way unites himself, as Vatican II declared, to every human being, and that everyone, including those to whom the gospel has not yet been preached,

⁶"Maurice Blondel's First Paper to Auguste Valensin," in *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin—Maurice Blondel Correspondence* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 23.

⁷Yves Congar, Preface to A. Feuillet, *Le Christ Sage du Dieu* (Paris: Gabalda, 1966), 14-15.

can in some mysterious manner participate in the paschal mystery (*GS*, n. 22). At the same time, Catholic theology will seek to understand how the proclamation of the gospel can lead people from the servitude of error to the freedom of God's truth and from the alienation of sin to reconciliation in the Body of Christ. Neglect of the Church's universal missionary mandate would be injurious to the catholic character of Christian faith and theology.

5. *Ecclesial context.* Since the Church is confessed in the creed to be Catholic, the Catholic character of theology has ecclesial implications. Faith, and consequently theology, are ecclesial in at least three senses: the Church mediates faith, is perceived in faith, and is the great believer. Theology looks to the Church not simply as a sociological entity but as the People of God, the Body of Christ, and the Temple of the Holy Spirit. The theologian's personal faith is a limited participation in the richer faith of the Church itself. Theological reflection on faith, if it is to be Catholic, must be carried on not by isolated individuals but by members of the community, which continually seeks a deeper understanding of its corporate faith. By striving to appropriate as fully as possible the faith of the whole Church, theologians enlarge and perfect their personal faith. The ecclesial character of Catholic theology distinguishes it from theologies that are purely individualist or those that make themselves accountable in the first instance to secular communities, whether academic, political, ethnic, or the like.

6. *Communion with Rome.* The ecclesial community within which the Catholic theologian reflects is in a preeminent way the Catholic Church—the Church of Jesus Christ as it subsists in the body of believers who are in communion with the church of Rome (*LG*, n. 8). Catholic theology *emanates from* the Catholic Church, as it calls upon its members to meditate on its heritage of faith; such theology *is directed to* the Catholic Church inasmuch as it strives to build up that Church. In offering the fruits of its study to the Church, theology performs a labor of love, seeking to glorify Christ by enriching the Church's understanding of the truth that Christ has revealed.

7. *Ecumenism.* This inner-Catholic quality of theology does not preclude ecumenism. The universalism implied in the very term "Catholic" encourages theologians to pray and labor for the unity of all Christians in the truth. Catholic theology should be eager to recognize and profit from all the authentically Christian elements that have been preserved in other churches and ecclesial communities, and from the good things that the

Holy Spirit has wrought in them. Catholic ecumenism, to be sure, recognizes real and important differences where they exist, and does not seek to gloss them over in a premature celebration of unity. Nor does it attribute to other churches the authority that pertains uniquely to the Catholic Church, as the ecclesial body in which the Church of Jesus Christ subsists. The very fact that a theological work has been produced in some other Christian community puts the Catholic on notice that the work, for all its brilliance, is likely to reflect the doctrinal perspective of the community from which it comes.

8. *Differentiated unity.* The wholeness implied in the term "catholicity" characterizes theology in its ecclesial aspect. Catholic theology seeks to assimilate and interpret the faith of the whole Church, that is to say, the entire communion of churches that integrally profess the faith that has been handed down from the apostles. In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female (*Gal* 3:28; *Col* 3:11). All the members, being one in the Body of Christ, must aspire to have one heart and one mind (*Acts* 4:32) and to speak in harmony with one another (*Phil* 2:2). Theologians must therefore promote allegiance to the universal Church with its structures, traditions, sacraments, and dogmas. Catholicity is opposed to sectarianism, factionalism, and party spirit (*1 Cor* 1:10-11).

The unity of the Church, however, should not be monolithic. Like modes of worship and spirituality, Catholic theology may appropriately take on various hues in different socio-cultural contexts, making use of the native genius, traditions, and cultures of each people (*LG*, n. 13; *GS*, n. 44). Catholic theology should foster a sound contextualization and address itself to the concerns of particular groups. But care must be taken not to disrupt the sense of belonging to the one Body of Christ. To proclaim a kind of theological autonomy for members of some one race, nationality, region, or gender would do violence to the Catholic character of theology. In the contemporary atmosphere of cultural relativism, it is particularly important to emphasize the value of unity resting upon universal human reason and upon the public revelation that God directs to the whole world.

