ORTHOPRAXIS

STARTING POINT FOR THEOLOGY

All theology is ultimately pastoral.

This maxim was widely invoked at the time of the Second Vatican Council by persons of quite different theological persuasion.[1] It expressed a principle that seemed agreeable to most theologians, namely the purpose of theology is to contribute to the pastoral life of the church.[2]

But here lay a difficulty. Too much theology was perceived as not really helpful to the pastoral life of the church. Theology had become too self-contained and esoteric or, to speak somewhat anachronistically, theology was too concerned with its academic public and not enough with its church and society publics.[3] There was too great a gap between theologizing and pastoring. In this connection the maxim also conveyed a critique and challenge to theologians to make their work more pastoral.

That challenge has been constantly repeated since Vatican II. For example, in each edition of their *Program of Priestly Formation* the United States bishops have urged that the curriculum be organized and theology be taught from a pastoral perspective.

> The Second Vatican Council made it clear that theology must have a strong pastoral emphasis. This does not mean that theology should be reduced to merely practical questions or pastoral skills. Nor does it mean that more time is to be given to "applied theology."
>
> Clearly, this means that it is not possible to teach even the most speculative branches of theology in isolation from pastoral concerns.[4]

Gradually this pastoral emphasis has taken hold as theological reflection seminars, field education and supervised ministry courses, Master of Divinity and Doctor of Ministry degree programs become standard curricular features. In some of these courses theologians, whose training and teaching experience is highly academic, team with pastoral reflectors. This direct contact with another approach to theological education is one way to enhance the pastoral dimension of all theology. Of course, just having

[1] This theme was struck by Pope John XXIII in his opening address to the Council Fathers. See Walter M. Abbott, S.J., ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: The Guild Press, 1966), pp. 710-720. For an elaboration of this pastoral character see Joseph Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights of Vatican II* (New York: Paulist Press, 1966), pp. 23-24.

[2] The meaning of "pastoral" has been notoriously ill-defined. In *Gaudium et spes*, Vatican II suggested the broadest possible scope when it explained that the "constitution is called 'pastoral' because, while resting on doctrinal principles, it seeks to express the relation of the Church to the world and modern mankind." Note 2, *The Documents, op. cit.*, p. 198. A similar scope may be seen in surveying the use of the word "pastoral" in the official publications of the U.S.C.C./N.C.C.B. since Vatican II.

[3] For this distinction see David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad Books, 1981), pp. 3-47.

[4] N.C.C.B., *The Program of Priestly Formation* (Washington, D.C.: U.S.C.C. Publications Office, 1982), p. 38.

an explicit pastoral component in the curriculum and competent pastoral educators as colleagues on the faculty maintain some degree of exchange.

Along with these developments in theological education there have been other attempts to relate theology to the pastoral life of the church. The best known and most influential, of course, are the contributions by liberation theologians, primarily in southern hemisphere countries, reflecting on the experience of oppression and injustice in their social situation.[5] Similar contributions are being made by women who theologize from their distinctive feminine experience;[6] by members of oppressed minority groups (especially black people) and intentional communities (especially those committed to social justice) who theologize from their experience;[7] and by those theologians who take experience thematically and categorically as an integral part of their theological methods.[8]

All this is well known to us as a professional theological society. What may be less well known is the work of another group of theologians who have traditionally and consistently taken the pastoral life of the church as their starting point for doing theological reflection. I refer to those customarily called pastoral or practical theologians.

I am thinking especially of those in the United States who have been grappling with the challenge of integrating the benefits of scholarly theology with the benefits of skilled pastoral practice so that theology might make its contribution to the pastoral life of the church. In this effort

[5] Within this extensive literature, the most pertinent discussion of what it means to theologize in this way is Juan Luis Segundo's *The Liberation of Theology*, tr. John Drury (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1976). The pastoral application of this view is found in Segundo's *The Hidden Motives of Pastoral Action*, tr. John Drury, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1978). The most helpful North American commentaries are (for Segundo) Alfred T. Hennelly, *Theologies in Conflict* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979) and (for liberation theology in general) Robert McAfee Brown, *Theology in a New Key* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978). A comparable literature from Africa and Asia is finding its way into English, thanks to the prophetic commitment of Orbis Publishing Co.

[6] Among recent, significant titles are Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, MA: The Harvard University Press, 1982); Jackson W. Carroll and Barbara J. Hargrove, *Women of the Cloth* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982); Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad Books, 1982); and Kaye Ashe, *Today's Woman, Tomorrow's Church* (Chicago: The Thomas More Press, 1983).

[7] Among other sources see Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone, *Black Theology: A Documentary History 1966-1979* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979); J. Deotis Roberts, *Roots of a Black Future*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980); Edward P. Wimberly, *Pastoral Care in the Black Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1979) and *Pastoral Counseling and Spiritual Values: A Black Point of View* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1982). See also Jim Wallis, *The Call to Conversion* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981) and James Hug, ed., *Tracing the Spirit* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983).

