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# Experiences: Theology as Hard-Won Wisdom

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### *Theology as Hard-Won Wisdom*

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**T**hink of someone with amnesia. Without memory, a person does not know who he or she is. Memory gives us our bearings: tells us who we are, where we

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*It seems important to return doctrine to the thicket of the history that created it. Such an approach means looking at flesh-and-blood churches. It means meeting real saints with their piercing insights and their amazing blind spots. Most of all, it means recognizing that human history matters for a faith which makes the Incarnation the centerpiece of its teaching.*

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are going, why we do what we do. This is true not only for individuals. It applies equally to the Church. If we do not take care of our communal memory as Church, we risk losing our very selves, forgetting who we are, where we are going, why we do what we do.

And so it is in the arena of memory, of history, that I have come to root my work as a teacher and as a theologian. I teach Church history; or more precisely, I teach Catholi-

cism via the medium of Church history. Let me give an example. In introductory theology, we examine, of course, the question of the divinity of Christ, but we do not survey the whole history of Christian thinking on the matter. Instead we focus on a single episode: Athanasius' defense of the Nicene Creed. And we don't just look at final formulae. We go back and re-enact the debates. We explore the colorful personalities, the zigzagging politics, the tumult in the streets. We grapple with the arguments, their biblical moorings and their implications for spirituality. In a semester-long course, we might embark on 25 to 30 such case-studies: the Cappadocians on the trinity, Augustine on the resurrection of the body, Thomas Aquinas on the real presence, Teresa of Avila on mysticism, Vatican II on ecclesiology.

This case-study method lets one balance depth with breadth, and at the same time prevents history from becoming a blur of names and dates. But the issue is not simply pedagogical. It is also theological. Too often Catholic theology has been presented as a vast system divorced from the life-stories of those who have shaped it, as though Catholic teaching had been wrought outside the bounds of time and space. It seems to me important to return doctrine to the thicket of the history that created it. Such an approach means looking not at disembodied ideas of Church, but at flesh-and-blood churches, at churches which, for all their messiness and ambiguity, throbbed with life. It means meeting saints, not the plaster-cast variety, but real ones, with their piercing insights and their amazing blind spots. Most of all, it means recognizing that human history matters, at least for a faith which makes

the Incarnation (God entering as flesh-and-blood into human history) the centerpiece of its teaching.

I realize that wandering through the history of Christianity does not offer us pre-packaged solutions to current problems. But it does put us in touch with tradition, what Jaroslav Pelikan has called "the living faith of the dead."<sup>1</sup> Pelikan has argued—rightly, I believe—that to nurture the living faith of the living, we need "to include the dead within the circle... of our conversation."<sup>2</sup> Such efforts presume that those who have gone before us have something to say to us; that there exists a continuity between their living faith and ours; and that they possess a wisdom, admittedly a wisdom with quite definite limits, but a wisdom nonetheless. My hope is that by reflecting on those who have come before us, we might not forget a hard-won wisdom and might gain from their guidance the ability to ask new questions and to explore new courses that may indeed serve the task of living faith.

One of my students came up at the end of a course and said, "I see why we studied all that history: because Catholicism is unfinished. There's much more to do. It's our turn now—to go deeper, further, to be the next story." Exactly.

1. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 9.

2. Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 82.