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A Vision for Theological Research and Scholarship

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A vision comes out of one's own experience, out of the delights and disconnects of life. To speak then about a vision for scholarship – what kinds of scholarship are needed to resource education, pastoral work and the life of faith – I will begin from my own experience. As a brother of Taizé, intense theological reflection was always coupled with pastoral concern. In fact, theological reflection happened because of the pastoral needs witnessed in the many young people visiting the community. The needs of the people, the needs of the neighbor, irrupted into theological reflection and scholarship.

Academia, as it is organized in North America, tends as you all know to dissociate these two spheres or at least to set boundary lines around them. But I want to hold on to what I experienced as a monk. And so I have this vision for theological scholarship that is continually interrupted and marked by the needs of the neighbor, the church, the local community. The Christian practices that I engage (for example communal prayer) are not pre-established or simply acquired from the tradition neither are they self-invented, rather they are dictated by the needs of my neighbor. They are “the traditioned yet always-emerging patterns through which communities live...” (Dorothy Bass, 32)

Perhaps, I could best define this type of scholarship as a witness or testimony. The scholarship itself witnesses to the need, the cry, of my context, culture, neighbor. It witnesses and in that witness it embodies that cry. The cry is recognized as one's own deep cry, need.

This type of scholarship is then a spiritual discipline rather than simply an academic or rational pursuit. I believe that Tom Long's work is engaged in this type of testimony. His work witnesses to the deep underlying dis-ease in our culture with body and death; it witnesses to the needs and cry of people, pastors, believers and non-believers and in so doing he is able to retrieve an ancient practice – the funeral liturgy – as a practice that truly preaches, or proclaims the Gospel, an abundant way of life and death. Proclamation reconfigures what it means to live as a disciple. Scholarship opens up questions for the heart as well as the mind.

This model of scholarship is attuned to culture but it also questions culture. Attuned to culture, theological scholarship will question the relationship between practices and culture. Scholarship will grapple with context, particularly with a post-Christendom context. Recognizing that Christian practices are deeply formed by a cultural context, scholarship will be both truth-telling and imaginative. The counter-cultural character of practices will be highlighted – as Tom Long has done with the funeral liturgy. And in some cases perhaps, daring proposals need to be made that redefine the “parish” center (and therefore the community of faith as presently conceived). Scholarship, in its critique of culture, is therefore also prophetic.

Scholarship as prophetic witness will point to those aspects of practices that are conformist and those that are creative. It will name the dead-ends of culture and the dead-ends of practice. For example, it might ask about the *telos* of Christian practices and arrive at surprising conclusions. What are practices forming? Individual or communal identity? But what if the concern about identity is a cultural artifact? Can scholarship envision practices that are not framed by a goal or *telos* such as identity, even Christian

identity? What if practices are cruciform – conforming us to death and life in Jesus where identity takes back-stage, as in the case of John the Baptist, always pointing away from himself to Another?

Scholarship will dare to propose portraits of Christian life that are not pleasing. When presenting Martin Luther’s understanding of baptism to students, they said “if we preached that no one would come to church!” Scholarship needs to continually address the question about its goal: why are we proclaiming the Gospel? To bring people to church? To form communities of faith that might have a totally different boundary from “church”? In this sense, scholarship is adventurous: to explore, ask, provoke and not to resolve, classify, explain. Such scholarship that does not lead first of all to knowledge but to a disruption of knowledge.

This daring or adventurous scholarship is not afraid of redefining certain basic Christian theological assumptions.

Tom Long’s *The Christian Funeral*, for example, provides a basis for asking questions about baptism. What is the character of baptism and how is it lived out in our communities? The practice – in this case a liturgical practice – offers the possibility of redefining core theological assumptions about baptism and the character of Christian vocation. This redefining requires, I believe, a new vocabulary. Scholarship can draw upon a language developed outside the theological realm. It needs to be interdisciplinary and very collaborative. The language of culture, for example, can often better embody its own deep cry and its own joyful wonder. Scholarship therefore needs to continually question its own use of language.

This attentiveness to language, its own and that of culture, will enable theological scholarship to engage culture not in condemnation nor in simple conformity but by enabling culture to better “hear” its own cry and “see” its own need. By engaging a different language, theological scholarship will be able to imagine and propose unrehearsed Christian characters.

I envision theological scholarship that moves towards disruption and reconciliation. The scholarship that is needed is not simply a body of knowledge. It is first of all inviting students into the disruptive nature of practice and knowledge and life. This disruptive characteristic has nothing negative about it (unless you wish to resist that work of the Holy Spirit!). In this sense, scholarship itself is a practice that embodies the dying and rising of Jesus Christ. Death and life are inscribed in its writing.

When this happens, the reconciliation that we know in Jesus is offered as a reality and a vision. Scholarship invites students on this journey where reconciliation is already a reality given in faith. Theology is then not binding, utilitarian, productive but freeing.

I conclude with a few questions! Can scholarship embody that fundamental gift of reconciliation? What does this reconciliation in Christ look like in our practices and in our scholarship? How is it embodied in our research and writing? What is the language of reconciliation? Theological scholarship can spark the imagination and disrupt time-honored characters to allow for those unrehearsed characters in Christian practices. This scholarship will spur on an imaginative pedagogy and even open up resources of spirituality.

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