Oriented as it is toward the truth of revelation, theology abstains from advocacy based on anything less than the promotion of truth itself. By seeking to promote their individual self-interest or that of some particular faction within the Church, theologians can easily blind themselves to important aspects of the truth and fall away from the universal love that is a mark of

catholicity. Theological activism is especially suspect when it takes over the axioms of some political party or sociological school and uses them as normative for theology itself.

9. *Continuity with the past.* The apostolicity of the Church is its catholicity in time—its “diachronic” catholicity, if you prefer. Like the “synchronic” catholicity just discussed, this quality of theology is in need of being defended in the face of contemporary relativism, which emphasizes the variability of beliefs from one age to the next. Modernistic historicism, which requires each generation to constitute its own truth, must be firmly rejected. Aware that the truth of revelation transcends the barriers of place and time, Catholic theology will cultivate solidarity with its own past. Confident that the Holy Spirit has been actively at work in the Church in every century and every generation, theologians will seek to draw upon the wisdom found in the great ages of patristic, medieval, and modern theology. They will gratefully receive what has been handed down in the tradition, and will seek to help others to appreciate and learn from it.

Far from impeding the development of doctrine, solidarity with the past is the very condition of authentic development. Speaking in a contemporary context, Catholic theologians will seek to present ancient truths in a language and conceptuality adapted to the needs and capacities of their own generation. While speaking in new accents, they will refrain from disparaging their predecessors and from cultivating novelty for its own sake. They will especially resist the temptation to achieve notoriety by radical revolutionary claims.

10. *Sacramentality and worship.* Out of respect for the “Catholic principle” described above, Catholic theology will recognize that the encounter with God is normally mediated by created realities. In common with Orthodox theology, it may be called sacramental. Sacramentality in the broadest sense views the whole of creation as a mirror in which the features of the Creator are reflected. But in a stricter sense sacramentality refers to the sacred actions by which Christ makes himself really and salvifically present in the midst of his people. Catholic theology ponders the saving mysteries as they are experienced through the liturgy of the Church. It avails itself of public worship as a theological font and recognizes the inseparability of the law of belief from the law of prayer, especially as attested in the approved texts and rites of the liturgy. The best theology has always been nourished by personal and ecclesial prayer and by

holiness of life. A theological proposal that weakens the life of worship or draws people away from the path of holiness will be for that very reason theologically suspect.

11. *The sense of the faithful.* Conscious that the entire Church is animated by the Holy Spirit, Catholic theology will consult the “sense of the faithful,” including clergy, religious, and laity. It will make a discriminating use of that sense, taking care not to confuse it with public opinion, which can always be led astray by the spirit of the age. The sense of the faithful (*sensus fidelium*) cannot be ascertained by Gallup polls (perhaps not even NORC polls!). It exists only in believers who are disposed to “think with the Church” (*sentire cum Ecclesia*) and is never separable from the guidance of the pastors. The saints, who are the preeminent bearers of the sense of the faith, brilliantly exemplify ways in which courageous initiative can be combined with loyalty, modesty, and prudence.

12. *Acceptance of authority.* Together with reason, Catholic theology avails itself of authority—especially the authority of Scripture and tradition as the preeminent forms of the word of God. The Catholic theologian will be on guard against any allergic attitudes toward authority, evidenced in mean-spirited and hostile criticism. In its response to canonical authorities, it will not indulge in a hermeneutics of suspicion at the expense of a hermeneutics of trust. Because God ordinarily comes to us through the means and channels of grace that he has established, the spontaneous attitude of the believer toward the sacred sources will be one of reverent receptivity. If anyone finds solid or apparently solid grounds for thinking that the process of mediation has gone awry in a particular case, probative scrutiny will be in order, but the critical distance involved in this scrutiny should not be allowed to weaken the theologian’s sense of solidarity and communion.

