

CREATING SPACE FOR CATHOLIC THEOLOGY? A CRITICAL-EMPATHETIC READING OF *THEOLOGY TODAY*

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The author asks whether the criteria for Catholic theology presented by the International Theological Commission's Theology Today (2011) are meant to constitute "walls" that seal out or "windows" that open to the rich reality of God's dialogue with humanity through creation and history. Careful exegesis leads the author to conclude that the document, while including restrictive paragraphs, intends to open up perspectives for a legitimate plurality of theologies within the living tradition of the Catholic Church. The article ends with a nuanced evaluation and highlighting of the document's strong and weak points.

IN SPRING 2012, the Vatican's International Theological Commission (ITC) published a much-overlooked document entitled *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles, and Criteria*.¹ Its occasion was a question raised by

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¹ ITC, *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles, and Criteria* (March 8, 2012), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_doc_20111129_theologia-oggi_en.html. (All URLs cited herein were accessed on August 21, 2013.) The document was worked on by two successive subcommittees. Santiago del Cura Elena (Burgos, Spain) was the chair from 2004 to 2008; the members consisted of Bruno Forte (archbishop of Chieti-Vasto, Italy), Savio Hon Tai-Fai, S.D.B. (Hong Kong), Antonio Castellano S.D.B. (Italy), Tomislav Ivančić (Zagreb, Croatia), Thomas Norris (Maynooth, Ireland), Paul Rouhana (Université Catholique, Kaslik, Lebanon), Leonard Santedi Kinkupu (Kinshasa, Congo), Jerzy Szymik (Lublin, Poland), and Thomas Söding (Bochum, Germany). The second subcommittee, chaired by Paul McPartlan (Washington, DC, USA), worked from 2009 to 2012. Its members were Adelbert Denaux (Leuven, Belgium—Tilburg, The Netherlands), Jan Liesen (bishop of Breda, The Netherlands), Sara Butler, M.S.B.T.

the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) regarding guiding principles for specifying what Catholic theology is. A major reason why this question surfaced is that the CDF was confronted with a multitude of theological schools of thought, styles, and projects, all claiming to be Catholic. The ITC intended, however, not only to provide principles by which to specify Catholic theology, but also to sketch a broader theological framework. For this reason the document does not simply provide a checklist of necessary criteria, rather it opens up perspectives for a theology that situates itself in the church's living tradition.²

Did the ITC succeed in its purpose? Does the document free up (more) space for theologies that take many different forms today, while claiming to be Catholic? I address this question here, beginning with a recent case in which the Catholic character of a specific theological methodology, comparative theology, came under question. In the next section I consider the ITC text more closely and undertake a critical-empathetic reading of it. I first describe the document's method and sketch its content, thereby giving the results of this way of reading it. I conclude by evaluating it and indicating issues that remain to be considered by the ITC and schools of Catholic theology.

WHAT IS CATHOLIC THEOLOGY TODAY? A RECENT CASE

At the 2012 annual convention of the American Academy of Religion, the Roman Catholic Studies Group organized a discussion session on the topic "Is Comparative Theology Catholic?"³ Four panelists discussed this

(Chicago, USA) and Serge-Thoma Bonino (Toulouse, France), along with the previously named Castellano, Ivančić, Santedi Kinkupu, Szymik, and Söding.

² So states Adelbert Denaux, an ITC member, in his introduction to the Dutch translation of the document ("Ten geleide" to *Theologie vandaag: Perspectieven, principes en criteria*, *Collationes* 42 [2012] 177–222, at 177–78).

³ The abstract described the discussion session as follows: "Since Vatican II, Roman Catholics have reflected abundantly on the religions of the world—however construed as traditions, and with whichever distinctions among them one adopts—and much has been written on how they are to be assessed from a Catholic theological view. At issue then is whether there is a Catholic way of studying religions, and whether there is a Catholic theological way of studying them. Personal styles and identity claims can be assumed relevant but not allowed to be decisive in this matter. This panel contributes to this discussion in a particular way, by addressing the question, Is there, or can there be, a comparative theology that is truly a form of Catholic theology? Four panelists, representing several European and American perspectives on comparative theology, answer the question in several ways, signaling areas of consensus and disagreement even among those interested in Catholic theology and comparative study" (http://www.aarweb.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/Annual_Meeting/2012/2012PrelimProgramBookAbstracts.pdf). The panel consisted of Francis X. Clooney (Harvard University), Klaus von Stosch (University Paderborn,

