Talking Back: Lay Theologians Create a Whole New Climate

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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 novelties. 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 sizable lay minorities. 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 dis-
cuss some consequences of these changes, but first a preface.

All writers have had the experi-
cence of making objective state-
ments, 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 dele-
terious consequences for Jesuit
universities because their educa-
tional ideals require the presence
of those who live the Society's
charism. Second, I studied with
several great Jesuit scholars—
James Hennessy, Charles Koch,
Laelikas Onor, 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, JESU, like other
institutions, has an affirmative
action policy for Jesuits. We take it
very seriously, although our best
college usually bear little fruit. What
follows is an objective account.

A new unique historical situa-
tion has come into existence. A
sizeable majority of Catholic the-
ologians now have no institutional
relationship with the hierarchy. Ex-
cept 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 insti-
tutions, their books and articles,
their grants and fellowships, and
presentations to learned societies.

Today a theologian can spend
her/his career solely within aca-
demic confines, literally never work
with the local ordinary, and yet still
enjoy enormous influence. Let me
use a simple example: a theolo-
gian'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 penal-
ties. They cannot be dismissed
by a provincial or deposed from a
job by bishops. Ecclesiastical au-
thorities can investigate their
teachings, but, thanks to academic
freedom, which universities
ensure, the investigations cannot
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 obscure the new historical situation, the consequences of which are just beginning to be understood.

University of Denver 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 acknowledge 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 often 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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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, preoccupations, 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, priests, and lay, can work with the magisterium so that the gifts lay theologians offer will be seen and accepted as such.

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