

## PROCESS THEOLOGY AND THE CATHOLIC THEOLOGICAL COMMUNITY

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**T**HE EMINENT Catholic theologian Edward Schillebeeckx reflected over the development of Catholic and Protestant theology since 1870 and spotted two distinct patterns. On the Protestant side, represented by the Reformed tradition, theological authority arises from individual scholars whose statures form a series of outstanding mountain peaks: Barth, Bultmann, Tillich, Ebeling and Fuchs, Moltmann and Pannenberg, and so on. On the Catholic side, however, these peaks are more relative: "theology seems to be borne along by a wider stream which carries all kinds of vessels along with it, but within which a current that is somewhat faster than the stream itself can from time to time be observed."<sup>1</sup> For Schillebeeckx, the distinctive difference in theological development lies in the Catholic idea of church. While the radical need for interpretation is no less acknowledged in Protestant theology, Catholic theology attaches a far greater importance to the whole community of believers (*fides ecclesiae*) than to the finest syntheses of theologians. Moreover, the catholicity of faith seems spontaneously to resist the authority of one personal synthesis, however successful this may be at a given period, whether a Thomas Aquinas or a Karl Rahner. Every Catholic theologian knows from the beginning that he or she remains subject to the criticism of a community of faith. The Catholic theological principle *lex orandi est lex credendi* (the law of praying is the law of believing) expresses well this inextricable unity of life and doctrine, worship and understanding, prayer and belief. Thus, while the theologian takes a formative part in the direction of theology, he or she remains always in a subordinate relationship to a larger undertaking.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, Schillebeeckx had the development of European theology in mind, but in fact his insight applies to the American theological scene as well. Perhaps, on the one hand, American theology might even be interpreted by some as a backwash of European theology and thereby even more dependent upon the strong current of the stream to carry it

<sup>1</sup> T. Mark Schoof, *A Survey of Catholic Theology 1800-1970*, Introduction by E. Schillebeeckx (Ramsey, N.J.: Paulist, 1970) 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 2.

along and refresh its still waters.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, others might interpret theology in America as no less a part of the driving current in the middle of the fast-moving stream but without calling attention to itself. While the former interpretation describes our past history, the latter sets the stage for the future. Theology in America benefits from the insights of the most technologically advanced country, where new models of science, forms of interpretation, and futuristic possibilities come together today to present the challenges for tomorrow's theology. Whatever American scenario eventuates, the manner will remain the same: theology will be interrelated with the faith life of a believing community and be responsible to its interpretation.

Process theology and its parent, process philosophy, are part of this American Catholic scenario. The vital, searching, and honest question is not an explanation of process theology or process philosophy, nor even how they relate together. Although these are extremely important academic questions, they avoid the painfully personal faith-question: How does the American Catholic theological community understand and evaluate process theology and philosophy in the light of its own fidelity to the God of Jesus Christ? In other words, process philosophy and theology provide potential meaning to a community of interpretation, in this case the Catholic Church, that applies principles of interpretation, namely, fidelity to the faith (*fides ecclesiae*), and that instinctively resists the authority of a one-person synthesis.

The purpose of this paper is a critical appraisal of process theology. Such an appraisal, I submit, can best take place within a community of interpretation. My point of reference throughout is the American Catholic theological community, and my point of focus is the relationship of process theology to that community. Because they are beyond the scope of this discussion and not because I regard them as unimportant, I will neither explain how the Catholic community interprets new theologies nor justify the rationale for its hermeneutical principles. I accept a magisterium, or teaching authority, and a *sensus fidei* as givens in Catholic theology. I will develop the paper in three steps: (1) the anatomy of the problem, (2) the history of the problem revisited, and (3) the challenge to process theology for the future.

<sup>3</sup> The pre-Vatican II dependence in theological formation upon European scholarship in the form of Thomism, and even the use of Latin manuals from Europe, seem to confirm this view. Since Vatican II, Latin American liberation theology, which attempts to develop a theology responsible to its cultural context, also serves to disclose the lack of any truly North American theology.

## ANATOMY OF THE PROBLEM

My thesis is that process theology has not made significant inroads into the American Catholic theological community. I would consider a significant inroad to include, but not be limited to, a Catholic faculty identifiably in the process camp, a Catholic publishing house using process material, an identifiable journal, a major Catholic theologian of national prominence providing leadership in process thought, or a popular groundswell calling for process insights.

