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Susan K. Wood

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THEN AND NOW

Theology Confronts ALL of Modern Culture

By Susan K. Wood

Theological education has changed dramatically. Before Vatican II college courses were primarily catechetical. Most of the professors were Roman Catholic priests who did not hold doctorates and who were trained from Neo-Scholastic manuals in seminaries. Teachers presumed that their students would be Roman Catholic. Graduate courses for the laity were unknown.

In the early 1900s, college bulletins emphasized the religious foundation of all education, but the study of Neo-Scholastic philosophy was the distinguishing characteristic of the traditional liberal arts curriculum in Catholic colleges before the academic study of religion became an established part of the curriculum. The hegemony of Neo-Scholasticism, reaffirmed in Pius XII's encyclical, *Humani Generis*, in 1950, waned by the end of the decade and all but disappeared by the mid-1960s. The academic study of religion in the curriculum began in the 1990s. The debate on its role was formulated as "theology" vs. "religion," the former identified as "scientific," and the latter as "homiletic" or "catechetical." Thus the effort to make theology an academic discipline moved it beyond catechetics to include a rational reflection on the content of faith. It became, in the words of Anselm, *fides quaerens intellectum*.

World War II inaugurated a Catholic intellectual revival and was a turning point in the relationship of Catholic institutions to the wider culture. John Courtney Murray, S.J., a prominent voice in the debate over the nature of college theology in the 1940s, summarized what a college religion course might seek to accomplish in the *Jesuit Educational Quarterly*, Oct. 1949:

... the aim of the course would be "education unto religious adulthood, in intelligence, character, and sentiment." Adulthood in religious intelligence involves (1) a movement from the sur-

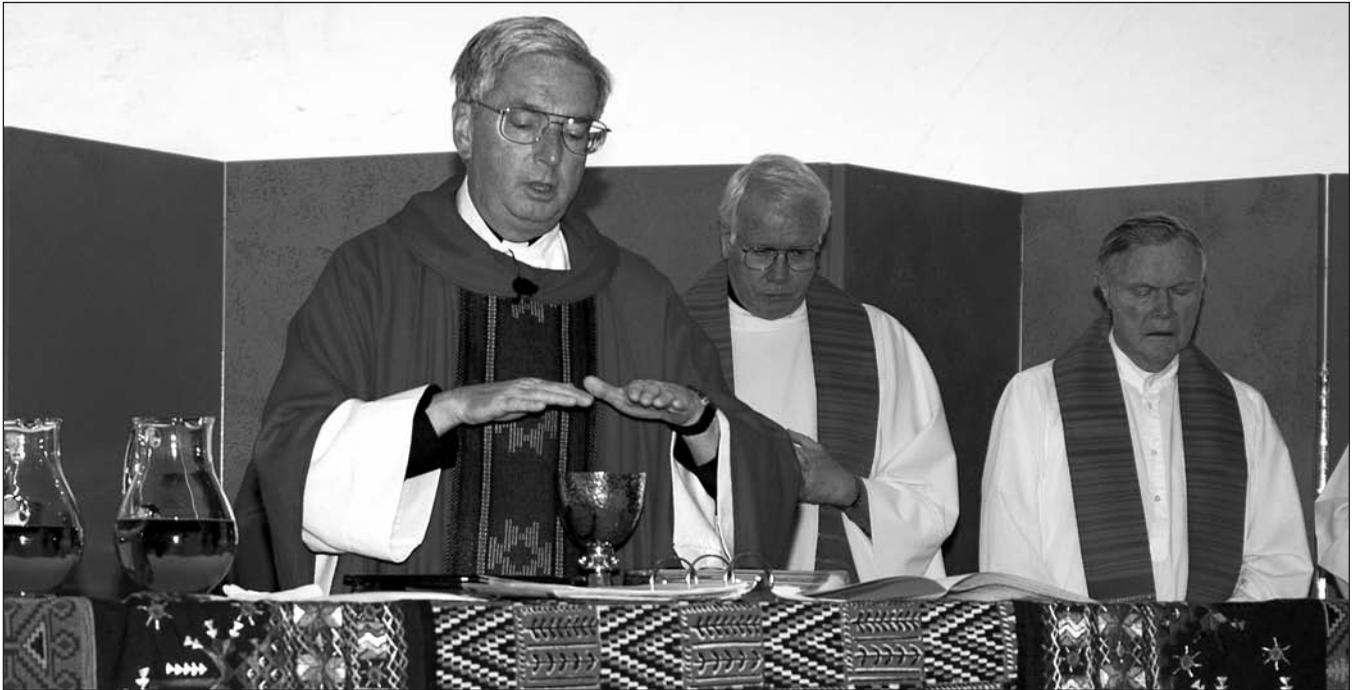
face (Catholic practices, devotions, etc.) to the center, which is Christ, viewed in his full living reality; (2) an insight into Catholicism, in its doctrines, laws, liturgy, etc., as an organic whole, whose principle of unity is again Christ; (3) a personal possession of the whole truth of Christ, through a personal "discovery" of it; (4) a grasp of the relationship of Catholic truth to all other truth, and to the whole of life and all its problems; (5) the development of the faculty of Christian judgment on all that is secular...

