

Catholic Theology in America: Quo Vadis?

REINHARD HÜTTER
Duke University Divinity School
Durham, North Carolina

ON* September 19, 2010, at Crofton Park in Birmingham, England, Pope Benedict XVI beatified John Henry Newman. Soon afterwards, on October 9, 2010, the Catholic Church in England for the first time commemorated Blessed John Henry Newman. For that day, the Office of Readings of the Liturgy of the Hours provided a well-chosen passage from the *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, Newman's most famous work.

"I believe the whole revealed dogma as taught by the Apostles, as committed by the Apostles to the Church, and as declared by the Church to me," wrote Newman, referring to his faith as a Catholic. "I receive it, as it is infallibly interpreted by the authority to whom it is thus committed, and (implicitly) as it shall be, in like manner, further interpreted by that same authority till the end of time." In itself this affirmation of the magisterium of the Church is unexceptional, but Newman goes on, emphasizing his docility: "I submit, moreover, to the universally received traditions of the Church, in which lies the matter of those new dogmatic definitions which are from time to time made, and which in all times are the clothing and the illustration of the Catholic dogma as already defined. And I submit myself to those other decisions of the Holy See, theological or not, through the organs which it has itself appointed, which, waiving the question of their infallibility, on the lowest ground come to me with a claim to be accepted and obeyed."

Had I been presented with Newman's affirmations on the feast of the Holy Innocents, 2004, when my wife and I were received into the full communion of the Catholic Church, I could have made his word my

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own, not only without qualification but also with a real sense of joy. For my experience has been like Newman's, who expressed it better than I can: "It was like coming into port after a rough sea; and my happiness on that score remains to this day without interruption."

As I was to learn, however, becoming Catholic is one thing; becoming a Catholic theologian is quite another. The former entails the loving assent to the Church's faith; the latter involves the arduous acquisition of theological wisdom. As a result, while I could see that the former requires catechetical instruction—one needs to know what the Church teaches—I came to see that the latter requires a deeper spiritual and theological formation.

This formation is not easy to acquire. Catholic theologians in the making must negotiate a difficult and often treacherous landscape in America, for our late modern times are all too absorbing. Where do "young" Catholic theologians—whether still in graduate programs, or in their first teaching positions, or "late born" like myself—find the kind of intellectual and spiritual guidance and formation that allows them to pursue a vision other than that of simply being functionaries of their academic guild?

The problem was not unknown to me. As a Lutheran theologian I recognized that the general pattern of modernity has pushed theological analysis and reflection to the margins of the intellectual life and the universities. To survive, theology departments have steadily adopted theologically extraneous perspectives of self-understanding and standards of self-evaluation that ever so subtly estrange theologians from their subject matter. For the up-and-coming young theologian who seeks advancement, and who wishes to be globally marketable to any institution that offers a job, it becomes nearly impossible to resist the pressure to embrace the attitudes and behaviors expected by the secular university. So where can Catholic theologians in the making be theologically and spiritually formed today so that they may aspire to the most intellectually rigorous understanding of the revealed truth? Where will they be instructed with the greatest fidelity to the Church? What will help them resist the one-sided and exaggerated contemporaneous academic emphasis on originality and productivity?

The unity and coherence of theology can be accounted for only if we explicitly conceive of it as an ecclesial intellectual practice of the Church, arising from the Church's nature and mission. This was the burden of the argument in my 1999 book, *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice*. The book was intended as an implicit challenge to certain forms of liberal Protestant theology that, uprooted from any ecclesial setting and accountability, rapidly had come to endorse a historicist relativism and subjectivism and eventually ended up embracing and celebrating individual arbitration in all matters of faith and morals. To me this conclusion felt

like a new discovery, but of course I had only reproduced, in an “evangelical catholic” key, what then-cardinal Joseph Ratzinger already had argued in his small but important book, *The Nature and Mission of Theology: Essays to Orient Theology in Today’s Debates*: that theology is essentially ecclesial, and theologians have an essentially ecclesial vocation.

And so, with a firm sense that becoming a Catholic theologian required me to enter into a specifically church-oriented tradition of intellectual and spiritual formation, I gladly became, once again, a student of theology, this time Catholic instead of Lutheran. Some sobering surprises lay ahead. As I looked for well-developed and intellectually continuous Catholic modes of theological inquiry—the very conditions for the possibility of a spiritually sound and intellectually rigorous formation in Catholic theology—I found myself challenged in a rather unexpected way. The Church welcomed me as a believer, but her theological life seemed less hospitable.