question. The first speaker was Francis Clooney, who may be considered the father of comparative theology.⁴ For him the research he conducts by the comparative reading and discussion of sacred texts from Christianity and Hinduism is certainly Catholic theology. He gave four reasons for this conclusion: with regard to content, method, fruitfulness, as well as the profile of the researcher, comparative theology contributes to the project of Catholic theology. To add power and legitimacy to his argument, he referred to doctrinal texts of the Catholic tradition. First, with respect to content, comparative theology concerns the revelation of the divine, especially the means whereby God reveals Godself in other religions (here Clooney cited the CDF declaration *Dominus Iesus*). The comparative reading of founding Scriptures is a way to trace this divine revelation. Next, Clooney emphasized that for the study of another religion the researcher should possess a methodological expertise at least comparable to the expertise needed for studying (the sources of) one's own religion (he referenced Vatican II's *Dei verbum*). Third, comparative-theological research leads to fruitful insights that relate to elementary doctrines of Christian faith, stemming from the church's tradition. These fruits witness to the fact that such research is carried out with a Catholic-theological purpose in mind. Finally, the researcher's professional character is also emphasized as an element in the Catholic character of comparative theology. The researcher does his or her work out of a familiarity with the hermeneutical-theological mission and sensitivities of Catholic theology, giving attention to the whole nature of the human person. Clooney concluded, with reference to *Fides et ratio* and *Nostra aetate*, that doing comparative work in other religions is not something extrinsic to theology. All in all, he took a rather defensive position; understandably, his contribution to Catholic theology and personal integrity were at stake.

The second member of the panel, Klaus von Stosch, whose area of specialization is the relationship between Christian faith and Islam,⁵ answered the question in a similar way (and mentioned with a wink that he had received a *nihil obstat* at the time of his appointment at the theological faculty in

Germany), Jeannine Hill Fletcher (Fordham University), and Paul J. Griffiths (Duke University).

⁴ Clooney's most recent books are *Beyond Compare: St. Francis and Sri Vedanta Desika on Loving Surrender to God* (Washington: Georgetown University, 2008); *The Truth, the Way, the Life: Christian Commentary on the Three Holy Mantras of the Srivaisnava Hindus* (Leuven: Peeters, 2008); *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); and the anthology, *The New Comparative Theology: Voices from the Next Generation* (New York: Continuum, 2010).

⁵ See Klaus von Stosch, *Komparative Theologie als Wegweiser in der Welt der Religionen* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2012).

Paderborn). To keep the focus on my argument, I do not further elaborate on his contribution to this panel.

The third member of the panel, Jeanine Hill Fletcher,⁶ also gave a positive reply. She defined Catholic theology from a Catholic feminist perspective with the help of the following two characteristics: theology is Catholic when it witnesses to *sacramental* imagination (the everyday world is imbued with the presence of God) and to *prophetic* power (theology is for the promotion of social justice). Then she made an interesting argument—based on diary entries—regarding how a group of Maryknoll sisters, who travelled to China at the beginning of the 20th century, came to a deeper existential understanding of their own Christian faith by living among Chinese women from another faith tradition. This experience often came into tension with the classical frameworks from which they worked. For Hill Fletcher it is obvious: this kind of practical comparative theology is Catholic, since it is sacramentally and critically-prophetically put into action.

The fourth panel member, Paul Griffiths, took a different view. He thought that comparative theology is certainly interesting, even Catholic, as long as no one expects that comparative dialogue with other religions will contribute substantially to the content of Christian revelation. That would, after all, harm the definitive and full character of divine revelation in Jesus Christ. It may be worth the effort to distinguish the similarities and differences between various religious traditions, even to rediscover one's own tradition as a result of such discussions. But for Griffiths, to think that such dialogue would be able to contribute to the Christian understanding of revelation is a bridge too far. He argued that the church cannot learn truths as yet unknown from comparative theology. Strange texts are never revelation, since they do not satisfy the criterion of the "particular intimacy" that characterizes Christian divine revelation in Scripture and tradition. Reading such texts can be legitimate in a theological project, but only under the category of *praeparatio evangelica*.