Courtney Murray forged an intrinsic link between Catholic identity and world mission in his promotion of the "lay apostolate" to be carried out by a well-educated and committed corps of lay people who would irradiate the Christian spirit into the secular order.

Marquette University's history reflects these developments. In 1952 Marquette changed the name of its department from religion to theology and initiated the undergraduate minor in theology, adding the major in 1959. It established a master's program in theology in 1953 and inaugurated the first American Catholic doctoral program in religious studies to admit laymen and laywomen in 1963. The designation "religious studies" was intended to distinguish it from the kind of theology then taught in most seminaries. It never meant what the term means today, the study of all religious phenomena from a neutral perspective.

Under the auspices of the North American region of the International Federation of Catholic Universities, a group of Catholic educators issued the Land O'Lakes

Sara K. Wood is in the theology department at Marquette University.



Celebrating mass. Regis University.

Statement on July 23, 1967, which articulated the relationship of the modern American Catholic university to the Church and to American intellectual life. It identified the Catholic university as a community “in which Catholicism is perceptibly present and effectively operative.” It affirmed theology as a legitimate intellectual discipline and identified its primary task to:

Engage directly in exploring the depths of Christian tradition and the total religious heritage of the world, in order to come to the best possible intellectual understanding of religion and revelation, of man in all his varied relationships to God. Particularly important today is the theological exploration of all human relations and the elaboration of a Christian anthropology. Furthermore, theological investigation today must serve the ecumenical goals of collaboration and unity.

The debate today is between “theology” and “religious studies”

The statement called for dialogue within the university so that theology would confront all the rest of modern culture and all the areas of intellectual study. It affirmed the autonomy of all the recognized university areas of study and disavowed any theological or philosophical imperialism at the same time that it pointed to the philosophical and theological dimension of most intellectual subjects.

Today, priests comprise a small minority within theology departments. Lay professors may include

Protestants and non-Christians and hold doctorates from European and American universities, which may be Catholic, Protestant, or secular schools. Protestant authors as well as classical and contemporary Catholic authors are standard fare in the curriculum.

The student body is more diverse. While Catholic students may still constitute a majority, Protestants, non-Christians, and students with no religious background are an ever-growing percentage of the student population. Some students enter college after twelve years of Catholic education, but an increasing number come with very little understanding of their faith or with no faith.

The debate today is not between “religion” and “theology,” but between “theology” and “religious studies,” “theology” being a discipline that begins in faith and seeks to explore faith through scholarly research and reflection. It includes biblical, historical, and systematic theology and utilizes a variety of methodologies. “Religious studies” deals with a multiplicity of religious beliefs and their adherents, i.e., the phenomenon of religion, but not from a committed perspective. It incorporates social scientific methods for understanding religion.

Catholic universities of the 21st century are inquiring once again into the meaning of their Catholic identity. This inevitably has implications for a theology curriculum. Even when many institutions are moving towards a religious studies curriculum, if the Catholic identity of an institution represents a faith commitment not only from its sponsoring religious community, but of the institution itself, then it seems that students, their parents, and the public have a right to expect that the theology taught there reflects that faith commitment, albeit with ecumenical and interreligious sensitivity. ■