[8] See Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979 edition); David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975); John B. Cobb, Jr., *A Christian Natural Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1965); Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, tr. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad Books, 1980); Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, tr. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad Books, 1978).

theology appears more problematic than pastoral skills. John Shea's observation a decade ago is still applicable today.

> The pastoral minister often sees theology as neutral. He has read or attended lectures on the ideas of Rahner, Kung, and Schillebeeckx but they have seemed distant concerns from his day-to-day ministry. He definitely has a new vision of Church but he does not attribute it to theology but to the psychodynamics of actual community living. Counselling and organization are immediately useful skills. Theology does not come across as a skill but as speculative word games that are endemic to the university but irrelevant to the parish.[9]

My intention in this paper is to say a few words about the place of pastoral-practical theology within theology as a whole; then to describe the attitude of such theologians toward experience and what type of contribution they expect theology to make to that experience. In doing this, I am taking the term *orthopraxis* to refer to the experience of the church's pastoral life and the theological reflection that arises from and contributes to that experience.[10] Further, I am adhering closely to the stated limit of the topic—experience as the starting point for theology. To carry through the project and describe more fully a pastoral-theological methodology is a task for another occasion.[11]

THEOLOGY AND THEOLOGIES

There has been a long standing discussion in the United States and Europe about the status of pastoral-practical theology as a distinct theological discipline.[12] This discussion is sometimes posed as the contrast between academic and professional, theoretical and practical disciplines.[13] The most beneficial outcome of this discussion is to keep asking the

[9] John Shea, "An Approach to Pastoral Theology," *Chicago Studies*, 11 (1973), 16. The lack of successful theological integration in pastoral work is widely recognized and has been a stimulus for recent attempts to address the problem. Some of the most helpful of these attempts have been gathered in the four volumes of *Key Resources* published by the Association of Theological Field Educators and edited by Donald F. Beisswanger, Tjaard Hommes, and Doran McCarty. A similar compilation is found in the 1980 Report of the Biennial meeting of the Association of Professional Education for Ministry, edited by Robert L. Browning.

[10] It should be noted that this is not the first time the CTSA has addressed the topic of orthopraxis. See the essay of Bernard Lonergan and responses by Edward Braxton and Gregory Baum in the 1977 CTSA *Proceedings* as well as the 1980 convention which was devoted to "Christian Orthopraxis and the Emergence of New Meaning in Theology."

[11] My own attempt to sketch such a method is based on process thinking . See "A Process Model of Theological Reflection" in a forthcoming issue of *The Journal of Pastoral Care* 37 (June 1983), 144-56.

[12] See, e.g., James N. Lapsley, "Pastoral Theology Past and Present," in *The New Shape of Pastoral Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969) pp. 31-49; Josef Muller, "Die Pastoraltheologie innerhalb des theologischen Gesamtkonzepts von Stephan Rautenstrauch," in *Praktische Theologie Heute* (Grunewald: Ch. Kaiser Verlag, 1974) pp. 42-52; Rene Marle, *Le Projet de Théologie Pratique* (Paris: Editions Beauchesne, 1979).

[13] See John Ford, "Discrimination, Desegregation or Integration: Academic Theology and Pastoral Theology," *Review for Religious*, 37 (1978), 414-32; Matthew Lamb, "The Theory-Praxis Relationship in Contemporary Christian Theology," *CTSA Proceedings*, 31 (1976), 149-78.

questions: what is theology? how inclusive is theology? and how best may theology achieve its purpose?[14]

The aim behind the questions is to make the most satisfying connections and to set in motion the mutual contributions of the various theological specialties so that an integrated theology will result.[15] In my own work I find it helpful to use the term experiential theology to encompass both pastoral and practical theology and to distinguish it from scholarly theology.[16] Admittedly the distinction is not clear-cut or entirely satisfactory.

The main point of this contrast is that experiential theology is accountable to some definite experience (usually a pastoral experience in the ordinary sense of that term) whereas scholarly theology is accountable to an extensively interpreted and critically analyzed body of knowledge about such experience. The distinction hinges on the degree of direct contact with a (pastoral) experience which is to be reflected upon. When the experience which grounds experiential theology is very specific (like a hospital visit, a sermon, a counselling session, a parish council meeting), it gives rise to pastoral theology, i.e., theological reflection that responds to the specific circumstances and limitations of a given occasion.[17]

When such experiences are generalized (as in the types of issues and situations dealt with in pastoral care, preaching, pastoral counseling, community leadership), they give rise to practical theology. Put another way, practical theology addresses typical experiences whereas pastoral theology addresses specific, concrete and variable instances of such experiences.

This is a somewhat different understanding of pastoral and practical theology from that of Don Browning. He says

[14] An example of this type of ongoing inquiry is found in Bernard Cooke, "The Current State of Theological Reflection," *Bulletin of the Council on the Study of Religion*, 10 as well as David Tracy's arrangement of fundamental, systematic, and practical theology in *The Analogical Imagination, op. cit.*, pp. 47-99 and Edward Braxton's elaboration of the same schema in *The Wisdom Community* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980) pp. 101-38.

