

FACULTY ESSAY

Seeking Communion: Theological Scholarship and Christian Formation¹



Midway in our life's journey . . .

These opening words of Dante's *Divine Comedy* seem an appropriate starting point for reflection on my experience of theological scholarship in a Roman Catholic diocesan seminary. The Seminary of the Immaculate Conception is not only the province of seminarians who have passed through high-school and college seminaries without hiatus. Many seminarians have entered the program of priestly formation, if not at the exact midpoint of their life journeys, then after having traveled other roads.

They come to begin another sort of journey, into the tradition of the church and toward closer fellowship with God and other believers (1 John 1:1-3). They look towards ordination, and their entry into the Masters of Divinity program is a major step in commitment to priesthood. But they understand as

¹ An earlier draft of this essay was written for a group consultation, entitled "Vocation: A Career in Theological Scholarship," sponsored by the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion in the summers of 2002 and 2003.

they begin that the next years will entail intensive discernment on how that commitment is deepening and widening.

Among students in the Seminary's Master of Arts in Theology and Master of Arts in Pastoral Ministry programs, some are already involved in church ministries, professionally or as volunteers, and come to the Seminary to expand their knowledge for a defined purpose. Others, however, are simply following an inner prompting to re-set their focus and to deepen understanding of their faith tradition. They are enthralled with the journey they are undertaking although they cannot envision exactly where it is leading.

The Theological Community

I would characterize all these journeys as a seeking for deeper communion: with God and with fellow travelers. Seminarians, candidates for the permanent diaconate, and religious and lay students are drawn to the Seminary as a place where seeking communion is at the center of attention and the learning endeavor.

Theological study at the Seminary, then, entails more than the acquisition of knowledge about the Christian tradition. It means coming closer to God in understanding, in prayer, and in love in a way that can in turn exert a pull on the worlds in which all of us live and interact. The chosen word for this growth in terms of candidates for priesthood is "formation." Seminarians are not simply "educated" or "trained" for priesthood, but formed intellectually, spiritually, and pastorally, according to *The Program of Priestly Formation*.² This multidimensional concept of formation is reflected in the preparation of candidates for the permanent diaconate and implicitly influences the programs for lay students at the Seminary as well.³

If the literal translation of disciple as "student" is kept in mind along with its extended meanings, the theological community at the Seminary can be understood as a community of disciples. The designations "student of theology" or "theologian," as the candidates for priesthood are called, are also appropriate at the level of formation and graduate study that takes place at the Seminary. But in a seminary context, these designations mark locations on a continuum of Christian discipleship.

² 5th ed.; Washington, D.C.: NCCB, 2006.

³ Cf. the distinction between theological education as *Wissenschaft* (science) and as *paideia* (formation) in David Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological About A Theological School* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992) and idem, *Between Athens and Berlin: The Theological Education Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993). David Tracy ("On Theological Education: A Reflection," in *Theological Literacy for the Twenty-First Century* [ed. Rodney L. Petersen with Nancy M. Rourke; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002] 15) speaks of the ancient ideal of "the coherence of a true education as uniting a vision of life and a way of life."

Structure, Ethos, and Mission

This continuum is manifest not just in the hopes and aims of those who study at the Seminary, but also in its mission, structure, and ethos. The core and primary mission of the Seminary is to form, train, and nurture priests for the local church (the dioceses of Brooklyn and Rockville Centre); for dioceses in Uganda, Ghana, Congo, and Korea; for the Major Eparchy of Trivandrum (India); and for the Eastern Province (U.S.) of the Congregation of the Mission. The Seminary also serves as a center of theological, spiritual, and pastoral study and discourse within the local dioceses: through its graduate degree programs for permanent deacons, laity, and religious; the maintenance of a theological library; public lectures; workshops; retreats; and the participation of faculty and students in educational and formational events in the dioceses.⁴ As an institution the Seminary is organically connected to a wider church body whose mission is both manifold and centered on the way, the truth, and the life of Christ.

The structure and ethos of the Seminary's programs bear out this connection. Alongside their academic courses, candidates for ordination are engaged in curricula of spiritual, human, and pastoral formation, which include a two-year course entitled "Formation in Christ"; ongoing spiritual direction; periodic days of recollection and retreats; workshops on pastoral issues; direct experience in hospital and prison ministries; and a mid-program "pastoral year" living and assisting in a local parish. The rhythm of the seminarians' days is shaped by communal prayer: morning and evening liturgical prayer; midday Eucharist; regular holy hours. The interaction of seminarians at meals, in house jobs, in planned and informal social activities, and simply "around the building" is part, too, of their growth and discernment in discipleship.