From the outset I sensed a troubling fragmentation, and Alasdair MacIntyre’s famous image from *After Virtue* of a scientific discourse in ruins came to haunt me again and again. Reading around in the current theological literature, I found that important concepts often were ripped from the original contexts only to be revised, reenvisioned, and recombined. Various theologies *du jour* seemed quickly to replace each other, and the imperative of immediate impact and relevance haunted all too many publications.

Newman himself saw the danger in fragmentation, which ends up tempting us to build our theological vocations on a personal source synthesis. When he became a Catholic, he wanted to submit himself to the Church’s theological tradition rather than pick and choose on his own. As he wrote, “Gradually and in the course of ages, Catholic inquiry has taken certain definite shapes, and has thrown itself into the form of a science, with a method and a phraseology of its own, under the intellectual handling of great minds, such as St. Athanasius, St. Augustine, and St. Thomas; and I feel no temptation at all to break in pieces the great legacy of thought thus committed to us for these latter days.” In my efforts to allow my mind to be formed by the Catholic theological tradition, my own sensibilities moved in the same direction. I did not want to inhabit a theological world that had been broken into pieces, for that would involve an approach that required me to reassemble the fragments myself, and the danger would be that my old Lutheran sensibilities—or, worse, my secular academic sensibilities—would do the reconstructing.

Although it is possible to employ the term too simplistically, I think the situation of fragmentation arises from what Pope Benedict XVI has envisaged under the rubric of a “hermeneutic of discontinuity,” an approach to

theology that draws a sharp line between pre-Vatican II Catholicism and the new and different spiritual and intellectual atmosphere supposedly mandated by the council. As a Lutheran I experienced the dangers of a modern, liberal Protestant theology insufficiently rooted in ecclesial tradition, in part because of a similar hermeneutics of discontinuity—in this case, one that spoke of the vast difference between premodern and modern worldviews. By this way of thinking, older Protestant dogmatic theology was no longer viable, and Protestantism needed to be put on a new footing that would be relevant to “modern man.” In both the more recent Catholic talk of discontinuity and the older Protestant habit of doing the same, the rich and sophisticated theologies of the past are cut off from the present, depriving theological students of the pedagogy of tradition.

The notion of discontinuity has been reinforced by the pervasive adoption of the parliamentary political geography of left and right, progressive and conservative. These labels create the illusion that the Church’s theological culture involves taking sides, either on behalf of the past or for the sake of the future, when the contrary is true. As Newman understood, the future of the Church is best served by a submission to her past modes of reflection—modes that educate us to meet future challenges with a faithful intelligence. As long as categories of secular politics dominate the theological imagination of the Church, an intellectually rigorous and spiritually alive Catholic inquiry in Newman’s sense and a correlative formation of future Catholic theologians hardly seem possible.

In view of the poverty of a hermeneutics of discontinuity, I have found myself regularly drawn into a form of contemporary Catholic thought that has flourished in the modern era and that provides a nuanced vision of continuity: historical theology. I consistently encounter profound work being done in patristic and medieval studies and in studies of the early modern and modern periods—work that is historically rich, intellectually sophisticated, and ecclesially relevant. This remarkable work would have been inconceivable without some significant institutional initiatives undertaken in the last century: the intentional development of centers of patristic and medieval studies at leading Catholic universities in America. These institutional efforts were flanked by renewed study of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation periods, and, more recently, by the noteworthy initiatives undertaken by younger scholars investigating Catholicism’s varied responses to the Enlightenment.

The same fruitful renewal of already existing dimensions of the Catholic tradition strikes me as the case for philosophy as well. Whether Catholic philosophers in America continue to draw on the *philosophia perennis* (as, fortunately, many still do), or on phenomenology, or on the analytic tradi-

tion, or whether they work by way of meticulous interpretations of such classical figures as Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Scotus, Ockham, or Suarez, there is at work a consistently rigorous mode of inquiry that serves as a great inspiration and model for the intellectual formation of a late-born Catholic theologian like me. In instances when I found myself comparing the philosophy and theology departments of Catholic universities, the philosophy departments struck me most often as superior, not only in intellectual rigor but also in Catholic substance. When Catholic theology in America is again able, across the board, to match or surpass the intellectual rigor and Catholic substance of the best Catholic philosophy departments, we can call it a new day in Catholic theology in this country.