[15] See John V. Apczynski, "Integrative Theology: A Polanyian Proposal for Theological Foundations," *Theological Studies*, 40 (1979) 23-43; Ladislaus Orsy, "Integration in Educating for Ministry," *The American Ecclesiastical Review*, 168 (1974), 668-80.

[16] On the use of the term "experiential theology," see S. Grabowski, "Experiential Theology," *The American Ecclesiastical Review*, 167 (1973) 691-96 and Bruce Rahtjen, "An Introduction to Experiential Theology," *Key Resources*, vol. 3, *op. cit.*, pp. 161-64.

[17] The clearest examples of pastoral theology in this sense are case study or verbatim reports. See, e.g., Mary G. Durkin, *The Suburban Woman* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), Robert A. Evans and Thomas D. Parker, eds., *Christian Theology: A Case Method Approach* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1976).

> Practical theology is a branch of theology that attempts to state explicitly the ultimate grounds upon which we shall order the everyday moral meanings of our lives. It has a close relationship with theological ethics....Pastoral theology attempts to set forth the legitimations for specific pastoral acts—the minister's preaching, liturgical duties, pastoral care, and pastoral counseling.[18]

My distinction is based more on the degree of specificity of whatever experience is being considered rather than the subject matter (ethical concerns related to everyday living or explicit pastoral tasks) of the experience.

Scholarly theology prescinds from both levels of contact with experience. It should be noted that this is a methodological prescinding from experience. Scholarly theology is also imbedded in the types of experience practical and pastoral theology deal with directly, at the very least in the sense that the one who theologizes is an experiencing subject.[19] But scholarly theology channels its attention differently, not toward the experiences as such but toward further reflection on those experiencs.[20] It does so according to goals and criteria proper to established methods of research, analysis, argument and the like.

In this way scholarly theology transcends the limitations of concrete experience and pursues its distinctive task, according to John Cobb, of articulating a unified, Christian overview of experience as such.[21] By providing a coherent, intellectual framework, scholarly theology offers greater freedom for experiential reflection but it also runs the risk of separating the fruits of scholarly theology from their experiential roots. The goal is to maintain a healthy correlation between experiential and scholarly theology so that the pastoral life of the church may be served by theology as a whole.[22] The key to achieving this goal is to recognize that experience is the starting point for all theology.

[18] Don Browning, *The Moral Context of Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976) p. 109. Browning's most recent views on pastoral and practical theology are found in *Practical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983) pp. 1-21; 187-203. A view similar to Browning's is found in Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983).

[19] This may be seen in the abstract, conceptual use of the experience of "modern persons" as in Gregory Baum's *Man Becoming* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970); Richard R. Niebuhr's, *Experiential Religion* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1972); Hans Kung's *On Being a Christian* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976).

[20] See James Woelfel, "The Personal Dimension of Theological Inquiry," *Encounter*, 42 (Summer 1981), 225-33; Thomas O'Meara, "Toward a Subjective Theology of Revelation," *Theological Studies*, 36 (1975), 401-27.

[21] John B. Cobb, Jr., "The Integration of Objective Studies and Practical Theology," APEM Biennial, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-38. Karl Rahner has made a similar claim regarding pastoral theology as a theological analysis of the situation in which the church is to realize itself anew. See, e.g., "The New Claims Which Pastoral Theology Makes on Theology as a Whole," tr. David Bourke, *Theological Investigations,* XI (New York: Seabury Press, 1974) pp. 115-37.

[22] See Martin Thornton, *The Function of Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1968) especially chapter 3, pp. 37-57.

EXPERIENTIAL THEOLOGIANS ON EXPERIENCE

What do experiential theologians have to tell us about experience as the starting point for theologizing? How might one characterize their attitude toward experience?

1. First of all, experiential theologians *trust* experience. They trust experience more than they trust ideas or theories or reflexive interpretations or classic (even dogmatic) formulations. This trust is a preferential option; it is not a mistrust or antagonism toward scholarship and critical reflection. Experiential theologians are, after all, theologians.

Their trust in experience is based on the presupposition that experience already has theological relevance, i.e., it already is a concrete instance of what theology names reflexively.[23] This presupposition is further grounded in the conviction that God continues to act in human lives and contemporary experience. This divine presence and action is the starting point for all theological reflection. As C. W. Brister has said

> Pastoral theology, conclusions of a theological order revealing the content of pastoral work, emerges from critical reflection upon one's encounters with "living human documents."[24]

Experiential theologians prefer to work from such living human documents rather than articulated reflective documents.

For this reason they like to have experience in detailed, relatively complete accounts, such as those provided in standard forms like case studies, verbatims, critical incidents, journal entries and process notes. This yearning for detail is more true of pastoral theologians than of practical theologians, but both want integral experience because they trust and rely on the content of that experience.

For this reason, too, experiential theologians do not discuss the nature of experience as scholarly theologians or philosophers might.[25] Their approach is more phenomenological. They accept typical pastoral occasions like counseling-care, preaching-education, leadership-decision making, social mission, planning, etc. Then they identify the components of these experiences. Generally experiential theologians are interested in three such components: the agent(s), the (inter)action(s) which take place, and the relational environment which immediately influences and is affected by the experience.[26]

[23] The most pertinent, succinct statement concerning the role of experience in experiential theology is given by James and Evelyn Whitehead, *Method in Ministry* (New York: Seabury Press, 1981) pp. 53-67.