On all the evidence, process theology would seem to be a fortunate find in the Catholic community when the search for the inculturation of theology has arisen. It boasts American roots stemming from an identifiable American philosophy, offers Catholic theology in a time of growing pluralism a possible alternative to the historically dominant Thomistic and scholastic frameworks, draws on modern science as a vehicle of common world-wide discourse, supplies a philosophical support to speculative theology, and in general is in tune with a world that must live with constant and unavoidable change. To someone who wants to know whether or not there exists a future for process theology especially in the United States, the prediction would be a resounding yes. This prediction, however, would be like weighing the pros and cons of one's favorite football game: for all our figuring, what occurs on paper does not necessarily occur on the field. And so it has been with process theology. For all its attractive features, process theology has not caught on in the American Catholic theological community. No Catholic faculty in the U.S. can be identified with process theology; no Catholic publishing houses of books or Catholic journals are identifiably process in orientation; no outstanding Catholic theologian of national prominence exists who can be clearly identified as a process theologian; and the popular groundswell seems content to examine development in favor of process insights. In fact—and what seems to be an emotional conviction rather than an intellectual position—when process theology is mentioned among the Catholic faithful, it is regularly greeted with strong negative feelings and even hostility. One conclusion from the contemporary Catholic situation is that, with relatively few exceptions, the Catholic tradition has never tapped the roots of American intellectual life. Another conclusion is that the American Catholic community is facing a new and basic option in direction.

It is also interesting that Catholic theologians have been varied and frequent opponents of process theology. If I may use the outstanding Catholic journal *Theological Studies* as an indicator, David Burrell, who represents one extreme, has suggested that process theology rests upon a mistake; John Wright, less extreme, has criticized process' misunder-

standing of knowledge and human freedom and Thomas' adequacy to explain it; Leo O'Donovan, a less combative opponent, has indicated through his analysis of Jüngel's interpersonal relations the indifference to process categories.<sup>4</sup> My own work, favorable to its insights, has argued for its contribution to theology but also its critical limits.<sup>5</sup> Why, when so many indicators point in favor of process theology, has it been thus resisted and not taken root in the American Catholic theological community?

#### HISTORY OF THE PROBLEM REVISITED

While a complete cause-and-effect explanation of the problem between process theology and the Catholic theological community cannot be given, seven dynamics can be discerned which indicate the history of the problem and set the agenda for the future.

1) *The Catholic context of authority.* In the Catholic view of church, theology is done within an authority structure between the polarities of *sensus fidei* and magisterium. For some, authority is a pejorative word which conjures up repressive measures like the Galileo affair, the Index of Forbidden Books, doctrinal anathemas against heresies, or the censure of writers such as Hans Küng or Leonardo Boff. However, while authority possesses its continual tensions, the overall picture is not one of repression so much as one of preserving and proclaiming the faith of the people in both the past and the present. In some areas the magisterium leads (e.g., social encyclicals), in other areas it trails behind (e.g., women's issues). Today, even in secular newspapers and journals, authority and how it is used are increasingly discussed, too openly for some. In the final analysis, the authority of the Church is subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, is judged by it, and answers to it. In this sense the authority of the Church is itself always under continual judgment to search for the truth of faith. By being answerable to God, authority in the Church is not constitutively negative or repressive, even if instances show the contrary. By accepting an authority beyond itself, theology is not like other disciplines, whose principles of truth and accuracy reside within the canons of the discipline. Actually, a salutary wholeness to theology exists when it is done in this way: it remains at the service of the

<sup>4</sup> David Burrell, C.S.C., "Does Process Theology Rest on a Mistake?" *TS* 43 (1982) 125-35, and the appraisal by Burrell of O'Donovan, *ibid.* 130, n. 11.; John Wright, S.J., "Divine Knowledge and Human Freedom," *TS* 38 (1977) 450-77; Leo O'Donovan, S.J., "The Mystery of God As a History of Love," *TS* 42 (1981) 251-71.

<sup>5</sup> J. J. Mueller, S.J., "Faith and Appreciative Awareness: The Feeling-Dimension in Religious Experience," *TS* 45 (1984) 57-79. As the third part of that paper argues, I see my work within the larger empirical process tradition (73-79).

worshiping faithful and is not locked up in academic correctness.<sup>6</sup>

2) *The formation of a Catholic theologian.* It is impossible to separate Catholic theology from the type of theological formation that prevailed until recent times. Catholic theologians before Vatican II were almost universally clergy. Without question, since the time of the Reformation when seminaries began, the clergy were the theologians and theologians came from the clergy. Until recently, lay theologians were few and far between. One example of this domination, from the latter part of the 19th century, is the great English convert Cardinal John Henry Newman, who, desiring to start a university in Dublin, refused Orestes Brownson, one of the most creative American theological minds of the time, a position as a teacher of theology because he was a layman. Instead, he offered Brownson the chair of geography; angered, Brownson refused.