Altogether, the panelists represented three different definitions of Catholic theology, each based on a different understanding of revelation, tradition, and church. This became immediately clear when I put the following question to the panel: Why did you not refer to the recent ITC document *Theology Today* in your statements about the Catholic character of comparative theology, a document that offers principles and perspectives for doing just that? I argued that this document offers room for

⁶ From among her recent publications, the two most important for this text are Jeanine Hill Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation? A Feminist Approach to Religious Pluralism* (New York: Continuum, 2005); and "A Definition of 'Catholic': Toward a Cosmopolitan Vision," in *The Catholic Studies Reader*, ed. James T. Fisher and Margaret M. McGuinness (New York: Fordham University, 2011) 129–47.

thinking about comparative theology as Catholic theology, since it starts with the recognition of the multitude of theological styles and methods, as well as of the dialogical character of theology. Referring to *Ad gentes* and *Nostra aetate*, *Theology Today* no. 57 speaks—albeit too briefly—about dialogue with other religions as important for contemporary theology. Along with the fact that the existence of this document was hardly known among the panel members, their reactions were revealingly varied. Clooney said that he was very pleased with the document's appreciation for dialogue with other religions as a *locus* for theology, even if this appreciation should be further elaborated. Hill Fletcher reacted hesitantly, and doubted whether theologians still could accept the idea that the Catholic project is defined solely by documents coming out of Rome. It is better not to attempt to stretch too narrow definitions but to proceed at full speed from one's own definition. Griffiths thought that it was enough to point out that the ITC text is not a document from the magisterium and thus is not normative.

Where does this leave us? Is the text from the ITC too narrow and too Roman (and thus irrelevant to contemporary theology) because it originates from the context of the Vatican? It is true that *Theology Today* is not a text from the magisterium, although the ITC is an advisory body of the CDF, and its prefect acts as its chair. Even so, the text does not simply express the opinion of some individual theologians but was produced by an internationally assembled committee charged by the church with writing this text. Perhaps for this reason alone the text deserves attention from those who reflect on what is Catholic theology today.

A CRITICAL-EMPATHETIC READING

The reading key for *Theology Today* that I offered in my introduction asks, What does a contemporary understanding of Catholic theology involve, and what are the criteria used to determine this? Are modern theological developments, new theological trends, and methodologies legitimate or not? And is there room for a Catholic comparative theology that is worthy of that name? The ITC document intends to provide a framework for addressing precisely these sorts of questions. After all, the document's starting point is the observation that plurality occurs in theology, and it sees its mission to be to indicate the family characteristics of what may be considered Catholic theology.

However, theologians usually often look with skepticism at documents that emanate “from Rome” and concern their own work. Questions spontaneously arise concerning which commands and prohibitions will follow, what warnings will be sounded, and what the limitations of space will be for theology. They automatically expect restrictive pronouncements concerning what is and what certainly is not Catholic, pronouncements characterized

by a double exclusivity: (a) who belongs and who does not, and (b) who determines who belongs and who does not. This is almost a natural reflex, and it is fed by many recent statements from the Vatican concerning the task of theology, theological developments, and the work of individual theologians—statements that appear to consist primarily of warnings and prohibitions, judgments and condemnations, suspicion and control.⁷ The introduction to John Paul II's *motu proprio Ad tuendam fidem* (1998) is telling in this regard:

TO PROTECT THE FAITH of the Catholic Church against errors arising from certain members of the Christian faithful, *especially from among those dedicated to the various disciplines of sacred theology*, we, whose principal duty is to confirm the brethren in the faith (*Lk 22:32*), consider it absolutely necessary to add to the existing texts of the *Code of Canon Law* and the *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*, new norms which expressly impose the obligation of upholding truths proposed in a definitive way by the Magisterium of the Church, and which also establish related canonical sanctions.⁸

Moreover, documents “from Rome” demand special attention from the reader regarding what precisely is happening in the text. When reading these documents, one needs to be aware of certain often-recurring characteristics, for it is usually in relation to such characteristics that the real meaning of texts is to be found.

(1) Such documents contain many references to classical notions, understandings, formulations, and authorities [*auctoritates*] that stem from the tradition but that are often cited independently from their original text and context. Based on the idea of continuity with the past, such references legitimate the text in the present. For example, documents about theology will be expressly situated in line with classical statements about theology: widely known traditional terminology, lines of argumentation, authors, and references make their appearance, and it requires a trained eye to spot the new perspectives and precisely the manner in which they are being used (the context in which they are cited, their relation to other references, etc.).

⁷ The list of doctrinal documents from the CDF can readily give this impression: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/doc_dottrinali_index.htm. Theologians will especially remember *Donum veritatis*, the CDF's instruction concerning the ecclesial vocation of the theologian and the imposed oath of fidelity; the pronouncement *Dominus Iesus*; the Notifications that criticized the work of Jacques Dupuis, Jon Sobrino, and others; the difficulties in *nihil obstat* and *mandatum* procedures, etc. On the sometimes difficult relation between the magisterium and theology, see Bradford E. Hinze, “A Decade of Disciplining Theologians,” in *When the Magisterium Intervenes: The Magisterium and Theologians in Today's Church*, ed. Richard R. Gaillardetz (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2012) 3–39.