[24] C. W. Brister, *Pastoral Care in the Church* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1977 ed.) p. 12. See also Urban T. Holmes, III, *To Speak of God* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974) especially pp. 3-30.

[25] See, e.g., Gerald O'Collins, "Theology and Experience," *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 44 (1977), 79-90; Dietmar Mieth, "What is Experience?" in *Revelation and Experience*, Concilium, vol. 113 (New York: Seabury Press, 1979) pp. 40-57.

[26] A slightly different description of these three elements is given by Thomas W. Ogletree, "Dimensions of Practical Theology: Meaning, Action, Self" in *Practical Theology, op. cit.*, pp. 83-105. Ogletree's divisions roughly parallel the helping, changing, and theological abilities John Shea describes in "Doing Ministerial Theology," *Toward Vatican III* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978) pp. 188-96.

The agents usually get primary attention but other factors may be more significant in a particular experience, or a general type of experience like pastoral planning or community organization or worship. Experiential theologians try not to predetermine the choice. To do so would be to use experience to illustrate or test or apply ideas developed elsewhere. To trust experience means that experience, as it is given, initially determines where attention should be focused.[27]

Methodologically this means that experiential theologians are largely re-active, at the outset anyway. The experience at hand sets the theological agenda and guides reflection on it, at least in the sense that subsequent theological reflection is constantly related back to the originating experience(s) to determine its theological relevance to that experience. Experiential theologians are not merely reactive, however, and experience, especially in its originating form, does not absolutely determine the scope of theological reflection.[28] But to trust experience means to be guided by and work in the context of experience as it is given, rather than being guided by doctrinal formulations, a systematic methodology, predetermined sources of theological input, or interests derived from somewhere other than the experience at hand.

A final note. It is not always easy to maintain this trust. Experience itself is constantly challenging the preferential option in its favor. It is confusing, ambivalent, elusive, unpredictable, imprecise, variable, threatening, frustrating, and contingent. All of this gives rise to a second characteristic of experiential theology.

2. Experiential theologians *respect* experience. They acknowledge the complexity and the interconnectedness of every experience.

The complexity of every experience refers to the threefold structure just mentioned (agent, action, and environment). All three components have their own dimensions or levels which are simultaneously present.[29] Moreover, the inherent subject matter of each component is the basis for additional, related specialties. For example, the agent is studied in psychology and human development, interaction in behavioral science, and environment in social science. These specialized disciplines and their primary interests are not the main focus of experiential theology, but they cannot be entirely overlooked if theology respects experience.[30] Indeed the existence of such

[27] This is the task of identifying or diagnosing what is really at issue in a given experience. See, e.g., Donald Capps, *Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979) especially pp. 79-108.

[28] This is well illustrated in the extended theological reflection initiated by a case study in Ian McIntosh, *Pastoral Care and Pastoral Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972) and in John B. Cobb's *Theology and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

[29] G. Coleman has suggested paying attention to these levels as a way of doing pastoral theology. See his "The Trouble with Pastoral Theology," *The American Ecclesiastical Review*, 168 (1974), 651-67.

[30] One of the ongoing debates in experiential theology concerns the proper relation between theology and these related disciplines. See, e.g., Alastair V. Campbell, *Rediscovering Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981) and Gary R. Collins, *Psychology and Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981) for recent critical proposals.

distinct specialties can help clarify what is of theological significance and how theology relates to other perspectives on the same experience.[31]

Methodologically this means that experiential theology is a multidisciplinary task. Because no one theologian can be master of all the pertinent disciplines, experiential theology calls for collaboration either by theologizing in direct dialogue with other experts or at least by consulting the fruits of their work.[32] This multidisciplinary response to the complexity of experience also allows for some specialization within experiential theology (e.g.., theology and Jungian psychology as in the works of John Sanford or Morton Kelsey; theology and behavioral science as in the recent works of Edward Wimberly; theology and social sciences as in the work of Charles Keating and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead.)

Experiential theologians also respect experience because it is interconnected. This takes two forms: one temporal, one systemic. Every experience has a genetic past and a proleptic future. It is a moment in a time process. It is both a new configuration of previous events and an anticipation as well as conditioning of coming events. Even when it is isolated for reflection, an experience remains connected to its past and pushes into its future.[33]

Coupled with and penetrating this temporal complexity is a systemic complexity, whereby a given experience may be linked up with other experiences. The connection is made by way of parallels, analogies, relationships, effects which are not already included as a defining element of the experience.[34] Defining elements constitute the relational environment mentioned above. The potential range of relevant connectedness can be extremely extensive and commands respect from the experiential theologian.

