

BISHOPS' DOCTRINE COMMITTEE

THE THEOLOGICAL ENTERPRISE IN LIGHT OF THE NEW EVANGELIZATION March 24, 2017

"The Sociology of Catholic Theology as an Ecclesial Vocation"
William L. Portier
College Theology Society

Back in the 1890s, before the 1924 restrictions on immigrants from Italy, my great-grandfather, Big Tony Testino, came to the United States from Genoa. He lived in Italian Harlem. Eventually he moved across the river to Tenafly, New Jersey, where he worked on the Erie Railroad. His grandson, my father, had to drop out of high school during the Great Depression. My mother did graduate from high school and worked most of her life as a bookkeeper. With help from the GI Bill, my dad got a civil service job in the U.S. Post Office. That makes me a first-generation college student, the only college graduate in my family. In 1995 Big Tony's great-great granddaughter graduated from Yale. That's the story of European American Catholics in the United States.

I only went to college because, in 1959, when I was fourteen, I entered a minor seminary. Eleven years later, when I left before making final religious vows, a lot had changed. Now it was theologically and sociologically plausible for me to study theology as a lay person and believe that I might even find a job. When I got my first academic job at Mount Saint Mary's in Emmitsburg in 1979, I was the only lay theologian. My colleagues were five diocesan priests. By the 90s I was department chair. All my former colleagues had retired or died. Lay people replaced them. I found myself in the strange position of hoping to find at least one priest for the theology department.

My story offers a more vivid picture than demographics could of the sociology of Catholic theology as an ecclesial vocation. It also illustrates the history in which "evangelization" and "evangelical" became Catholic words. It illustrates the gradual demographic shift from the European American immigrant Catholic subculture, in the last stages of which I grew up, to a voluntary religious culture in which we discuss religious affiliation and disaffiliation and how to teach and minister amid the so-called "rise of the nones." I used the modifier "European American" because we all know that this subculture marginalized many people. It is good, therefore, to see our colleagues from ACTHUS and the Black Catholic Theological Symposium here today.

A voluntary rather than an inherited religious culture means that you just don't know whether your kids are going to grow up to be Catholics. This is why we talk about evangelization. In 1967, when I was a senior in college, a group of scholars at Catholic University produced the first edition of the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. And though we were getting restless, grandchildren of European immigrants still

filled convents, rectories, and seminaries. You will comb the fifteen volumes of the *NCE* in vain for an entry on “evangelization.” We had home and foreign missionaries and evangelical counsels, but no evangelization. Nor do I recall any talk of “Catholic identity” or the “Catholic intellectual tradition.” We didn’t have “mission offices.” Those phrases are born of a sense of something once taken for granted now clearly coming into view as it begins to pass away.

Within a decade, Pope Paul VI’s apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975) introduced Catholics to the term *evangelization*. Before long, Pope John Paul II began speaking of the “new evangelization.” As I tried to make sense of my students in the 80s and the 90s, I remember discovering *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. It played a central role in my efforts to think about “evangelical Catholics.” But at the time, I had no idea of its Latin American provenance.

Pope Francis consistently refers to *Evangelii Nuntiandi* as “the most important pastoral document written after Vatican II.” His own *Evangelii Gaudium* cites the document to which its title alludes at least thirteen times by my count. He recommends *Evangelii Gaudium* as “the apostolic framework of the Church today” and locates its twin foundations in the 2007 *Aparecida* document and *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.

If you want to know what the “new evangelization” is all about, read *Evangelii Nunitandi*. The church exists to preach the Gospel. Jesus Christ and salvation in him are the Gospel’s content. But evangelization can’t be limited to explicit preaching, either from pulpits or street corners. It’s primarily about witness. The Church’s main job is to show people what Jesus Christ and salvation in him look like. If you get that far, you’ll probably have to talk about Jesus Christ “as the meaning of life, the cosmos, and history.” But first, in both life and in the classroom, you go for the heart. As Blessed John Henry Newman put it: “The heart is commonly reached, not through the reason, but through imagination, by means of impressions, by the testimony of facts and events, by history, by description. Persons influence us, voices melt us, looks subdue us, deeds inflame us” (*Grammar*, 92-3). “In the Church,” Paul VI wrote in 1975, “the witness given by a truly Christian life ... must be regarded as the basic means of evangelization.” He continued: “people listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, or, if they listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses” (*EN*, 40).