Theological Scholarship in a Seminary Context

My practice of theological scholarship has developed within this culture of Christian formation. During my thirteen years teaching Scripture (Old Testament) at the Seminary, I have encountered an unimagined variety of seminarians and students and taught classes of all shapes and sizes. I have regularly participated in the liturgical life of the Seminary and shared in retreat days and community colloquia. I have engaged in countless lunch-time conversations with students and faculty. These experiences form the texture of my professional life at the Seminary, which extends beyond the classroom and the library. I have watched myself grow and shift in response, so that the proportions of things have looked different over time.

⁴ Cf. Robert J. Wister, "Theological Education in Seminaries," in *Theological Education in the Catholic Tradition: Contemporary Challenges* (ed. Patrick W. Carey and Earl C. Muller, S.J.; New York: Crossroad, 1996) 164.

In contemplating these changes in perspective, I recognize a dynamic between what I sense my students both need to be introduced to in the biblical texts and how I myself engage with those texts.⁵ As I have come to understand it, my task as a seminary teacher is to attune students to the chorus of voices in the Scriptures, a chorus that articulates the presence of God in human life, inspiring and shaping a conversation about God that is ongoing among believers today. Priests, deacons, and all who participate in the life of the church need to regard and speak about Scripture as a formational body of divinely inspired writings to which we turn (as to the entire tradition of the church) to illuminate the dimensions and implications of faith in our own times and circumstances.

What is demanded of me as a scholar and teacher of Scripture is not simply to impart factual material about the texts or even to provide an overview of the texts themselves, though both are important. My primary goal in teaching, rather, is to develop in myself and my students an ear for the essential human and theological questions addressed by these writings and their significance for living within the framework of belief. I must lead students, further, to recognize in the biblical texts not only their own personal questions and situations but the issues with which the wider church grapples in its progress towards proclaiming and manifesting the kingdom of God in the world.

To draw out these dimensions does not mean breaking off exegetical and historical research in favor of the spiritual essence of the text. Such a rupture would run counter to the parameters of Catholic biblical interpretation. *The Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)* asserts that we access the wisdom expressed in the Scriptures *through* understanding their literary forms, historical contexts, and narrative structures.⁶ Further, I have found that students themselves seek this kind of information about the biblical writings. Many have just as many queries about the particular details, unfamiliar expressions, and historical issues of a text as about its themes and implications.

What is necessary in my own approach to teaching and studying the biblical texts is not necessarily a total change in the *content* of study but a

⁵ This dynamic can be seen as part of a hermeneutical and pedagogical movement toward consideration of the reception by the faithful of the biblical texts and of what is said or taught about them. St. Augustine's classic exposition of the interpretation of Scripture, *De doctrina Christiana (On Christian Teaching)*, speaks first of the discovery of what is to be understood in the Scriptures and second of the teaching of what is learned. For contemporary reflections on biblical interpretation, see e.g., The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1996) 1-42; George Montague, S.M., "Hermeneutics and the Teaching of Scripture," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 41 (1979) 1-17. See also Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana*, Books II and III.

⁶ See, e.g., paragraphs 11-13. Cf. The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1996) 5-11, 41-42.

reshaping of it to direct attention toward what speaks to the life of faith—of Christian discipleship— then and now. I no longer weigh down the beginning of a class with an exhaustive survey of background information: authorship, redaction, literary form and structure, historical setting (literary and actual). This material is worked in, to varying degrees, at appropriate points, but what guides my overall conception and structuring of a class session or sessions is my sense of the essential subjects the text explores in *relation* to its place in time, though not *limited* to it.

For example, I now anchor my discussion of the narratives about Abraham and Jacob in the contrast between two models of faith in action. The relationship of divine judgment to mercy and of human failure to spiritual and moral renewal is key to my presentation of the prophetic books. My conception of a course in the postexilic prophets, the wisdom books, and the Book of Daniel centers around the dynamic of “grace and choice.” The naming of such topics is by no means original, but the placing of them as rubrics under which a class explores the particular features and densities of a text marks a shift in my own approach to teaching Scripture.

Reading Inside and Outside the Text

Articulating the significant questions addressed by the biblical text is only part of the task, however. The necessary second component is to stimulate students to hear the resonance of these questions and to “try on” the responses of the texts to them.

Sometimes the confluence of the text’s own power and the sensitivity of students to a particular question creates a transparent space for recognition and claiming. This was the case, for example, with a Polish-born seminarian during a class on Isaiah 7. He had grown to adulthood in a country with a long experience of occupation by foreign powers. He heard Isaiah’s counsel to the king of Judah to trust in God (“Unless your faith is firm, you shall not be firm!”) in relation to the way many of his fellow Poles understand that a life centered around trust in God’s presence withstands defeat and subjugation. This student experienced, and helped the rest of the class to experience, a kind of communion with the text.