[31] This issue is often posed as the question: what is the difference between counseling and pastoral counseling, or between social work and pastoral care? Some responses to that question may be found in Edward Thornton, *Theology and Pastoral Counseling* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967); C. W. Brister, *The Promise of Counseling* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978) especially chapter 7, "The Goals of Counseling," pp. 93-108; and Barry K. Estadt, ed., *Pastoral Counseling* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1983), especially pp. 1-50.

[32] An example of collaborative experiential theology is *Parish, Priest and People* by Andrew Greeley, Mary Durkin, David Tracy, John Shea and William McCready (Chicago: Thomas More Press, 1981). An example of using other experts is Evelyn Eaton and James Whitehead, *Christian Life Patterns* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1979).

[33] This temporal dimension is especially prominent in Thomas Groome's method of shared praxis. See his *Christian Religious Education* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980), especially pp. 184-235. For an experiential theological reflection on time see James Whitehead, "A Christian Asceticism of Time," *Method in Ministry, op. cit.*, pp. 145-65.

[34] See, e.g., the parallels drawn with Erik Erikson by Donald Capps, *Pastoral Care, op. cit.*, pp. 13-46; or the analogies drawn by Thomas Oden with Rogerian psychotherapy in *Kerygma and Counseling, op. cit.*, pp. 47-83 or the correspondence drawn by Dieter Hessel between a theology of fidelity and social values in *Social Ministry* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), pp. 58-74. I have suggested a similar approach in "How Pastoral Theology Functions," *Theology Today*, 37 (January 1981), 225-390.

Methodologically this means that in order to theologize on experience, experiential theologians must select a focus of attention or concentration because any experience is too complex to be treated comprehensively. The experience itself may suggest a focus but usually there are several options. At this point experiential theology becomes more pro-active. In doing so, it faces an inherent twofold risk. On the one hand the decision to concentrate on this aspect of an experience when there are other appealing aspects may prove not to be the most fruitful aspect for theological reflection. On the other hand one's selection may reflect ideological or other prejudicial positions that turn experience to the service of predetermined views. The best (and perhaps only) antidote to these risks is to theologize with others who can better identify all the possible, relevant focal points and can challenge and check one's own ideological tendencies.[35]

The need to select a focus and the skill used in making the selection lead to the third characteristic of experiential theology.

3. Experiential theologians *enter* experience, although they use different words to describe this activity.[36] To enter an experience is to penetrate it as it really is, to get to know it thoroughly. Whereas other disciplines enter the same experience from their special viewpoints, experiential theology enters experience theologically.

In order to do this one must have an adequate familiarity with theology. How much familiarity and of what type is an open question, and a point of ongoing dialogue among theological educators.[37] Perhaps it is sufficient to befriend the theological tradition. As this phrase is used by Jim and Evelyn Whitehead, it means "increase in intimacy with the Tradition. The image of 'befriending' suggests that a more-than-intellectual grasp is required. The minister's familiarity with the Tradition must include both critical awareness of and comfort with the diverse testimony of the Tradition on a specific pastoral concern."[38]

Too extensive or too detailed a theological knowledge may even be a liability for experiential theology, because experiential theologians enter an

[35] This is why group reflection is the standard procedure in theological reflection seminars connected with training for ministry. For a general description of this approach, see Robert L. Kinast, "Theological Reflection for Ministry Preparation," in *Tracing the Spirit, op. cit.;* Patricia O'Connell Killen and John de Beer, "Everday Theology: A Model for Religious and Theological Education," *Chicago Studies* 22, 2 (August, 1983), 191-207.

[36] Donald Capps follows the suggestion of Paul Pruyser and speaks of diagnosis. See Pruyser, *The Minister as Diagnostician* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976); James and Evelyn Whitehead speak of attending to experience in *Method in Ministry, op. cit.*, pp. 81-90.

[37] Some consensus is reflected in the criteria for accreditation used by the Association of Theological Schools, but the diversity of viewpoints is equally reflected in the differences among various degree programs accredited by ATS. Nowhere is this clearer than with the Doctor of Ministry degree. See also Edward Farley, *Theologia* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983) and Gerald R. Niklas, *Making of a Pastoral Person* (Staten Island, N.Y.: Alba House, 1981).

[38] James and Evelyn Whitehead, *Method in Ministry, op. cit.*, pp. 16-17.

experience by attending to its dominant theological element and not to the details and nuances of a full theological assessment.

The dominant theological factor is referred to in various ways by experiential theologians: the paradigmatic experience (Shea), the unifying theme (Capps), the theological variable (Pruyser). Usually the dominant theological factor originates in non-theological form.[39] Because of this, experiential theologians set in motion a kind of parallel process between experiential data and theological interpretations, as mentioned above. In order to set up appropriate parallels, experiential theologians must be conversant enough to move in and out of different spheres of discourse. The aim is to identify with that theological factor which gives the experience as a whole its theological unity or character. The orientation is holistic rather than analytic. Experiential theologians attend trustingly and respectfully to all that is given in the experience, identify honestly and collaboratively with its theological pattern or shape, and let that stimulate the corresponding theological contribution. The ultimate aim is to create meaningful, relevant connections between experience and theology.