What will bring about this new day? My previous Lutheran theological education, received at two German universities, taught me the importance of an intellectually demanding theological formation in a reasonably coherent curriculum. In the years of my training, Lutheran theological formation in Germany was still characterized by a tangible inner coherence among all subdisciplines and by an accountability to a shared theological inquiry that always was larger than the sum of its parts. There also still existed distinct theological schools (or remnants thereof) that facilitated and intensified theological formation—schools that had formed around such eminent theological figures as Friedrich Schleiermacher, Albrecht Ritschl, Martin Luther (of the Luther Renaissance of the early twentieth century), Karl Barth, and Rudolf Bultmann.

Something similar is necessary in contemporary Catholicism, both to combat fragmentation and to provide a means for students to achieve a theological synthesis that is communal rather than merely personal. Indeed, the decades after Vatican II provide important evidence of this necessity. Most of the dogmatic theologians who at present serve as points of reference, orientation, or departure for Catholic theology in America were trained before Vatican II, at a time when dogmatic theology not only was an intellectually robust and rigorous intellectual discipline but also was dominated by theological schools, the most influential of which were schools of various forms of Thomism (broadly conceived) or of Suarezianism (an attempt at a synthesis of Thomism, Scotism, and Nominalism). This is true of Karl Rahner, Bernard Lonergan, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Henri de Lubac, and others. These theological schools provided the intellectual horizon for the important innovations and insights these figures brought to the Catholic tradition.

Soon after the council, and in the wake of rather precipitous curriculum reforms, the unity of dogmatic theology rapidly disappeared; at the same time, its intellectual rigor tangibly declined. Interestingly, this decline

coincided in complex ways with Karl Rahner's unparalleled influence on the discipline. Rahner's early work goes under the label of Transcendental Thomism. It is conceptually rigorous and had the potential for forming a theological school, the first beginnings of which could be seen in the American context in the years immediately following Vatican II. Rahner himself, however, developed in ways that led him to read Vatican II more and more through a hermeneutics of discontinuity and rupture, and this mentality came to define the work of most of his American disciples.

Faithful to the hermeneutics of discontinuity, they ceased to regard as relevant the basic thrust of Transcendental Thomism—to revise and renew a continuous theological tradition. As a result, the third generation of American Rahnerians has merged with those who understand systematic theology exclusively as critical reflection on the role of religion in political and cultural contexts, usually in service of a program of liberation, self-realization, and social justice. Today, post-post-Rahnerians—always in pursuit of the paradigmatic modern Protestant goal of relevance—treat revision of the Catholic faith and morals as the main task of contemporary Catholic theology. Where the hermeneutics of discontinuity and rupture dominates, Catholic systematic theology is shaped by revision and construction in service of social, cultural, and political ends.

In addition to Karl Rahner, Bernard Lonergan has had an important influence on Catholic systematic theology in America, again with the potential of forming a theological school, of which there were indeed tangible beginnings. But Lonergan is difficult to understand and, hence, hard to teach. Today the efforts to communicate Lonergan's important insights have born fruit in a remarkable edition of Lonergan's works. But there is no ongoing school of Lonergan, either here or in Europe.

Rahner and Lonergan do not exhaust the options today. Avery Cardinal Dulles was, for better or worse, a one-man school. Over the course of several decades, his fairness, objectivity, and aversion to polemical discourse won the respect of the whole field. But his influence was largely personal. He was the embodiment of the learned, ecclesially formed theologian. Since his death no theologian has been able to assume this position and role, perhaps because Dulles, like the other influential theologians in the decades after Vatican II, was trained before the council and thus within the reigning school theologies of the era. Because these schools were set aside by the hermeneutics of discontinuity, they have been unavailable to the generations trained after the council. Only now are they being revived.