⁸ At http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/motu_proprio/documents/hf_jp-ii_motu-proprio_30061998_ad-tuendam-fidem_en.html (emphasis added).

Sometimes classical adages and doctrinal formulations are situated in a new comprehensive perspective so that they receive a contemporary meaning, or at least are nuanced by the new perspective. On other occasions new elements are placed into what at first sounds like a very classical text: for example, while the main clause sounds extremely classical, a new perspective or nuance may appear in the subordinate clause.

(2) Such a document is legitimated not only by means of continuity with the past but also by references to and citations from recent magisterial proclamations, which are limited to recent papal documents. To really grasp the tenor of a text, therefore, it is highly informative to examine precisely who and what is cited, from which context the citation is taken, and into which context or perspective it is placed. Sometimes an innovative thesis in a new document is reinforced by a citation taken from an older text. In *Theology Today* references are made to doctrinal proclamations by John Paul II and Benedict XVI. However, most conspicuous and significant are the many references to and citations from texts of the Second Vatican Council.

(3) The third characteristic of such documents is their multiple authorship. Due to the diverse styles and perspectives of the contributing authors, these texts show irregularities that can range from stylistic instabilities and other formal inconsistencies to peculiarly constructed arguments, ambiguities, and even contradictions. Other theological and political sensitivities and nuances often play a role in the background, as do opinions concerning what revelation, tradition, church, and theology are and how these develop in relation to the current context.

All of this means that such texts are not always easy to read, and an experienced eye often sees more than what is obvious at first sight. To put it bluntly, “The devil is in the details.” This also explains why these texts can be read in more than one way, and why recognizing reading keys can be so helpful.⁹ For whoever reads, does so from specific theological and political presuppositions and perspectives.

In what follows I focus on a critical-empathetic close reading of *Theology Today*—completely in line with what theology must be according to the document itself. With special attention to the particular characteristics of such texts, I examine how the document tries to prove what—by my reading—it intends to say, namely, that multiplicity and unity cannot be played off against each other in Catholic theology, but create precisely the room wherein theology itself ventures a “faith that seeks understanding.”

⁹ As I indicated in “The Swan or the Dove? Two Keys for Reading *Fides et Ratio*”, in *Philosophy and Theology* 12 (2000) 1, 3–24, John Paul II’s encyclical *Fides et ratio*, in its substantive contour, allows two different ways of reading it.

TWELVE CRITERIA FOR GOOD CATHOLIC THEOLOGY

For those who have not yet read *Theology Today*, I first briefly present the criteria that the document elaborates. It has three chapters: the first and third contain three sections each, while the second contains six. Each section ends with the formulation of a criterion that Catholic theology must meet in order to be so recognized—for a total of twelve criteria.

Chapter 1 situates theology in a dynamic of (1) revelation and (2) faith, and formulates its task as (3) coming to a rational understanding of faith by scientifically clarifying the Christian faith response to the historical revelation of God's Word. On this basis three criteria are identified: Catholic theology

1. recognizes "the primacy of the Word of God" in the multitude of ways in which God speaks in creation and history (no. 9);
2. takes the faith of the Church in response to God's Word as "its source, context and norm" (no. 15);
3. is faith that "in a rational and systematic manner" searches for understanding (*scientia Dei*, which seeks to understand *sub specie Dei*) (no. 19).

Chapter 2 situates theology's task in the life of the church community and identifies the constitutive interactions (*loci theologici*) that characterize Catholic theology. Here we find six criteria: Catholic theology

4. builds upon, and nourishes itself with, the witness of the canonical Scriptures (no. 24);
5. shows "fidelity to the Apostolic Tradition" and knows how to deal actively and discerningly with the various forms in which this tradition receives expression (no. 32);
6. concerns itself with the *sensus fidelium*, which it attempts to articulate and clarify (no. 36);
7. gives "responsible adherence" to the church's magisterium (no. 44);
8. is done in collegial cooperation with "the whole company of Catholic theologians in the communion of the Church" (no. 50);
9. is "in constant dialogue with the world" and "should help the Church to read the signs of the times" in light of the gospel (no. 58).

The third and final chapter examines the specific profile of theology as the science of faith and, in relation to current themes, portrays theology as (1) a specific scientific enterprise, in relation to philosophical and other scientific rationalities; (2) a multiform discipline that employs a plethora of methods to unfold the one truth; and (3) a combination of science and wisdom, affecting all talk about God.