This is a demanding challenge. In responding to that challenge, however, experiential theologians must face the equally challenging demand of the truth claims of both theology and experience.[40] In seeking the truth of a particular theological position, an experiential theologian may have to proceed into more depth and detail theologically but always in relation to the originating experience which prompted the reflection and continues to guide it. Likewise in gauging the truth of experience, an experiential theologian may have to discern methodically the *sensus fidelium* and weigh the available testimony according to principles of such discernment. Truth is not the province of theology only or of experience only but of a convergence of the two which appears only in *doing* experiential theology.

To enter experience theologically gives rise to an inquiry in which the experiential theologian may examine, compare, develop, critique, analyze the theological resources which appear to be relevant to the experience. The purpose of theologizing is to enhance the originating experience, i.e., to theologize from experience is to theologize for experience. All theology is ultimately pastoral.

[39] John Shea has taken note of this in describing the theological abilities of ministerial theology in "Doing Ministerial Theology," *op. cit.*

[40] The truth question is often bypassed in experiential theology. Don Browning has taken pastoral carers to task for the oversight in *The Moral Context, op. cit.* Urban Holmes has addressed this question as, "Is It True?" in *To Speak of God, op. cit.*

[41] On the sense of the faithful, see James and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, *Community of Faith* (New York: Seabury Press, 1982) pp. 151-75.

[42] In fact the question is sometimes reversed as in Ian McIntosh, when he discusses "three levels at which theological reflection on concrete pastoral relationships might be held to have value for theology in general." These levels are illustrative, question-raising, and supplying answers, "supplementing or emending traditional doctrinal statements." *Op. cit.*, pp. 115-22.

But in this regard, what does an experiential theologian expect of theology? What sort of contribution, in general, can theology make to experience? Or, to put it more crassly, why bother?

EXPERIENTIAL THEOLOGIANS ON THEOLOGY

On the whole, it is my impression that experiential theologians expect very little from theology. They certainly do not expect theology to provide answers to concrete, pastoral or practical questions nor do they expect theology to work out the theory which is then to be applied to particular cases or in particular circumstances. Consequently, much of what follows represents my own expectations of theology and sketches the experiential theology I try to do. In this regard I find the framework of process thought especially helpful and I will be speaking primarily in this genre.[43]

What experiential theologians do expect of theology is that it help mature the experience under consideration, i.e., help it achieve its potential. The notion of maturation is not conventionally used in this regard, but it expresses some important features of theologizing from experience. These features and the notion of maturation itself are especially pertinent when the agents in an experience are the focus of the reflection, but the same may be said when the interaction or environment is the focus.

Maturation suggests, first of all, a process, a reality that is already in motion, an event that is becoming. This dynamic quality, already noted as engendering respect in experiential theologians, reminds that theology enters something already there. Theology is not a *de novo* creator of experience.

Second, maturation is ultimately a self directive process. To be sure, external factors can condition, positively or negatively, any experience, but no external agent can actually mature someone or something else. In fact, when such an attempt is made, it usually retards growth rather than fosters it. This fact is a reminder that theology's contribution is auxiliary to experience and it presupposes trust in the inherent and already actualized potential of experience.

Third, maturation refers to a patterned process of self direction. There are certain passages or stages, certain typical sequences that structure a maturation process.[44] This grounds the possibility of a method for aiding the maturation process. Such a method would attend to the rhythms and timing and other variables in a given experience in order to help mature that experience.

[43] The most complete integration of process theology and pastoral care/ministry concerns is Gordon E. Jackson's, *Pastoral Care and Process Theology* (Washington, D. C.: University Press of America, 1981).

[44] Partly for this reason, the work of developmental psychologists like Erik Erikson, Carl Jung, Abraham Maslow, Daniel Levinson are favored in pastoral care/counseling just as systems and management analysis are favored in pastoral planning and administration. On the latter, see Charles J. Keating, *Community* (West Mystic, CT: 23rd Publications, 1977); Robert R. Newsome, *The Ministering Parish* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982).

Theology can contribute to this process in at least three ways, each of which represents an important moment in the maturation of any experience and each of which is a claim which experiential theology makes on theology as a whole. Theology can intensify, enlarge, and advance experience.

1. *Intensification* refers to the feelings which accompany and define an experience. Such feelings are not limited to the realm of the emotions. In fact, they center primarily on the climate, the atmosphere, the mood, the overall sense of an experience.[45] The analogue here is aesthetics. Intensification of aesthetic feeling is a heightening of the whole experience, a thrill or impact or excitement which is how the experience feels and how one feels the experience.[46] These feelings constitute the experience and this is what experiential theology focuses on.