Given that Catholic theologians were drawn from the clergy, what kind of training was prescribed for them? The Code of Canon Law in 1917 prescribed for ordination to priesthood two years of philosophy followed by four years of theology.<sup>7</sup> After ordination, scholars specializing in theology might take additional formal training. Hence, in the Catholic Church and especially in its theological community, a close, even intrinsic connection has existed between philosophy and theology. From a Catholic viewpoint, one cannot do theology without at the same time philosophizing.

3) *The historical development of theology and philosophy in the Catholic community.* In 1870, with the dogmatic constitution *Dei Filius* and then in 1879 with the encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, the Catholic Church officially adopted Thomas and scholasticism as the "optimum modum philosophandi." The Modernist crisis at the end of the last century and the condemnation of Modernism in the first decade of this century intensified the need for sound thinking in a world exploding with "modern" thoughts. However retrogressive this decision might sound to those who wanted openness to the new developments, the strategic decision to remain solidly aligned with the tested durability of Thomism as a philosophical basis provided a strong support for theology. In fact, Thomism proved not to be as bogged down in the past as many progressives expected, because many varieties of Thomism blossomed: the Neo-Thomism of

<sup>6</sup> While I do not disagree with David Tracy's three centers of responsibility—church, academy, society—I do not find the interrelationships among them sufficiently delineated, especially the role of the Church as the central interpreting community which this paper examines. Cf. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 3–46.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. the 1917 Code of Canon Law (CIC), canons 1364–66. For an extensively documented history of seminaries, see *Seminaria ecclesiae catholicae* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1963).

Kleutgen and Rousselot, and the three irreducibly distinct emphases developed between the First and Second World Wars which gathered schools of followers around the formative thinkers: Maritain and his use of tradition, Gilson and his use of the historical texts of Thomas, and Maréchal and his use of the transcendental method.<sup>8</sup>

The choice of Thomas and scholasticism as “the best way to philosophize” had far-reaching ramifications which continue to the present day. The principal one for our purposes is that until Vatican II the philosophical training for theology was Thomistic. By the trickle-down theory, this meant that Catholic universities throughout the United States shared this theological and philosophical basis with their students in theology and philosophy courses and generally throughout the curriculum. The enormity of this unified theological enterprise and its continued influence can be measured by simply taking the number of existing Catholic schools that bear this tradition and present the educational leverage that still exists. We are speaking about 319 seminaries and 239 Catholic colleges and universities in the U.S.<sup>9</sup> This represents a potentially formidable alignment of thought by any standard. From top to bottom the theological community in the Catholic community accepted its relationship with philosophy as a working partner. Such an affiliation would present both special concerns and advantages to process thought.

When process philosophy (and now I am speaking of Whitehead as the central proponent and classical presentation of process philosophy, which he called a philosophy of organism) burst on the scene in the 1920s and 1930s,<sup>10</sup> Catholic philosophy was still forming theologians, clergy, and students with Thomistic thought. Process philosophy did not dent Catholic thought during this period and would not be recognized as a serious option until the late 60s and 70s. On the theological side, the critical power of neo-orthodoxy with the Niebuhrs and Tillich in the U.S.

<sup>8</sup> Gerald A. McCool, *Catholic Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Seabury, 1977) 241–67.

<sup>9</sup> *The Official Catholic Directory 1985* (Wilmette, IL: Kenedy). My use of 1984 statistics emphasizes the continued influence. If one returns to 1965 statistics to understand the potential at the end of the pre-Vatican II period, the comparable statistics are: 596 seminaries and 304 Catholic colleges and universities. If one examines the longer historical influence, some of the comparable statistics are: in 1950, 388 seminaries and 225 Catholic colleges and universities; in 1940, 202 seminaries and 143 Catholic colleges for men and 683 Catholic “colleges and academies for girls”; in 1920, 113 seminaries and 215 colleges for men and 710 colleges and academies for girls. Cf. *The Official Catholic Directory*.