Once again three criteria are given: Catholic theology

10. grows from the productive relationship between faith and reason, and, as “scientifically and rationally argued presentation of the truths of the Christian faith,” it avoids both fideism and rationalism (no. 73);
11. recognizes “the unity of theology in a plurality of methods and disciplines,” the contribution other sciences make to its own project, and the importance of critical-scientific dialogue (no. 85); and
12. sees the close relationship in theology between science and wisdom, resulting in an attitude that “seeks not to possess God but to be possessed by God”: “Theology implies a striving for holiness and an ever deeper awareness of the transcendence of the Mystery of God” (no. 99).

Merely mentioning this list of criteria really does not advance my purpose, since the relationship between the different criteria and the weight assigned to each of them is not clarified. The question remains which comprehensive perspective one is to use. Only a close reading—in line with the reflections I presented above—may deliver some results.

CRITERIA FOR CATHOLIC THEOLOGY: WINDOWS RATHER THAN WALLS?

In what follows, rather than discuss each chapter, section, or paragraph *in extenso*, I select for discussion only certain important characteristic passages, arguments, and positions. The order will follow that of the document, giving particular attention to chapter 2. My subtitle “Windows Rather Than Walls” refers to a quote of Joseph Ratzinger in which he argued that dogmas should not be conceived of as solid walls, but as windows through which one can see.¹⁰ Are the criteria for Catholic theology, then, meant to be walls that seal out, or windows that open to the rich reality of God’s dialogue with humanity through creation and history? Are they creating space for theologians to engage in their work, or are they rather affirming the norms in order to restrict this space?

Introductory Paragraphs: Legitimate Theological Plurality as Starting Point

Paragraph 1 of the introduction makes the ITC’s starting point clear: the legitimacy of various forms of theology. Plurality among theologians is the result of new voices, contexts, themes, and conversation partners. Moreover, the postconciliar inspiration here becomes obvious: on the one hand, in descriptive terms, it concerns a theological development during the period after Vatican II; on the other hand, in normative terms, this

¹⁰ See Joseph Ratzinger with Vittorio Messori, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1985) 72.

theological diversity is a positive development that takes its lead from the council. The document later clearly testifies to this commitment to Vatican II, as I will point out in due course.

At the same time, the first paragraph indicates that diversity can lead to fragmentation, and that the church needs a common language. But the document immediately adds “to some extent” (no. 2), a nuancing that is repeated when it mentions the need for “a certain unity” in theology. Furthermore, unity is certainly not to be understood as uniformity, a point emphasized twice (nos. 2, 5).

The same paragraph then offers a *theological* legitimation for unity and diversity in theology:

As it explores the inexhaustible Mystery of God and the countless ways in which God’s grace works for salvation in diverse settings, theology rightly and necessarily takes a multitude of forms, and yet as investigations of the unique truth of the triune God and of the one plan of salvation centred on the one Lord Jesus Christ, this plurality must manifest distinctive family traits. (no. 2)

The document repeatedly confirms this theological legitimation of both unity and diversity (e.g., nos. 5, 74, 77).¹¹

From this perspective the document then justifies the presentation of the criteria and introduces its three chapters (no. 3):

In the rich plurality of its expressions, protagonists, ideas and contexts, theology is Catholic, and therefore fundamentally one, if it arises from an attentive listening to the Word of God (cf. Chapter One); if it situates itself consciously and faithfully in the communion of the Church (cf. Chapter Two); and if it is orientated to the service of God in the world, offering divine truth to the men and women of today in an intelligible form (cf. Chapter Three).

According to this introduction, the twelve criteria are not meant to restrict theology’s space, but to indicate unity in the diversity of theological voices, while entering into conversation about unity and diversity. The criteria are therefore to be considered a set of stepping stones, or family characteristics that create room for doing theology in many different ways in relation to new voices, new contexts, new themes, new conversation partners, etc. without falling to pieces—thus windows rather than walls.

¹¹ From a conversation with Adelbert Denaux, a coauthor of the document, I learned that as far as the unity of theology is concerned, a second theological legitimation was also deliberately included in the text, which is of an ecclesiological nature: the unity of theology is connected with catholicity, apostolicity, and holiness, all four together being the four basic characteristics of the church (*nota ecclesiae*): “The unity of theology, like that of the Church, as professed in the Creed, must be closely correlated with the idea of catholicity, and also with those of holiness and apostolicity” (no. 2).