Theology as a whole has a distinct contribution to make in this regard insofar as theology mediates divine feelings for human experience. The divine feelings are disclosed primarily in biblical theology and historical theology, if the latter is understood as the history of narrative accounts of how God's feelings have been experienced.[47] In both of these sources, the theological form of narrative is prominent. This is, of course, the primary form of experiential disclosure in the pastoral life of the church as well. The overlap is not coincidence. Narrative permeates and structures human experience and grounds the primal communication of God through the Word.[48]

This narrative quality of the theological tradition both intensifies and matures experience when a holistic sense of how God feels is contrasted with how the agent(s) in a particular situation feel. The contrast provides a stimulating tension which allows persons to feel their own experience more fully and to appropriate anew God's feelings for that experience via their own. Obviously the key to this whole exchange is an accurate perception of God's feelings. This is a task primarily for scholarly theology as it interprets the biblical and historical testimony. Of course, the narratives from the experiential life of the church can aid scholars in interpreting the biblical and historical narratives.

[45] Something of this orientation may be seen in Henri Nouwen's suggestions for moving beyond professionalism in *Creative Ministry* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971). The feeling dimension of pastoral encounters is, of course, the hallmark of Clinical Pastoral Education, the chief model of ministry training in the United States.

[46] In process terms, these feelings, technically called prehensions, explain the dynamics of all becoming. See Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, corrected ed., David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne, eds. (New York: Macmillan, 1978) pp. 219-83.

[47] On the use of Scripture see William B. Oglesby, Jr., *Biblical Themes for Pastoral Care* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980); Donald Capps, *Biblical Approaches to Pastoral Counseling* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981). For the use of historical narrative see Charles Jaeckle and William A. Clebsch, *Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1964); Herbert Mayer, *Pastoral Care: Its Roots and Renewal* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979).

[48] Narrative theology has spawned an enormous literature in recent years. Among other works see John Navone, S.J. and Thomas Cooper, *Tellers of the Word* (New York: Le Jacq Publishers, 1981); Sallie McFague *Metaphorical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

To be useful for experiential theology such interpretation should concentrate on the divine feelings disclosed in the sources.[49] At the very least, theology should not curb, mute, abstract from, or dismiss feeling but channel its communicative skill toward expressing the divine feelings contained in theology's own resources.

2. The second contribution of theology is to *enlarge* experience. Enlargement refers to expanding the physical, conceptual, psychic, or spiritual space within which an experience occurs. This touches on either the systemic connections inherent in the interconnected quality of experience or the location of a particular experience in a larger context of meaning and feeling. The former stretches the experience itself; the latter stretches one's attentiveness to the relevant setting of the experience.[50]

The analogue here is ecology. The goal is to find the proper space for an experience to mature. Too much room dwarfs the experience; too little suffocates it. Enlargement of the operative space in which an experience occurs opens up options, provides alternatives, widens scope, and aims at increased exercise of freedom pertinent to the maturation of experience.[51] Experiential theology focuses on freedom understood as opportunities for self directed growth.

Theology as a whole has a distinct contribution to make in this regard insofar as theology mediates the divine ecology (more frequently referred to by theologians as the divine horizon). The divine horizon is always at least one size larger than any experience and is disclosed primarily in the depth and breadth of fundamental and systematic theology. In both of these sources the theological form of imagination is prominent.[52] Imagination is also evident in the pastoral life of the church, expressed usually in terms of mission, vocation, or vision.

This imaginative quality of the theological tradition both enlarges and matures experience when the divine horizon is contrasted with the horizon of the agent(s) in a particular situation The divine horizon is a measured environment, i.e., it is always in relation to the possibilities of a given experience. The divine horizon is the further, attainable possibility, given the factual makeup of any experience. Thus, the divine horizon is always relative and never finally given, because every experience pushes beyond its

[49] An example of the integration of such scholarly work with experiential concerns is Rosemary Haughton's *The Passionate God* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981) as well as John Shea's two volumes *Stories of God* (Chicago: Thomas More Press, 1978) and *Stories of Faith* (Chicago: The Thomas More Press, 1980).

[50] An example of this type of enlargement is Edward Braxton's, *The Wisdom Community, op. cit.*

[51] Among process thinkers, Bernard Loomer in particular has stressed the theme of size and enlargement. See his essay "S-I-Z-E Is the Measure," in *Religious Experience and Process Theology*, Harry James Cargas and Bernard Lee, eds. (New York: Paulist Press, 1976) pp. 69-79. Other essays in this volume advance the same themes implied in the enlargement of experience through theological reflection.

[52] See recent works by Gordon D. Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981); Urban T. Holmes, *Ministry and Imagination* (New York: Seabury Press, 1981).

own previous achievement and so calls forth a new, relatively larger horizon.[53] Obviously, once again, it is essential that imaginative theology be guided by and remain within the divine horizon. From an experiential point of view theology is not to confine itself to the limits of experience but to disclose the further possibilities of experience when set against the divine horizon.

3. The third contribution of theology is to *advance* experience. Advancement refers to new enactments which are consequent upon a given experience or a certain type of experience. The analogue is play.[54] Advancement in playful activity results from a creative blending of specific values or norms, a testing of the limits to structured behavior, and a willingness to risk and fall and redesign a way of proceeding.[55] Experiential theology focuses on enactment, understood as intentional action which presses concretely previous interpretations in order to generate new experience.