<sup>10</sup> For a moving account of how this new philosophy captured the imagination of the faculty at the University of Chicago in 1924, see Bernard Meland, “The Empirical Tradition in Theology at Chicago,” in *The Future of Empirical Theology* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1969) 283–306.

reigned before the Second World War<sup>11</sup> but spent itself with the changes that came after the Second World War. A theological vacuum developed, and the beginnings of process theology emerged with Wieman's *The Source of Human Good* (1946), Meland's *Faith and Culture* (1953), Williams' *The Spirit and Forms of Love* (1968); and although the late Bernard Loomer did not publish much, as dean and teacher at the University of Chicago and later at the GTU in Berkeley he made a strong impact. A second generation emerged in John Cobb Jr. and Schubert Ogden, who began their impact in the early to mid-60s. Norman Pittenger remained the foremost popularizer of process thought and an important figure. The philosophy of Charles Hartshorne was also significant—e.g., his *The Divine Relativity* (1948) and *Reality As a Social Process* (1953). These two generations were nurtured by Liberal Protestantism.<sup>12</sup>

The demise of much of the existing theology continued with the death-of-God theology which exploded on the scene in the early and mid-60s, signaling to many the corruption of theology and its dubious relationship to new philosophies. At the same time many diverse movements, both liberal and fundamental, vied for credibility in what was an unraveling situation bordering on panic and calling for new directions. Born from the devastation of World War II, existentialism began to undercut classical metaphysics. Many more Protestant theologians began to study process philosophy as a possible direction. Meanwhile, riding the momentum built up from the previous decades, Catholic theologians continued to delve into the new and growing discoveries of Thomas and his perennial contribution to thought. And in a chaotic intellectual climate, his philosophical underpinnings seemed even more helpful and true. Stability, vigor, and optimism represented the benchmark for Catholic thought throughout these halcyon years of the 50s. It culminated in a new Catholic consciousness when John F. Kennedy, who symbolized much of the Catholic community, became president of the United States. Catholics had come of age. The golden age of Catholic life seemed to have arrived and the appropriateness of the Thomistic choice was vindicated.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Sidney Ahlstrom, *Theology in America* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967) 76–91.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Dean Fowler, "A Process Theology of Interdependence," *TS* 40 (1979) 44–45. He sees the Catholic theologians David Tracy and Bernard Lee as a part of the third generation, a statement that I believe needs the nuancing this paper provides.

<sup>13</sup> The 1950s in U.S. Catholicism is a decade whose story needs telling both in itself and in its relationship to the continuing movements of history. For example, explosive dynamics were unleashed in the 50s with which we are coming to grips today: the expansion of all Catholic educational institutions, the swelling of religious vocations, and the general upward mobility of immigrants come-of-age in the socioeconomic arena.

4) *Emerging pluralism in Catholic theology.* Emerging from a century of consolidation, Vatican II (1962–65) recognized new responsibilities occurring in the world and opened its windows to new challenges for proclaiming the gospel. With the recognition of diverse cultural dynamics at work, a pluralism of philosophical systems also emerged. Existentialism, phenomenology, empiricism, language analysis, structural analysis, and semantics were only a few of the philosophies that claimed attention. In addition to individual systems, the whole history of philosophy was opened to new interpretations. In the midst of this turmoil, dialogue partners and what they stood for changed. At this time, when process philosophy was marshaling its greatest arguments against the so-called classical tradition (perhaps against Descartes rather than the tradition), the classical tradition as appropriated by the Catholic community continued to develop, became interested in all kinds of philosophies, and by its own choice dissolved its monolithic façade. Thus the classical philosophical position which so readily was identified with the Catholic community gradually ceased to apply. In fact, by not remaining uniformly Thomistic, Vatican II changed three relationships: it left process theology without a clear adversary; it welcomed process insights, thereby relativizing process thought to one philosophical voice among many; and it remained an advocate, along with process thought, for strong philosophical relationships to theology.