Chapter One: The Difficult Integration of Classical Theological Notions and Patterns of Reason in the Dialogical Understanding of Revelation in Vatican II

Chapter one's first paragraph quotes from *Verbum Domini*, Pope Benedict XVI's exhortation to the 2008 episcopal synod on "The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church," where he refers to *Dei verbum*, Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation¹²: "The novelty of biblical revelation consists in the fact that God becomes known through the dialogue which he desires to have with us."¹³ In line with Vatican II, I assume the dialogical character of God's revelation to humanity through creation and history as a fundamental horizon for every understanding of revelation, tradition, church, and theology.¹⁴ From this understanding of revelation, *Theology Today* legitimates once again the diversity and unity of theology, together with their interconnection:

The sheer fullness and richness of that revelation is too great to be grasped by any one theology, and in fact gives rise to multiple theologies as it is received in diverse ways by human beings. . . . Likewise, the plurality of theologies should not imply fragmentation or discord, but rather the exploration in myriad ways of God's one saving truth. (no. 5)

Besides references to the New Testament, *Dei verbum* is the document most often cited in the rest of the text, thereby accentuating the conciliar perspective. The notes also refer to other documents: *Verbum Domini*, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Vatican I, John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et ratio*, and various writings by Augustine. Anselm of Canterbury's classic definition of theology as *fides quaerens intellectum* appears in the last paragraph of this chapter. Meanwhile many other classical theological notes and distinctions are cited in passing:

- Scripture and tradition (no. 8)
- tradition and "*leiturgia* (liturgy), *martyria* (testimony) and *diakonia* (service)" (no. 7)
- the church and *koinonia* (fellowship) (no. 13), the "assistance" of the Holy Spirit (no. 8), the apostolicity of tradition (no. 10)
- revelation and faith (no. 11)
- reason and faith in faith understanding (no. 12).

¹² When quoting the text of *Theology Today*, I also cite its footnotes and attendant references verbatim.

¹³ Pope Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Verbum Domini* (2010) no. 6; see *Dei verbum* nos. 2, 6.

¹⁴ I developed this perspective on revelation on the basis of *Dei verbum* in: "Revelation, Scripture and Tradition: Lessons from Vatican II's Constitution *Dei verbum* for Contemporary Theology," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 13 (2011) 416–33.

These are cited in their relation to the distinction and connection that flow from them into (1) natural and supernatural knowledge (although not so designated); (2) the difference between and connection with *fides qua* (act of faith) and *fides quae* (content of faith) (no. 13); (3) the Augustinian *crede ut intellegas* (no. 16); and (4) the notions *intellectus fidei* (no. 17), *visio beatifica* (no. 17), *scientia Dei* (no. 18), and *sub specie Dei* (no. 19). All these notions and distinctions appear in a discourse that is fundamentally colored—so the introduction proposes—by *Dei verbum*'s dynamic and dialogical understanding of revelation, where the diversity of theological voices contributes to theologically legitimate proposals. But the document has difficulties pursuing this dynamic and dialogical discourse all the way to the end and extending its perspective through to the details.

Chapter one's second section (nos. 10–15) seems far more classical than the first, and the renewed concept of revelation from Vatican II, along with the space for a multiform theology that ensues from such a concept, does not expressly resound here. This section hardly takes any step toward creating such space and rather forms a clear and logical but also a particularly safe statement of classical notions and distinctions that could have appeared in a historical document about theology. That the penultimate paragraph (no. 14) concerns heresy and uses the rather canonically formed definition from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is then perhaps not really surprising, but it fits the tone of this section.¹⁵ The third section (nos. 16–19) also does not stand out in the further development of what I believe is the actual intent of the document, namely, to develop the interconnectedness between the formulation of criteria for Catholic theology on the one hand, and creating space for diversity in theology on the other. It is not always clear, therefore, whether the first three criteria here prove to be walls rather than windows.

Chapter Two: Windows, or Walls Once Again?

In chapter two the ITC aims at distinguishing between “the fundamental reference points for the theological task,” and it offers an updated retranslation of Melchior Cano's classical *loci theologici*.¹⁶ “It is

¹⁵ No. 14 refers to the *Catechism* no. 2089: “Heresy is the obstinate post-baptismal denial of some truth which must be believed with divine and catholic faith, or it is likewise an obstinate doubt concerning the same.”