Theology has a distinct contribution to make in this regard insofar as theology mediates divine symbols which beckon for enactment, because they originate in the activity of divine-human encounters. The divine symbols are disclosed primarily in sacramental, moral, and spiritual theology.[56] In all three theological sources the symbol is prominent and corresponds almost exactly to the typical symbolic expressions found in the pastoral life of the church.

The symbolic quality of the theological tradition both advances and matures experience when the divine symbols of God's participation in human life are contrasted with the symbols of human participation in life. The contrast induces a quickening of the human experience precisely as a focused encounter with the divine. The power of symbols generates a movement toward action that energizes the experience. Once again, a careful interpretation of the history of symbolic praxis can yield the basis for the persistence of certain symbols to nourish faith experience as well as criteria for creating new symbolic expression. At the very least from an experiential point of view theology is not to analyze and abstract from the symbolic but to accentuate and encourage enactment of the symbolic.

CONCLUSION

Experiential theology is theology. Its starting point is not the standard forms of theological expression but the prior, experiential grounding of

[53] Examples of this enlargement by divine horizon are John B. Cobb's, *Theology and Pastoral Care, op. cit.*, and Martin Thornton's, *The Function of Theology, op. cit.*

[54] See James Whitehead "The Practical Play of Theology," a paper presented at an ATS seminar on Models and Styles of Practical Theology, February 1983.

[55] The spirit behind this view is seen most clearly in Whitehead's *The Aims of Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1929).

[56] Recent examples of this use of divine symbols are (for sacramental theology) Bernard Cooke, *Sacraments and Sacramentality* (Mystic, CT: 23rd Publications, 1983); (for moral theology) Bernard Haring, *Free and Faithful in Christ* (New York: Crossroad Books, 1981); (for spiritual theology) Leonardo Boff, *Way of the Cross, Way of Justice* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1980).

those expressions. Experiential theology sets in motion a parallel process between experience as it is given spontaneously, directly, factually and theologically as a highly reflected, interpreted, developed representation of experience. When these two processes intersect, theology is able to intensify, enlarge, and advance experience while experience is able to give back to theology its own origins. Orthopraxis occurs when experience and theology pass explicitly into each other's constitution.

For this to happen more effectively and more frequently, three further claims may be made on theology as a whole by experiential theology.

1. In relation to any given experience or any general type of experience, theology always possesses an overinterpretation, i.e., theology always has more to say than any experience needs to hear.[57] Consequently, theology's abundance must be disciplined by the relative capacity of concrete experience. In this sense experience serves as both the starting point and a criterion of theological input. Theologians must discern the relative, relevant contribution of theology to experience and make that contribution with qualitative excellence. Herein lies the asceticism of modern theology and perhaps the path to sanctity for the theologian.

2. The agenda which every theologian pursues is influenced by personal experience. The experiential quality of all theology would be enhanced if that personal, experiential background were included as part of one's theological statement and if theologians trusted their own experience enough to reflect on it rather than on other theologians' reflections.[58]

3. Theology takes many forms of expression. The most useful forms for experiential theology are those that correspond most closely to the typical forms of experience. These have already been cited as narrative, image, and symbol. Experiential theology lays claim to the cultivation and elaboration of these forms for theological reflection.

A final point. Experiential theology is not a totally new type of theology. There is a long, if not always favored, strand of experiential theology in Christian tradition begining with St. Paul and continuing through Augustine, Bonaventure, Luther, Kierkegaard, Schleiermacher, Tillich and the contemporaries cited in this paper. To highlight the experiential starting point of theology is to keep us in touch with the irreplaceable origin of theological reflection. Everyone stands to gain if the experiential foundation of theologizing is made more explicit. But this is not an automatic or easy task. Even those who try to do it full time and intentionally keep searching for ways to do it better and to understand what it is they are doing.

[57] I am indebted for this phrase to Charles Winquist, *Practical Hermeneutics* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980).

[58] There are increasing examples of this personalizing tendency. One of these, which has enjoyed great popular success, is Harold Kushner's, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Avon Books, 1981). Another example is Bernard Tyrrell's *Christotherapy II* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982).

In this regard the CTSA can make a valuable contribution. Perhaps a continuing seminar could be added to the current list of seminars. Its purpose would be to bring together the best current examples of experiential theology and to learn from them how to do such reflection more effectively. Or, the current "Method in Theology" seminar might take a turn in this direction, focusing more on the method than the results of experiential theology. In either (or both) case, publication in the *Proceedings* would provide a public record of such discussions and offer a valuable contribution to others engaged in this type of work.

A third possibility is that some of the money now earmarked for scholarly publications might be used to seek a matching grant to start a new journal—something Philip Murnion suggested to us in Cincinnati two years ago—or produce a collection like the ATFE's *Key Resources*. Such a journal would have the same purpose as the continuing seminar except the issues could be treated more extensively.

At the very least, all theologians might honor the claim that they explicate the experiential basis of their own work and use more often experiential forms of theological expression. And if none of this appeals, just remember that there is another group of theologian colleagues who take experience as the starting point for their theologizing and who, for the chance to tell their story and share their experience in this setting and to this highly respected audience, thank you.

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