Meanwhile, theology was finding its roots less dependent upon philosophy, especially metaphysics, which was under considerable attack by the academic community, and more dependent upon the growing discoveries in scriptural studies. In the 1943 document *Divino afflante Spiritu*, the Catholic Church officially subscribed to historical-critical methods as part of its interpretation of Scripture and began to train a generation of scholars who emerged in the late 50s. By the 60s new doors had opened and scriptural scholarship became an exciting and thrilling addition that was disseminating throughout the Catholic community. Moreover, Vatican II insisted that all theological formation return to Scripture as its source. Without doubt, the advance in Scripture is the most important contribution to theology in this century. Historical dynamics again worked against each other: while process theology championed the underpinnings of a new philosophy, Catholic theology moved away from its previous relationship to philosophy to include Scripture. An emancipation from what had been a dependent relationship to philosophy in the last century had been accomplished. Catholic theology matured to a more independent identity that would relate to all disciplines in its own responsible ways.

In summary, although the prognosis indicated that pluralism in Cath-



olic theology would aid process' entrance into the Catholic theological community, the opposite occurred. Pluralism opened up thought extensively beyond American borders to a smorgasbord of ideas where process was only one small voice among many.

5) *The Catholic concern with the relationship of process theology to process philosophy.* Process theology depends directly upon process philosophy as expounded by Whitehead. In his introduction to *Process and Reality*, Whitehead stated that he was trying to rescue the larger empirical tradition of Bergson, James, and Dewey from the charges of "anti-intellectualism."<sup>14</sup> He called his new thought a philosophy of organism. Hartshorne attributes the coining of the word "process" to Loomer. Process philosophy, then, though emerging from the empirical tradition in the U.S., has come to be associated exclusively with Whitehead. His seminal treatment of God occurs from the short Part 5, chapter 2 of *Process and Reality* and seems more like an afterthought than his main concern. Whitehead did not think that God should be an exception to metaphysical categories. The universe as disclosed in modern scientific observation does provide some knowledge of the way God is which will be complemented by the documents of the religions of the world.<sup>15</sup> It is from this chapter that the process philosophy of God is elaborated and becomes the cornerstone for process theology. From its conception—and this is an important genetic point—process theology is the intellectual child of process philosophy. The relationship is not a philosophy which underpins theology so much as a philosophy which generates a theology. Even the name "process" indicates a familial, dependent relationship upon process philosophy. So then, if one does not accept the philosophical presuppositions of process philosophy, does one reject the theology? If one accepts the theological insights, is one really doing a philosophy of religion? Does process theology require a twofold acceptance of both its theological insights and its philosophical basis? Whether one argues for an organic intellectual unity between philosophy and theology or only the theological use of the philosophical insights, a close connection does exist and the acceptance of one does imply the acceptance of the other. In any case, the question arises whether process theology has sufficiently understood and explained its own starting point in philosophy.

6) *The Catholic concern of theological philosophy.* Process philosophy is decidedly metaphysical in concern, and with Whitehead really cosmological. It is necessarily abstract and theoretical. Anyone who has read

<sup>14</sup> A. N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Free, 1978) xii.

<sup>15</sup> Laurence Wilmot, *Whitehead and God: Prolegomena to Theological Reconstruction* (Ontario: Wilfred Laurier Univ., 1979).

Whitehead's *Process and Reality* can testify to the many new terms and expressions such as prehensions, concrescences, and eternal objects. Because the vocabulary and related mental constructs are abstracted from their experiential grounding, process philosophy is predominantly knowledge-oriented as opposed to life-oriented. During this same time the Catholic theological community found a voice in Teilhard de Chardin, who provided an alternative vision, also tied to new concepts but spoken with the poetic description of a mystic rather than a logician. In what became a search for an appropriate language which empowered and enhanced people's experience, process vocabulary seemed restricted to the classrooms of university professors and graduate students. When the mood was ready for a hearing, process thought seemed encased in a foreign language that first had to be learned before people could apply it. The effort alone made it impractical for the ordinary language of experiences.

Another turn occurred. Process theology took on a combative temperament against classical theology and proceeded with a dogmatic righteousness to cut human experience to fit the Procrustean bed of Whitehead's cosmology, a movement that Whitehead himself, if alive, would have resisted. Rather than the pursuit of his inductive approach, which was a return to experience, a deductive explanation removed from experience resulted. An important non-Whiteheadian switch had come about whereby people repeated Whitehead's answers instead of repeating his method. Just as the return to Thomism by the Catholic intellectual community actually served to free Thomas from what people thought Thomas said (Thomism), so process theology would do well to liberate Whitehead from Whiteheadianism. Simply repeating answers, whether of Thomas or Whitehead or anyone else, becomes a tiring explanation that circumvents the process of thinking.

