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How to Live with a Theologian

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In the "good old days," theologians could talk to each other through learned theological journals and discussions without fear of being misquoted or misunderstood. Very few people knew what they were talking about and that was fine because their new theories had a chance to become clarified before they filtered down through seminaries, universities, workshops, journals, parish pulpits and classrooms where they might begin to have an impact on the body of the Church.

Now that situation has changed because of two developments. The first lies in the immense progress — way out of proportion to the achievements of the previous centuries — in the development of the tools for understanding the origins and approaches of scriptural documents. We now make judgments based on better intellectual foundations. The second development has come principally during and after the Council. There has been an extraordinary decline in the control exercised by authority over theological scholarship. Previously "Rome says" could delay the appearance of "far out" theories from reaching the market place until they had been tested. Today a new theory appears and tomorrow it is printed in *Time* or *Newsweek* without benefit of the long-term challenge of professional criticism.

Many people pick up their theology from the daily newspaper. As a result, they become confused and disturbed and wonder if the Church isn't falling apart. These people need guidelines to help them "keep the faith" and learn to live with over-eager theologians, impatient with getting their views aired. Perhaps the following thoughts will help.

- 1) The opinion of a Catholic theologian, or even a cluster of them, is not necessarily the teaching of the Catholic Church.
- 2) Because of its purposes and procedures, the *official* teaching of the Church will always seem somewhat behind the times because it tries to be sensitive to the attitudes and practices of the people in the pews.
- 3) There is nothing in Catholic teaching which says that the teaching of the Church will not change. The fundamentals remain the same, but the Church can and does respond to new social situations, to new understandings of Scripture, of nature, of society and of men. There is always room for new insights and refinements.
- 4) Theologians can theorize all they want; a few may even find themselves questioning one or the other of these basic religious beliefs.

But the *authoritative* teaching of the Church does not depend directly on them. The *validity* of a new interpretation of papal infallibility is not going to be determined by a column in a diocesan newspaper, by a religion teacher in the local Catholic high school or by a parish priest in his Sunday homily.

5) There is no need to get all stirred up by a news story that appears in the religion section of *Time* or *Newsweek*. They should be read thoughtfully and reflected upon. We have a responsibility to learn all that we can about God and our relationship to Him from whatever source. After all, the test of the religious person's life is the quality of his religious response.

6) Leave the infighting to the pros. We'll continue to hear reports of controversies and disagreements between various Catholic authorities (scholarly and official) but we should not let these discussions disturb us. At least someone is doing some thinking.

7) Realize that hardly any of the most pompously announced new theories of today will stand without rejection or substantial modification five years from now.

8) Finally, try to convince yourself that the invitation of Jesus was not extended only to those who possess doctorates in theology. It was extended to all — the simple and the unlettered as well as the learned and the skillful. These are wonderful days. Let's use them to draw closer to God. Keep the faith. (Thanks to J. R., C.S.C.)

Early in the century G. K. Chesterton wrote: "A piece of peculiarly bad advice is constantly given to modern writers, especially to modern theologians: that they should adapt themselves to the spirit of our age. If there is one thing that has made shipwreck of mankind since its beginning, it has been the spirit of the age which always means exaggerating still further something that is grossly exaggerated already."

c. 1915