¹⁶ In his *De locis theologicis*, which appeared posthumously in 1563, the Spanish Dominican friar Melchior Cano (1509–1560) distinguished between seven *loci theologici proprii* and three *loci theologici alieni vel adscriptitii*: the first seven theological sources are: Scripture, oral tradition, the Catholic Church, the councils, the Church of Rome (i.e., the pope), the Fathers and the theologians; the three other or auxiliary sources are: natural reason, philosophy, and history.

important to know not just the *loci* but also their relative weight and the relationship between them” (no. 20). Strangely enough no further explanation about weighing the *loci* is given, and the text is not always clear concerning their mutual relation. Does the order of enumeration result from the order of ranking? As expected, Scripture and tradition are front and center. But placing the *sensus fidelium* third, before the magisterium, is surprising. Mention of dialogue with other theologians and dialogue with the world is most opportune, but if the sequence is actually important, this last locus remains undervalued—unless of course this dialogue with the world is already long at work in the other *loci* (I come back to this later). From a contemporary perspective on theology and a dialogical understanding of revelation, it is, after all, difficult to isolate the dialogue with the world within a sixth domain; such dialogue, it would seem, forms rather a dimension that gives—or should give—color to all other *loci*. I now comment on each *locus* in turn.

(1) Placing Scripture in front once again positions this chapter fully in the momentum of the Second Vatican Council, where Scripture is described as the very “soul of sacred theology” (no. 24). Once again, the majority and most explicit of the references are taken from *Dei verbum* and to a lesser extent from *Verbum Domini*. A few references come from the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. Completely in line with *Dei verbum*, the role of historical-criticism and of other exegetical methods is expressly acknowledged, including the conviction that only in such a manner can justice be done methodologically to the historicity of revelation (no. 22). A quotation from *Verbum Domini* confirms both the necessary function of historical-critical exegesis in arriving at a truly theological interpretation of the Scriptures, and the need for theological interpretation: “Only where both methodological levels, the historico-critical and the theological, are respected, can one speak of a theological exegesis, an exegesis worthy of this book” (no. 34).

Finally, the document emphasizes the possibilities for ecumenical cooperation that arise whenever Bible study becomes more central to the whole of theology (no. 23).¹⁷ All in all, this section is a beautiful and nuanced example of how establishing the norm of arriving at a truly theological interpretation of the Bible is associated with the creation of space for a methodologically multiform, contemporary theology—the one not without the other.

(2) Another example is provided—although not without textual unevenness—in the following section devoted to “Fidelity to Apostolic

¹⁷ Again referring to *Verbum Domini*: “Shared listening to the Scriptures . . . spurs us on towards the dialogue of charity and enables growth in the dialogue of truth” (no. 37).

Tradition.” Here I examine the text in greater detail. The section begins with promise and puts forth a broad understanding of tradition in which—with reference to Acts 2:42—the *lex orandi* (the rule of prayer), *lex credendi* (the rule of faith), and *lex vivendi* (the rule of life) belong together (no. 25). In the next paragraph, the process of tradition formation is characterized as being “in the power of the Holy Spirit”: “Tradition is therefore something living and vital, an ongoing process in which the unity of faith finds expression in the variety of languages and the diversity of cultures. It ceases to be Tradition if it fossilises” (no. 26).

The section then describes important moments in the formation of the tradition and refers first to the Church Fathers whose writings constitute “a specific reference point” for theology. Here again space and diversity are emphasized in the expression of the one faith:

The Tradition known and lived by the Fathers was multi-faceted and pulsing with life, as can be seen from the plurality of liturgical families and of spiritual and exegetical-theological traditions (e.g. in the schools of Alexandria and Antioch), a plurality firmly anchored and united in the one faith. (no. 27)

Then the ecumenical councils are mentioned and, in reference to *Lumen gentium*, the magisterium of pope and bishops as well (no. 28). The following paragraph looks at the special status of dogmas. Once again the affirmation of the norm is connected with the creation of space for interpretation and inquiry (no. 29). First the norm:

Catholic theology recognises the teaching authority of ecumenical councils, the ordinary and universal magisterium of the bishops, and the papal magisterium. It acknowledges the special status of dogmas, that is, statements “in which the Church proposes a revealed truth definitively, and in a way that is binding for the universal Church, so much so that denial is rejected as heresy and falls under an anathema.”¹⁸

Then the space:

Dogmas belong to the living and ongoing Apostolic Tradition. Theologians are aware of the difficulties that attend their interpretation. For example, it is necessary to understand the precise question under consideration in light of its historical context, and to discern how a dogma’s meaning and content are related to its formulation.¹⁹

It appears, however, that the authors of the document are suddenly shocked by the room this provides, as the last sentence seems to take back

¹⁸ ITC, *The Interpretation of Dogma* (1990), B, III, 3; see ITC, *Unity of the Faith and Theological Pluralism* (1972), nos. 6–8, 10–12, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_1972_fede-pluralismo_en.html.