Because of strong and definite underpinnings by process philosophy, process theology is open to the criticism that it is really a philosophy of religion whose cornerstone is not faith but the clarification and extension of a cosmology into the religious realm. Instead of regarding philosophy as a system unto itself, the Catholic community asks the question of philosophy's relationship to the life of faith. In this relationship, theology, defined as faith seeking understanding, *fides quaerens intellectum*, calls upon philosophy to help clarify understanding. Theology is the queen of the sciences and philosophy is its handmaid, *ancilla theologiae*. Process theology seems to operate in the reverse direction, as a theology serving a philosophy: understanding seeking faith. Hence any tendency to baptize process philosophy or canonize Whitehead would be resisted quite spontaneously and emotionally within the Catholic community. While Cath-

olic theology does not take away the need for epistemology, metaphysics, and cosmology—in fact, has championed such thinking—process theology would have to be rethought from the perspective of faith experience.

This is a very serious statement to the 20th-century theological community, because it is too kin to the unfortunate Bultmannian choice of this century—a kind of intellectual sin against the Holy Spirit, if you will, which is unforgivable. Bultmann remains continually scolded for the decision he made as a theologian to find a philosophy which would underpin his work. As he looked around, he saw Heidegger's philosophy as the most reasonable, well-argued, and influential philosophy. Therefore he adopted it. In a sense, he baptized a philosophy into his theological work. If the adage "once bit, twice shy" teaches any lesson, then his decision indicates that theology will not tolerate a full-scale, mass conversion of philosophy into theology. Theology has matured and taken a more critical stance toward philosophy. Any protestations of "I'm for Thomas" or "I'm for Whitehead" or "I'm for Heidegger" will meet the same fate, no matter who proclaims it.

7) *The Catholic return to experience.* When the pluralism of philosophical systems was admitted into the Catholic theological community after Vatican II, simultaneously several emphases emerged which dealt with inculturating theology. Liberation theology in Latin America, contextual theology in Africa, indigenous theology in Southeast Asia, and political theology in Europe began raising strident cries about the nature and purpose of theology. Liberation theology continued to develop under many forms, e.g., black and feminist theologies in this country. In general, theology shifted its emphasis to life-oriented theologies, which were characterized as moving from the bottom up, i.e., from experience to reflection, and resisted any appearance of slicing experience into already-determined, aprioristic categories which came from the top down. Reflection, they all insisted, must spring from action (praxis) and is tested by its effects, which for some were measured against the cries of the poor and oppressed; for others, social justice; for still others, the renunciation of oppression.

This method was foreign neither to the American intellectual tradition, especially pragmatism, nor to the generalized United States preference for practicality. Although U.S. Catholics did not consciously bring their American roots into relation with their theology, and allowed European categories to dominate, the reality pervaded American Catholic behavior. When these new theological developments emerged from around the world, they provided a context by which our own distinctive American identity could be compared, contrasted, and recognized. The resulting changes of awareness among U.S. Catholic theologians indicate that,

unexpectedly, liberation theology and not process theology has tapped into the American character, even though process theology is "home-grown." The result is that liberation theology has made the most significant inroads into the U.S. Catholic theological community in the last 20 years.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, Vatican II encouraged the laity to assume greater responsibility for their role in the Church. This emergence of the laity also signaled changes in theology. Since theology would no longer be so totally dominated by the clergy, the way theological formation was performed in the U.S. was altered. For example, because the preparation of the lay theologian was not controlled by canon law, the two-year preparation in philosophy was not required. In addition, whereas theological doctorates had normally been taken in Europe, for many reasons now the number of Catholic doctorates in theology from American universities increased dramatically.

The rift between philosophy and theology continued to widen and deepen. Theology went its own way, due primarily to Scripture scholarship and the "return to the sources" mandated by Vatican II's directives for theological formation. A significant rearrangement of the way theology was done took place. Scripture replaced philosophy as the practical preparation for theology. At the same time, the practical importance of theology continued as believers insisted that theology speak to them in a relevant and pastoral way. Hence theology established a pastoral connection to life such as it had not enjoyed for centuries. Experience thus became far more integrated with theology both as a starting point and ending point. In sum, by incorporating Scripture and experience as sources for theology, every area of theology underwent a transition from the ground up. By the call for a practical theology, theology became more concrete and less abstract.<sup>17</sup>

Two ships were passing in the night. One ship, the Catholic community, sailed into more pastoral and practical waters with more diverse dialogue partners in philosophy than ever before, while slowly divesting itself from what appeared to be constitutive or derivative relationships to philosophy. The other ship, process theology, remained anchored in abstract and theoretical constructs separated from the experience of the faithful and tied closely to philosophy. It seems that the dynamic of

<sup>16</sup> "Inroads" that indicate liberation theology's influence are the publishing house of Orbis, the social-justice emphasis on the intellectual and popular levels, and major Catholic theologians identified with it (e.g., Gutiérrez, Boff, Segundo, Sobrino).