Other seminarians have, in assigned presentations in class, traced out the implications of biblical texts in a variety of human and pastoral contexts. Recently a seminarian proposed using the Book of Ecclesiastes to prepare those involved in parish bereavement ministry who must come to terms with the reality of death, especially unexpected death, in human life. The value of Proverbs as a resource for moving forward in the spiritual life after a conversion experience was suggested by another presenter. Another student saw the possibility of drawing on the book of Sirach to guide children in the ups and downs of friendship in the “facebook friend” generation.

At times Scripture challenges the expectations of students, as they struggle to find an opening—in the text and in themselves—for connection. Such struggles are common in discussions of the flood narrative, the sacrifice of Isaac, the deception of Isaac by Jacob, the divine hardening of Pharaoh’s heart, God’s rejection of Saul, and many prophetic declarations of death and destruction. If seriously engaged in, these discussions, too, represent an effort on the part of students to touch and interface with the experience of God voiced in the text. They alert students to the dangers of facile and literalistic readings of these texts and help them to discern reasons for not bypassing them completely.

What seems important is that students think through and try on from the inside, as it were, the theological revelations and insights that are voiced in the Scriptures. Biblical literacy is not only a matter of accurate observation and analysis of the tradition from the “outside.” Clearly students must learn to distinguish and differentiate, compare and assess the biblical texts through secondary critical literature. They must learn to bring knowledge and scholarship to the reading of Scripture. But the ultimate goal of study is communion with the presence of God working through the Scriptures and the human faith communities that underlie them. It is the capacity to recognize, weigh, and ponder the insights embodied in these texts and to work out a relationship with them. There is, in fact, a vital element of informed subjectivity inherent in this enterprise.⁷

Tuning the Ear and Turning the Heart

As a theological scholar in a seminary community, I, too, am impelled to go deeper into the Scriptures, to try them on, to do theology from the inside as well as from the outside. I, too, am caught up daily in the shared discipline of tuning my ear and turning my heart in response to the Spirit at work in the Word of God, in all its subtlety, complexity, variety, and beauty.⁸ The teaching and learning I engage in at the Seminary has moved far beyond the more factual and distanced approach toward biblical study of my academic graduate training. It has not overridden that approach, but it has transformed it.

⁷ Cf. the coherence of subjective and objective elements in the interpretive approach of Bernard Lonergan, as summarized by George T. Montague, *Understanding the Bible: A Basic Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (New York: Paulist, 1997) 152-58. See also Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999; reprint of 2d ed., Herder & Herder, 1973).

⁸ The opening lines of the doxology of wisdom in Wis 7:22–8:1 capture well, to my mind, the quality of the word of God as bearer of inspired wisdom: “For in her [wisdom] is a spirit; intelligent, holy, unique/Manifold, subtle, agile; clear, unstained, certain/Not baneful, loving the good, keen; unhampered, beneficent, kindly/Firm, secure, tranquil; all-powerful, all-seeing/And pervading all spirits. . .”

The direction of this transformation has been propelled in my case not so much by theoretical discussions about biblical exegesis but incrementally and instinctively as a response to the culture of prayer and discipleship in the life of the Seminary as a whole.⁹ It has developed in relation to the hopes of students who seek in the biblical texts insight and meaning in their own journeys into communion with the Lord and with others.

Over the last thirteen years of teaching, I have experienced graced moments of communion between the Word, myself, and my students. Such moments have occurred within the context of other sorts of communions generated within a culture and ethos of Christian discipleship and formation. For an icon of this kind of communion, I return to Dante. The last lines of the *Paradiso* mark the end of his tour of the divine realms and at the same time the beginning of a movement within himself:

Here my powers rest from their high fantasy,
but already I could feel my being turned —
instinct and intellect balanced equally

as in a wheel whose motion nothing jars —
by the Love that moves the Sun and other stars.¹⁰

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⁹ For theoretical discussions and examples of contemporary theological exegesis of Scripture, see, among others, Brevard S. Childs, “Toward Recovering Theological Exegesis,” *Pro Ecclesia* 6 (1996) 16-26; Christopher Seitz and Kathryn Greene-McCreight (eds.), *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); Christopher R. Seitz, *World Without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) and *Figured Out: Typology and Providence in Christian Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001); Stephen E. Fowl (ed.), *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Blackwell Readings in Modern Theology; Oxford: Blackwell, 1997); Johnson, Luke T. and William S. Kurz, *The Future of Catholic Biblical Scholarship: A Constructive Conversation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

¹⁰ Dante Alighieri, *The Paradiso* (tr. John Ciardi; New York: New American Library, 1970).