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BOOK REVIEW

## Campus Conversations Lead to an Attractive *Apologia*

ROGER BERGMAN

Michael J. Himes

*Doing the Truth in Love: Conversations about God, Relationships and Service*

Paulist Press, 1995

\$12.95

So compellingly written is this slender volume that midway through it I found myself imagining ways to put it to use. It would be perfect, I thought, as the core text for an adult education course in the theological foundations of Christian faith and its meaning in everyday life. I could volunteer to teach such a course at my parish . . . .

It is precisely this impulse to volunteer that forms the subject of Michael Himes's new book. Indeed, it is that impulse that gave rise to the book in the first place.

Fr. Michael Himes, a priest of the diocese of Brooklyn and now a professor of theology at Boston College, was from 1987 to 1993 on the faculty at the University of Notre Dame. In addition to his regular teaching responsibilities, Fr. Himes was often called on by the Center for Social Concerns to lead students in reflection on their volunteer service experiences off-campus. Many of these sessions, plus some of his popular homilies on related themes, were taped by Center staff. Extensively edited and rearranged, those conversations between the middle-aged priest and professor and the young-adult volunteers became, to the credit of all involved, *Doing the Truth in Love*.

While I was first attracted to the book as an ideal addition to the social-justice/service-learning course I teach to undergraduates each fall, I soon realized it had a wider appeal. Fr. Himes, known for his ability to communicate Christian teaching in remarkably fresh and

meaningful language (see "Living Conversation," in the Fall 1995 issue of *Conversations*), has authored, with the help of his young colleagues, a popular but by no means thin *apologia* for the Christian faith. The book deserves a substantial readership.

The first eight chapters of *Doing the Truth in Love* take up fundamental themes of Christian faith in Catholic perspective: the nature of God, the human experience of limitation and of restlessness, the call to compassionate service, the problem of evil, the role of theology, the sacramental vision, and the centrality of the Eucharist. A concluding chapter focuses on the importance of imagination to the whole project of bringing faith to life.

In each case, Himes does not try to say it all, to review or summarize the breadth of Christian or even Catholic tradition, but rather to get to the heart of the matter. That makes it a very different book from, say, Richard McBrien's treatment of the great Christian themes in his much more extensive *Catholicism*. Given this preference for the pastorally essential, Himes focuses closely on the claim made explicitly in the First Letter of John and implicitly throughout the ministry of Jesus, that God is love, *agape*. In Himes's arresting explication, this claim becomes not just a consoling thought about one among many of God's attributes, but a fundamental affirmation about the nature of reality and the power that creates, sustains, and works toward its perfection.

Himes's argument, however, is not metaphysical but parabolic: his discussion of the parable of the prodigal son—about which I thought I could hear nothing

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new—made me sit up and take notice. By human “good parenting” standards, the father is “hopelessly irresponsible” and “inept.” The parable is really not about repentance at all—as is conventionally claimed—but about the mysterious divine *agape*, the pure self-gift of God, which transcends human understanding and expectation but is at the very heart of the Christian vision. Himes points out that the younger son’s “repentance” is quite *pro forma*: his rehearsed tactic to get himself a meal. His father’s magnanimous welcome does not depend on the son’s asking for forgiveness, but rather simply on his being alive: “My son was lost, but now he is found.” This image of divine love suggests to Himes that *agape* is more a verb than a noun: John does not say, insists our author, that God is a Supreme Being who loves, but that God is *love*. And love, Himes contends, is not a thing but an act. Thus the notion that God is a person (and persons) has to be carefully rethought. Trinity, in Himes’s view, is least inadequately understood in the Augustinian language of relationship: Lover, Beloved, and the Love between them.

This perhaps gives some sense of how adeptly Himes is able to plumb the tradition through fresh perspectives and lead the reader into deeper reflection. That’s a pretty good definition of a master teacher, which Himes certainly is.

As a master teacher, Himes’s “syllabus” is also well integrated. God as pure self-gift, as *agapic* love, is the fundamental theme on which the entire book is constructed. It informs, for example, his vision of the human person, his theological anthropology. For Himes, the goodness of the person as a creature of this self-giving God is the essential claim of Christian tradition. The trouble is that creaturely goodness comes with limitations—we are not God—which may lead us to question or even deny the goodness and thus our very humanity. This humanity, however, is God’s self-gift to us, our place of encounter with God. The Incarnation, in which God takes on this very limitation in radical form, is a powerful salvific demonstration of our fundamental worth as human beings.

Jesuit theologian Thomas Clarke has written a brilliant reflection on this approach to Christology, relating it especially to the option for the poor (*America*, January 30, 1988). Given the social-concerns context of Himes’s conversations and his apparent sympathy with liberation theologies (where the phrase “option for the poor”

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originated), I was a little surprised and disappointed he didn't mine this rich Christological and soteriological vein more deeply. As it stands, the book's focus on service, which might suggest a rather bland and generic vision of Christian discipleship, tends to lack a prophetic or liberatory edge. Himes himself might respond, "But that's another book." Indeed, *Fullness of Faith* (Paulist, 1993), which he co-authored with his brother Kenneth R. Himes, O.F.M., and which deals, in the words of its subtitle, with the "public significance of theology," would make an excellent companion to *Doing the Truth in Love*.

Some of my students and I found one of Himes's chapters less successful than the others. It should come as no surprise that the stumbling block is the perennially vexing question of evil, of innocent human suffering. While he is most adept at drawing on key biblical images and parables throughout the book, here Himes fails to take the Jobian protest and argument with God seriously. Job's absence from the discussion seems a curious oversight. It is not that Himes collapses entirely here—his *social* analysis of the evil associated with repeated disasters in Bangladesh during monsoon season is quite provocative—but even for this longtime social activist not all innocent suffering can be traced to maleficent human design. There seems to be some radical principle of evil in the universe—represented by Satan in the *Book of Job* and throughout Christian tradition—that Himes simply does not address. But again, Himes's concern is less metaphysical than it is pastoral. Given that innocent human beings do suffer, what are we going to do about it? That's the question, and not the question of theodicy per se, that Himes would have us keep front and center.

My focus thus far on Himes's main arguments runs the risk of giving an incomplete picture of this remarkable book. Most of its chapters are followed by a brief personal reflection on the chapter theme by one of the students or Center staff. In response to Himes's discussion of human limitation, for example, Jan Pilarski offers a moving account of her discovery that her young son was autistic. Lou Nanni recounts the experience of returning from two years of overseas experience to encounter a new restlessness within himself. Ronald White recounts what he learned about community from growing up in an African-American congregation. In varying ways, each of these and the other intimate and

concrete reflections complement Himes's more explicitly theological expositions.

In response to the principal author's defense of the theological enterprise as a necessary dimension of all Christians' faith lives, Don MacNeill, C.S.C., and Andrea Smith Shappell suggest practical ways to encourage theological reflection—just in case you don't happen to have a Michael Himes in the house. All the chapters end with sets of questions to stimulate group discussion and personal journal writing. Having sprung from intimate conversations among faithful seekers and servants, the book is meant to be returned to such contexts. An excellent brief bibliography—with luminaries like Gutierrez, Nouwen, Ruether, Merton, and Dorothy Day prominent—is also appended.

In *Doing the Truth in Love*, a highly regarded professional Catholic theologian brings his years of learning and teaching into dialogue with college students encouraged by the experience of service to reflect anew on their faith. The result is a refreshingly jargon-free and intellectually stimulating book of considerable pastoral wisdom that should find a welcome place in university course syllabi—especially introductions to Catholicism or service-learning projects—but also in adult education settings. I am grateful to Himes and Company for extending their conversations to others through this book.