<sup>17</sup> For a current explanation of theological education and how it has changed, especially with respect to the pastoral dimension of theological formation, see T. Howland Sanks, S.J., "Education for Ministry since Vatican II," *TS* 45 (1984) 481-500.

process theology was anchored in harbor as far as Catholic theology was concerned. What process theology offered, Catholic theology was not interested in purchasing, because the wares were yesterday's frigates and unsuitable for the needs of today.

#### CHALLENGE TO PROCESS THEOLOGY TODAY

From the above, it would seem that process theology and the Catholic theological community have sailed in different directions due to external historical developments, differences in perspective, and internal evolutions. Personally, I do not see the prospects for process theology growing greater within the Catholic theological ranks. I believe they are diminishing. Does this mean that, like the grass in the field that is here today and gone tomorrow, so has been the fate of process theology? The answer will depend upon the following challenge.

Taking a lead from the communication style of Jesus of Nazareth, who found that mental pictures told more than words, let me begin with a parable. There was a giant and beautiful flower that bloomed taller and taller and finally was out of proportion to the rest of the plant. Its quick growth sapped the life from the main stem. While growing, it drew the attention of everyone who saw it. People began to consider it as potentially a whole new plant itself, taking over every inch of space. Imaginations ran wild with new possibilities and new uses for this plant. Popular magazines wrote about it. Finally, in size and beauty, the flower eclipsed the plant from which it drew its life. Indeed, to all it seemed that the flower was the plant. And then it happened. People noticed that the flower had grown so large that it could not sustain itself and was quickly growing itself to death. The flower so dominated that it seemed to be a different plant, but it was not. In its prominence it continued even more to depend upon its trunk and roots. Moreover, serious considerations needed attention. The flower might have to be cut off and its stem pruned. Yet, precious and precarious life remained in the dwarfed main plant, which, though obscured, continually fed the real life to the flower. Hope remained: if it could be saved, the life of the main plant might continue and offer new blooms and give life to other flowers.

The point of the parable? The fast-blooming flower is process philosophy, which came along at a time and place in American thought that brought together many dynamics from science, critical theory, and new models of thinking about the world in terms of change and processes. Drawing nourishment from its main plant, process philosophy had a quick growth-spurt in popularity and appeal which suggested great potential for the future. But the danger was that it grew beyond and at the expense of the main plant, as if it had the ability to live alone. The point

is: if process thought tries to live as if it were the plant, it will die either by its own self-contained growth or by being pruned as expendable.

What is this main plant which today continues to live and give nourishment to other flowers? It is the empirical tradition, which takes experience seriously. In philosophy the empirical tradition has given rise to many flowers such as pragmatism, which remains a truly American contribution to philosophy. Pragmatism itself resides within the wider blossom of the American classical tradition of Peirce, James, Royce, Santayana, and Dewey, to whom, not incidentally, Whitehead was indebted and whom he consciously tried to defend against charges of anti-intellectualism. Whitehead himself suggested this connection to the main plant and the constant return to it as a source: "the transitions to new fruitfulness of understanding are achieved by recurrence to the utmost depths of intuition for the refreshment of imagination."<sup>18</sup> The larger category of experience still remains deep in the American soul as part of our preferred personality and is called upon to nourish our intuitions, dreams, and theoretical constructs.

In theology the empirical tradition in the U.S. also contains an experiential tradition of long standing that found its first American voice in Jonathan Edwards. It is the experiential dimension that captivated American theology in its beginnings and continues to do so today. Liberation theology, praxis theology, pastoral theology, theology of hope, and even spirituality emphasize a beginning point in experience itself and fascinate American theology today. While theology is chary of philosophy dictating its terms—the Bultmannian sin clearly typifying the fruit that will be avoided in this garden—nevertheless the empirical tradition in philosophy still provides a viable root for collaboration with theology. Process philosophy can help interpret one facet of experience but remains too narrow or limiting as a philosophical system for wholesale use in theology. But there is hope: while, on the one hand, process philosophical theology is not catching on, and, on the other, the empirical dimension of theology is taking root, process philosophy can serve theology by challenging it to return to its understanding of experience, especially in the area of experience as social and relational.