One can point, first, to the relatively small but active *Communio* movement, which was inspired by an important group of conciliar and postc-

onciliar theologians, first and foremost among them Henri de Lubac, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Joseph Ratzinger. This theological movement is characterized by a sweeping theological vision, a renewal of theological biblical exegesis by way of a sustained recovery of the theologians of the patristic and early medieval periods, an authentic and profound fidelity to the magisterium, and a consistent and sustained engagement with the wider culture. Without doubt, the *Communio* movement will remain important, but it is not conducive to forming a theological school. Unlike Rahner and Lonergan's theological syntheses, both of which undertook to infuse modern, post-Kantian concepts into a modified, but still identifiably Thomistic frame of reference, the *Communio* movement is diverse. It is unified by a shared vision, a shared intuition, and a shared approach of patristic *ressourcement* rather than by a shared conceptual vocabulary. For a theological student already formed in proper ways, the great *Communio* theologians provide the occasion for a profound spiritual illumination and theological edification, in large part because they are exemplary soloists. Yet today we have a greater need, perhaps, for basic training; this requires a disciplined school of inquiry that may not soar to the heights one finds in the best of the *Communio* movement but nonetheless reliably provides the basis for an intelligent appreciation of its achievements.

As I immersed myself in the treasures of the *Communio* movement, I continued to search for a Catholic inquiry that, in Newman's words, "has taken certain definite shapes, and has thrown itself into the form of a science, with a method and a phraseology of its own." I eventually found what few observers of the Catholic theological scene would have expected thirty years ago: a small band of theologians who might best be called *Ressourcement* Thomists. These are students of the doctor communis, Thomas Aquinas, who seek a coherent and rigorous Catholic theological inquiry that has the intellectually and spiritually formative power of a school. They are in conversation with biblical exegesis and intentional about receiving the documents of Vatican II in a hermeneutics of renewal and development. Moreover, this emerging Thomist *Ressourcement* is aware of a certain tendency in all schools to become narrow, and it seeks to avoid this danger by pursuing its work in dialogue with Protestant theology and with Jewish and Muslim thought. Rooted in the synthetic vision of Thomas Aquinas, this Thomist *Ressourcement* is abidingly committed to a search for a coherent but expansive Catholic inquiry and uncompromisingly insistent on high intellectual standards as well as the communicability of theology.

Catholic theology in America: Quo vadis? What kind of Catholic inquiry will welcome, orient, guide, and instruct young theologians in the

years to come? Not a few of them will have been inspired by the works of an Augustine, a Bonaventure, an Aquinas, a Newman, a Scheeben, a de Lubac, a Maritain, a von Balthasar, a Ratzinger. Where will they find a coherent Catholic inquiry that comprehensively draws them in and equips them intellectually and spiritually in ways that will enable them to continue this grand tradition? The *Communio* movement and the Thomist Ressourcement are squarely rooted in the Church's doctrinal and intellectual tradition, and both are eager to engage and resist an increasingly obvious cultural and political context of sovereign secularism. As de Lubac emphasized, we embrace the gospel not as isolated individuals ensconced in the competitions of the academy, but under the tutelage of what de Lubac called *la maternité de l'église*—the motherhood of the Church.

Catholic theology in America stands at a crossroads. Some Catholic theologians seem already to have anticipated what Walker Percy described as the split-off "American Catholic Church." The Church these theologians seem to have on their minds is an ideal construct, a specious amalgam of current political ideals. A more difficult labor awaits those who wish to stand on the shoulders of the doctors and councils of the Church to learn, even now, the fullness of the mysteries of Jesus Christ. This labor can begin only with the acknowledgment that, in Newman's words, Catholic theology "has taken certain definite shapes, and has thrown itself into the form of a science, with a method and a phraseology of its own, under the intellectual handling of great minds, such as St. Athanasius, St. Augustine, and St. Thomas." Through a patient labor in pedagogy that trains theological students within these "definite shapes," the handing on and development of Catholic faith can be accomplished.

Ultimately, what is at stake—as Augustine realized during his own lengthy struggle with the trendy theologies of his day—is our heart's desire. We will not find what we seek in Jesus Christ unless we put ourselves under the tutelage of the "church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth" (1 Tim 3:15), for "great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of our religion" (1 Tim 3:16). As Newman reminds us again and again, "private judgment" cannot reliably interpret the Holy Spirit's work in Christ's Body. And so Catholic theology cannot establish itself as a *de facto* counter-magisterium, remaining in a splendid isolation from the Church. Nor should it seek to win a lasting standing in the secular academy that provides it a career path like that of any other academic profession. Nor, finally, will Catholic theology flourish if it is transmuted into "religious studies" to market its remnants in a post-Christian society. Whatever one thinks about the best way to give coherent and even sophisticated shape to Catholic theology, we must acknowledge that the

Church herself gives us our theological task: to assist the bishops in communicating, explaining, defending, and understanding the faith that comes from the apostles—a faith that is to be shared and witnessed to, in season and out of season.

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