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TALKING BACK

Lay Theologians Create a Whole New Climate

By Joseph F. Kelly

In the Fall 2007 issue of *Conversations*, Patrick Carey surveyed "Theology/Religious Studies: What's Happened in Since 1965," focusing on curricular matters. This piece focuses on the most obvious change: the personnel. Because of the vocation decline, theology/religious studies departments have mostly gone from majority Jesuit to majority lay, often with sizeable lay majorities. It is impossible to have such a massive change without some impact on the departments and how theology is done in this country. This brief article will discuss some consequences of these changes. But first a preface.

All writers have had the experience of making objective statements, only to see critics distort them into partisan positions, so let me be clear. First, lay theologians want Jesuit colleagues. We believe that the vocation decline has deleterious consequences for Jesuit

universities because their educational ideals require the presence of those who live the Society's charism. Second, I studied with several great Jesuit scholars — James Hennessey, Charles Lohr, Ladislav Orsy, and my mentor Robert McNally. I have personal experience and gratitude for Jesuit scholarship, and it saddens me that my students will not encounter such men. Third, JCU, like other institutions, has an affirmative action policy for Jesuits. We take it very seriously, although our best efforts usually bear little fruit. What follows is an objective account.

A new unique historical situation has come into existence. A sizeable majority of Catholic theologians now have no institutional relationship with the hierarchy. Except at those institutions which give bishops a constitutional role, lay theologians are responsible primarily to the university and to a lesser extent to the discipline. They are evaluated as theologians not by episcopal approval but by

the quality of their doctoral institutions, their books and articles, their grants and fellowships, and presentations to learned societies. Today a theologian can spend her/his career solely within academic confines, literally never work with the local ordinary, and yet still enjoy enormous influence. Let me use a simple example: a theologian's book might receive strong praise from the ordinary, but, on campus, that praise cannot begin to compensate for a negative review in *Theological Studies*.

Lay theologians also have freedom from ecclesiastical penalties. They cannot be transferred by a provincial or deposed from a job by bishops. Ecclesiastical authorities can investigate their teachings, but, thanks to academic freedom, which universities ensure, the investigators cannot

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secure the theologian's removal from the faculty. A lay theologian now enjoys the same right to free expression as chemists, economists, and sociologists. Personal freedom goes with it: she/he could get divorced or even convert to a different religion without fear of academic reprisal.

The latter point seems puzzling. Since theology is *fides quaerens intellectum*, how can someone teach theology without being a believer? I agree, but a different situation obtains at a university. The theologian – or her/his attorney – could ask university administrators if there is an official university document that states that a Catholic theologian can be dismissed for converting. Does the institution offer courses in Comparative/World Religions, in which Christians (i.e., non-believers) teach about Buddhism and Hinduism? Would the administration dismiss someone who converts *to* Catholicism? And, most effectively, despite external professions of fidelity, how can the administration ever actually know what anyone believes? There could be closet atheists who just want to keep their jobs! To be sure, the foregoing is hypothetical, but my point is that that situation of the theologian in the modern university differs considerably from that in universities a generation or two ago and in a seminary.

In actual fact, most lay theologians are practicing Catholics who wish to work with the bishops, and most bishops and diocesan officials would like to work with the theologians, as happens all over this country, but such cooperation does obviate the new historical situation, the consequences of which are just beginning to be understood.



University of Detroit Mercy.

Let us look at another area. Theologians bring to their task knowledge gained from their scholarly training but also from their personal experiences. Priest theologians know sacramental theology from the books, but they also bring to the subject their pastoral experience of having administered sacraments. They provide a view of the subject simply unavailable to lay theologians, who acknowl-

edge this. Bishops also accept this experiential knowledge because they understand it and even have superior experiential knowledge because priest-theologians have never administered confirmation or ordination.

Lay theologians also bring additional – and hitherto unknown among theologians – knowledge of subjects such as marriage and, for some, of divorce; of raising children; of sexual activity; and, for half of them, of being a woman. Their priest colleagues respect and value this knowledge. Indeed sometimes too much. At my first

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job, the Dominican chairperson asked me, a church historian, to teach the course on the theology of marriage, as he put it, "for obvious reasons." Since my knowledge of the theology of marriage was limited, I had to decline.

Lay theologians consider this new, additional knowledge a gift they can offer not just to their theological colleagues but to the Church at large. Yet new knowledge often forces people to re-think traditional positions, something that causes problems and something that many in authority reject, a lesson learned by Catholic exegetes who concluded that the virginal conception is more likely a theological phenomenon than a biological fact. Bishops may acknowledge the value of priestly experiential knowledge in doing theology, but will they acknowledge the value of lay experiential knowledge, since doing so would at some point entail re-thinking and even changing traditional views?

To use a brief example, divorced theologians understandably differ with the traditional view, but so do many married theologians because they know the stresses that accompany marriage and that some couples cannot handle them. Supporters of the traditional teaching laudably emphasize the permanence of matri-

mony, but others see a person who is hurting, who did not sin but rather just made a poor choice at a young age, left a lifeless relationship, and now, to remain Catholic, must go through life with no spouse, children, or grandchildren. Theologians who feel like that will present the traditional teaching, but probably with sympathy for divorced people and a hope that the traditional teaching can be re-thought.

And what goes for lay theologians as a group can be multiplied exponentially for women theologians, whose must overcome the

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obstacles and indignities of gender discrimination – but a woman should deal with those matters.

Bishops, who have so much administrative work to do, have traditionally relied upon professional theologians for theological advice. Now the great majority of professional theologians are lay people whose lives, premises, and outlooks differ, sometimes significantly, from those of the bishops. Both groups must recognize these differences and try to bridge any gaps. Theologians cannot teach apart from the bishops, but the theologians are the ones who actually teach young Catholics. How sad it would be for the Church if the official and the actual teachers do not work together. I can only pray that all theologians, priestly and lay, can work with the magisterium so that the gifts lay theologians offer will be seen and accepted as such. ■



Grasselli Tower, the first structure to rise on John Carroll's campus more than 75 years ago.