Process philosophical theology might be growing itself to a rapid death. It cannot become the plant itself. It must become one of many flowers for the life of the whole. Insights gained from process philosophical

<sup>18</sup> A. N. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: Macmillan, 1932) 203–4. Wilmot makes the observation that rethinking of Whitehead could be undertaken if empirical evidences found in religious experience required it—the point I am suggesting. Cf. Wilmot, *Whitehead* 83.

theology will continue to come forth, particularly in the arena of relationships. Loomer, to whom Hartshorne attributes the label "process," later said that the word is too narrow by itself to adequately convey the real insights; he preferred the clumsy but more adequate description of "process/relational" theology. While process thought has its critics, few deny the contributions it has made to understanding the human person as socially related, what Whitehead called the "individual-in-community." But, for all its good points, process theology has remained too much of a proponent and defendant of Whitehead's philosophy to the neglect of the empirical tradition from which his philosophy emerges and to which it needs to remain connected. Even within the process tradition itself, the call to rethink Whitehead in light of the empirical tradition has been made by no less a person than Meland<sup>19</sup> and is a challenge that process theology faces.<sup>20</sup>

A second challenge is interpreting the community's religious experience. Theology cannot remain content to explain itself in abstract and theoretical ways, leaving itself to speculative theology only.<sup>21</sup> No theology can nourish life when it is separated from the people it serves. For example, the God that inspires worship in song, that we pray to when our child is sick, that we preach about with loving passion, that we celebrate in sacrament, cannot be described to people as "abstract and consequent poles." It is very difficult to pray with any affection to a "dipolar God." While the construct is intellectually stimulating, no popular groundswell clamors for a dipolar God. Thus some mediation from people to theology and theology to people needs to be done whereby a theological vocabulary responsive and understandable to people's experiences develops. The community remains an indispensable interpreter of theology. When the *lex orandi* and *lex credendi* enhance each other, theology serves its community well.

A corollary to this second challenge requests that process theology not remain selective in its arguments. If it wishes to claim an entire metaphysical underpinning for theology—which I believe it does and must argue for—then it must also provide, as Whitehead himself demands of any system, an adequate and coherent explanation of the entire faith

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Meland's review of Craig Eisendrath's work on William James and Whitehead, *The Unifying Moment* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ., 1971), in *Process Studies* 3 (1973) 285–90.

<sup>20</sup> I have argued for the empirical dimension of process thinking in "Faith and Appreciative Awareness," *TS* 45 (1984) 57–79.

<sup>21</sup> This statement does not undermine the recognized contributions of process theology to speculative theology; cf. Robert C. Neville, *Creativity and God: A Challenge to Process Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1980) 137–46.

life. Except for some initial inroads into faith by Meland, love by Daniel Day Williams, Christology by Cobb, to mention only a few topics, process theology has not dealt with the foundational, systematic, and practical experiences of the faithed life. Until and unless it does, it will remain promise and not fulfilment. Because theology holds a fundamental unity between thought and action, or between doctrine and life, I see this challenge a very telling one to process theology today and little prospects on the horizon. My fear is that process theology has so exclusively bogged down in metaphysical arguments like the omnipotence of God that it cannot extricate itself and return to its empirical basis. If so, then it will suffer a quicker and more certain death than I have imagined.

The road ahead for process theology is a difficult one. Whether this road is a dead end or a through road will depend, in my judgment, upon a return to the empirical basis in which its roots were sunk and from which it drew nourishment. The Catholic theological community will remain critical of process theology and its relationship to a cosmology that seems to dictate the theology. This community will require a clearer delineation of the relationship between philosophy and theology. At the same time, it will admit no usurpation of its tradition of 2000 years nor take theology away from the worshiping faithful. One can expect a theology which dialogues in the future with many philosophies and will subject them to the critical function of its interpreting community. This community will continue to issue demands that doctrine and life be combined and mingled together in an integrated whole, thus providing nourishment for faith on the practical and theoretical levels. Further, this community will require a complete explanation of faith as it relates both to its traditional doctrines and to its legacy from past communities who also sought and found the God of Jesus Christ. If these dimensions of the challenge are met, process theology will enter a new phase in its own life of thought whose identity may be transformed into one flower among many and with a new and more lasting life.