13. *Scripture within tradition.* Like the theology of other Christian communities, Catholic theology will continually renew itself by recourse to Scripture, the basic written source of the apostolic heritage of faith. Yet there is a distinctively Catholic approach to Scripture. Catholics are convinced that Scripture, as the permanent and unalterable form of the word of God, has been committed to the Church as its authorized custodian and interpreter. Regarding the Bible itself as inspired and canonical, Catholic theologians will refrain from treating non-canonical texts or hypothetically reconstructed sources as though they had an authority equal to, or greater than, the canonical Scriptures.

While taking advantage of the added light that can be brought by various forms of modern historical study, Catholic theology will discountenance any fragmentation of the Bible into mutually antithetical passages, and will be intent on discerning the divine meaning of the word of God in its completeness. As Vatican II declared in its Constitution on Divine Revelation, "a right understanding of the sacred texts demands attention . . . to the content and coherence of Scripture as a whole, taking account of the entire tradition of the Church and the analogy of faith" (*DV*, n. 12). No effort will be made to limit the meaning to the conscious intentions of the human author who may have composed the particular passage under consideration.

While seeking to understand the Scriptures from within the Catholic tradition, Catholic theology will make prudent use of the scholarship of non-Catholic exegetes. It will be alert, however, to detect the influence of different ecclesial allegiances and philosophical options on the interpretations proposed by such authors. Some Lutheran exegetes, for example, treat justification by faith alone (*sola fide*) as the controlling hermeneutical principle, and focus in a polemically exclusive way on the theology of the Cross. While profiting from the valid insights of these exegetes, the Catholic interpreter will be conscious of the governing theological presuppositions and will seek a more integrally Catholic approach. Exegesis, in a Catholic framework, accepts the guidance of the ecclesiastical magisterium, which has the right and sometimes the duty to render judgment concerning the true meaning of disputed passages in Holy Scripture.

14. *Fidelity to the magisterium.* Catholic theologians will cultivate a relationship of trust with the hierarchical magisterium, which has received the mission and charism to teach with the authority of Christ. The successor of Peter, and the bishops in communion with him, are individually and collectively the judges of doctrine.

Catholic theology will recognize the differing weight of different ecclesiastical pronouncements.⁸ Statements should not be treated as definitive or irreformable in the absence

⁸See Avery Dulles, *The Craft of Theology*, enlarged edition (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 108-11, for a division of magisterial statements into four major categories based on the C.D.F., "Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian."

of strong indications that they are such. But even non-infallible teachings deserve to be received with respectful submission of mind.⁹ Legitimate questions may arise about the timeliness or felicity of certain doctrinal formulations, about the force of the supporting arguments, and even, at times, about the very content of official teaching. These issues may be made the subject of dialogue between theologians and the hierarchical teachers. Such dialogue can often be of benefit to the Church as a whole. But it must be conducted in a spirit of mutual respect, with a view to the unity and peace of the whole Church. Theologians will not challenge or contradict official Catholic teaching even in non-definitive matters without serious reasons, and will never do so in a manner that impugns the teaching role of the pope and the bishops. Still less will theologians attempt to preempt the official teaching role of the hierarchy by constituting themselves as a "parallel magisterium."

In the Catholic perspective official teaching is seen not as a burden but rather as a help and a guide. The rich heritage of Catholic doctrine, certified by those who have the mandate to teach with the authority of Christ, provides a secure platform on which the theologian may stand when dealing with new questions. Thanks to the cumulative character of the process of doctrinal development, theologians are dispensed from continually having to reexamine matters that have been definitively settled. They are liberated to concentrate on new and actual questions, bringing to bear the full resources of Catholic wisdom as it has developed over the ages.

15. *Association with the magisterium.* The question is sometimes raised whether Catholic theologians enjoy doctrinal authority as teachers, so that their collective judgment could be taken as a criterion of truth. In times and places when theological degrees are conferred by ecclesiastical authority with the requirement of a profession of faith, the faculties of Catholic universities can exercise a quasi-magisterial role. In earlier centuries they frequently pronounced on the orthodoxy of writings that were submitted to them. The *consensus theologorum* was commonly listed as a theological locus. But in contemporary America the possession of a doctoral degree or membership in a

⁹This last term is my attempt to translate the difficult and much debated Latin term "*religioso animi obsequio*" (*LG*, n. 25).