The conclusion is inescapably simple in thought and agonizingly complex in execution. To carry out their mission, Catholic colleges and universities need faculty who are both teachers and witnesses. In a pair of recent *Commonweal* articles on what makes Catholic universities Catholic, both John Garvey and Mark Roche converge from different angles on the conclusion that it is the faculty that make the university Catholic. On a political and religious landscape of voluntarism and pluralism, absent a strong Catholic culture, personal witness is indispensable in convincing both colleagues and students of such seemingly idiosyncratic intellectual goods as: the search for an integration of knowledge, a dialogue between faith and reason, an ethical concern, and a theological perspective (ECE, 15). A recent poll relating the college experience to “life preparedness,” identifies the “Big Six” college experiences. By far the most significant of the Big Six is this one: “I had at least one professor who made me excited about learning.” Knowledgeable and passionate teachers are going to turn students on to something. Catholic

universities need an abundance of professors who can turn students on to Jesus as he is mediated through the Catholic intellectual tradition.

The question for the second session asks, “How does the life of the Catholic university relate to the wider community, both church and civil community, in terms of evangelization?” Primarily through the faculty, I would say. Universities give corporate witness in the civil community and the church in many ways: by serving as a gateway through which their community can access the riches of the Catholic intellectual tradition, through their policies for hiring faculty and recruiting students, through their treatment of their employees, especially the staff and contingent faculty, through their relations with the local community, and even through college sports.

But faculty is key. My own university, for example, largely through the energy and commitment of our long-serving former president, Brother Raymond L. Fitz, SM, has deep connections with the city of Dayton and the communities that physically surround the university. As the Ferree Professor of Social Justice, Brother Ray heads the Fitz Center for Leadership in Community and spearheads efforts in child welfare, education both public and parochial, and neighborhood development. Brother Ray’s life and work, in company with the faculty and students who work with him, offer a blueprint for how a Catholic university evangelizes in the civil community.

What about the evangelizing activity of faculty in the church? The shift from the inherited immigrant subculture from which our universities grew to the voluntary religious culture in which they must now redefine themselves offers a sociological lens through which to look at this question. For the sake of time and this audience, I’ll limit myself to theology faculty. Many young theologians I know feel professionally cut off from the church. One of my colleagues is presently using her year-long sabbatical to try to figure out what, if anything, the academic theology she practices at the university has to do with the life of the church. She really wants it to have something to do with the church. I don’t think she is alone.

This was not always so. Recall my opening narrative. Five priests and only one lay person made up my department in 1979. By 1994 all lay people, no priests. Back then many of those lay people had a different sociological profile from that of today’s lay theologians. When I began graduate study, there were surely young lay people who studied theology inspired by the Council and its admonition “to work hard to acquire a deeper knowledge of revealed truth” (LG, 35), but they tended to be outnumbered by former seminarians and religious.

In that setting, nearly forty years ago, David Tracy offered a sociological portrait of what he called the theologian’s three publics: society, academy, and church. Tracy promised academic legitimacy to a generation recently removed from an inherited subculture, often suspicious of its strictures, seeking distance from them with a sometimes toxic mixture of dedication and disaffection. A priest of the Diocese of Bridgeport, Tracy’s 1969 migration from Catholic University to the University of Chicago performed the academic legitimacy he promised. Back then, however, the academy seemed to overshadow the church as the Catholic theologian’s primary public. Contemporary lay theologians find

themselves in a rather more complex social location, one in which their loyalties to both church and academy often render them suspect in both.

Apart from an ecclesial understanding of their vocation, why would young lay Catholics, who could have gotten an MBA or a law degree, pursue theology? Universities are the most likely place where such people might find a like-minded community, necessary resources, and even get paid to think and teach about Jesus as “the meaning of the cosmos, life, and history.” Apart from their local parishes and possibly a *mandatum*, such developments as gradual professionalization, accreditation, and eventual separate incorporation, make the connection of Catholic university theologians to the church sociologically, religiously, and legally voluntary. Young theologians such as my colleague on sabbatical find themselves with no formal connection as theologians to the local church without which their ecclesial understanding of their vocation makes no sense. On a voluntary landscape, this is a connection that cries out to be negotiated.

If they happen, such negotiations will be fraught. The history of the past forty years has bred suspicion on all sides. Our church has tremendous fault lines. In many ways, they reflect our political divisions. How should we respond politically and pastorally to public policies clearly at odds with the church’s commitments to human life and dignity? What about the role of women in the church? What about the fact that many Catholics who are people of color experience the church’s institutions as what sociologist Elijah Anderson has called “white spaces”? Nevertheless, in spite of our divisions, it strikes me that, in the generational cohorts of theologians currently coming up in Catholic universities, our bishops, as the pastors and teachers of our local churches, have a tremendous resource at their disposal for the new evangelization. These are teachers who spend a lot of time thinking about Jesus as “the meaning of life, the cosmos, and history.” They are teachers who are likely to be witnesses.

Bishops and theologians who are part of the same local church need to get to know one another. They need to recognize each other’s faces, know each other’s names. In a voluntary religious culture, nothing formal really requires this. Meetings such as today’s are a good start, but are they enough? This is something for both theologians and bishops to think about.

