From the Editor’s Desk

Not too long ago, while attending a conference on the future of systematic theology, one theologian opined to me privately that the era of systematic theology is finished. The conditions for its very existence are no longer in place: a doctrinal consensus, a common philosophical palette, and, perhaps left unsaid, patience among readers and many theologians themselves with what can sometimes seem a lurch into abstraction.

I readily admit that such sentiments are tempting to affirm when we look at systematic theology as the convergence of dogmatics and philosophy in a mathesis that places the content of faith in some sort of comprehensible order. Indeed, if one looks at the pages of many theological journals, including this one, over the past fifteen to twenty years, one encounters many historical and ethical studies (including excellent examples in this very issue); much continuing work..., much continuing work in conversation with Lonergan, von Balthasar, and Rahner; and exercises in theological specialization. While this is all very valuable and often superb work, necessary in order to know where we stand at the present time, it can also serve as evidence, to some, that perhaps the steam has run out of systematic theology.

But this conclusion rests on too narrow an understanding of what systemic theology can be. A recent book by the French Jesuit, Bernard Sesboüé, Introduction à la théologie: Histoire et intelligence du dogma (Salvator, 2017) agrees that theology has splintered into so many specializations that the dream of a synthesis seems elusive at the present time. The kind of systematic theology branded by European culture’s joining of dogma to a philosophia perennis is a venerable achievement of the past to which we continue to turn, but no longer theology’s necessary point of departure.

The point of departure today is more often that of human experience. We find this addressed, Sesboüé argues, in parts of the theological universe that we are still only in the early stages of exploring seriously: interreligious theologies, eschatology (and apocalyptic), pneumatology, and political theologies. These trajectories, and others, are leading us to a theology based not necessarily in Western paradigms, but toward a more globalized (catholic) theology achieved through the interaction of many voices, including those of historians and ethicists, as well as of biblical and liturgical theologians, and people of other faith traditions.

Cognate patterns have been developing in the Global North and the Global South. One of the most hopeful signs of this kind of interaction is taking place through the

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Catholic Ethics in a World Church conferences, where ethicists and their systematician friends explore the implications of the human situation, from refugees and migrants to women living in the obscurity of poverty and patriarchal control. The great African, Asian, and Latin American diaspora communities are generating global communities of theological discourse. Increasingly, for example, Latinx theologians in the United States are in deeper communication with theologians from Latin America. And in all these theologies, the voices of women are continuing to challenge, ever more trenchantly, long-established discourses of the past.

We are in the midst of all this and so are unable to know precisely where this moment in the history of theology might lead. But we do know that theology’s future is that of the future of faith, and there we can find hope. Yes, there are all the surveys indicating the growth in the “nones” and the growing despair among young people everywhere—realities that call for our urgent response. At the same time, there is a searching for something more that could lead to a new synthesis, as people rediscover the heart of faith in and through the myriad criss-crossing voices already being heard. And this will lead to a new meeting of revelation (the concern of dogmatics) with human reality (what philosophy concerns).

We can be encouraged especially by many of the younger, often brilliant, theologians who are emerging, standing to be sure on the shoulders of giants, but offering a new seriousness to the task of theology that will stand the church in good stead in the years to come. I see the future of systematics as a project being born anew.

With this March issue, we begin what we project to be a series of articles over time on the place and role of women in the church’s imagination, and in theological discourse. Shannon M. McAlister, of Fordham University, traces valuable sources in the theological tradition for the role of Divine Sophia as a way of imagining God and the feminine—and thus, women—in the Christian imagination. This editorial page will have more to say about this vitally important topic in the future, as we descend into the details, and their lived implications, in issues to come.

That phrase “descend into the details” is inspired by James F. Keenan’s lead essay in our venerable Notes on Theological Ethics section, where he addresses the situation of theological ethics today as it must address the climate crisis, the dearth of political leadership in our time, and racism. Theological Studies plans to address racism as well as US gun culture in issues to come.

Other essays in this issue are a reminder that we are at a new stage in our understanding and appropriation of the Second Vatican Council. We have moved beyond the initial stage of detailing and rehearsing its history, and then its reception, and are now delving into its implications for a very different historical moment.

Finally, this is the first issue of 2018, 50 years after 1968—a seminal year in history, including ecclesiastical history (recalling Humanae Vitae). We will be exploring various theological developments since 1968 in our September issue.

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Editor-in-Chief