¹⁹ See Pope John XXIII, *Allocutio in Concilii Vaticani inauguratione, Acta apostolicae sedis* 54 (1962) 785–95, at 792; and *Gaudium et spes* no. 62. For a detailed consideration of the whole question, see ITC, *Interpretation of Dogma*.

some of what was given in the previous sentence (notice the “nevertheless”): “Nevertheless, dogmas are sure points of reference for the Church’s faith and are used as such in theological reflection and argumentation.”

After a paragraph concerning the unity between Scripture, tradition, and magisterium (no. 30), a paragraph follows regarding the relationship between Tradition and traditions (no. 31), where once again something strange happens. On the one hand, the distinction between Tradition and traditions (in the form of a question) is used to legitimate tradition criticism:

Is it possible to determine more precisely what the content of the one Tradition is, and by what means? Do all traditions which claim to be Christian contain the Tradition? How can we distinguish between traditions embodying the true Tradition and merely human traditions? Where do we find the genuine Tradition, and where impoverished tradition or even distortion of tradition? (no. 31)²⁰

Then comes a nuanced indication that Tradition finds its expression precisely in concrete traditions:

On one hand, theology must show that Apostolic Tradition is not something abstract, but that it exists concretely in the different traditions that have formed within the Church. On the other hand, theology has to consider why certain traditions are characteristic not of the Church as a whole, but only of particular religious orders, local churches or historical periods. (no. 31)

But then, as if the Apostolic Tradition somehow exists independently of the concrete traditions in which it finds expression, this follows:

While criticism is not appropriate with reference to Apostolic Tradition itself, *traditions* must always be open to critique, so that the ‘continual reformation’ of which the Church has need can take place,²¹ and so that the Church can renew herself permanently on her one foundation. (no. 31)

Once again, precisely in a paragraph where the possibility unfolds of a legitimate critique of tradition (and is in fact strongly accentuated),²² there suddenly emerges a trace of essentialism regarding the “Apostolic Tradition,” threatening to put between brackets the historical-dynamic definition

²⁰ See “Scripture, Tradition and Traditions,” in *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order: Montreal 1963*, ed. P. C. Rodger and Lukas Vischer (New York: Association, 1964) 52 n. 48. Strictly speaking, as this document indicates, “Tradition” (with a capital “T”) and “tradition” (with a small “t”) may also be distinguished: Tradition is “the Gospel itself, transmitted from generation to generation in and by the Church”; it is “Christ himself present in the life of the Church”; and tradition is “the traditory process” (50 n. 39).

²¹ See *Unitatis redintegratio* no. 6

²² See the continuation of this paragraph: “Such a critique seeks to verify whether a specific tradition does indeed express the faith of the Church in a particular place and time, and it seeks correspondingly to strengthen or correct it through contact with the living faith of all places and all times” (no. 31).

of Tradition, in which the latter is not an abstract entity but receives expression precisely in traditions.

The concluding paragraph combines once again the norm with the creation of space for the theological endeavor: fidelity to the apostolic tradition demands an active discernment in order to take into consideration the diverse witnesses and expressions of that tradition (no. 32).

(3) I have already reported the interesting fact that “attention for the *sensus fidelium*” is listed before the criterion of the magisterium. The faithful people of God are the subject of faith. The double explicit legitimation of this from *Lumen gentium* and *Dei verbum* cannot help but be conspicuous: twice *Theology Today* affirms that the believing people of God stand before the bishops and the magisterium (no. 33). Of course the *sensus fidelium* should be correctly understood; it is not simply about whatever the majority of believers accept, nor is it about simply establishing whatever the magisterium teaches.

The *sensus fidelium* is the *sensus fidei* of the people of God as a whole who are obedient to the Word of God and are led in the ways of faith by their pastors. So the *sensus fidelium* is the sense of the faith that is deeply rooted in the people of God who receive, understand and live the Word of God in the Church. (no. 34)

Dealing in a critical-constructive way with the *sensus fidelium* is an important task for theology and requires sensitivity; paying attention to, for example, popular piety, new movements, and intellectual movements within the church requires a critical-theological investigation:

Theologians help to clarify and articulate the content of the *sensus fidelium*, recognizing and demonstrating that issues relating to the truth of faith can be complex, and that investigation of them must be precise. . . . Theologians’ critical assessments must always be constructive; they must be given with humility, respect and charity. (no. 35)

Later in *Theology Today* the *sensus fidelium* appears as a powerful locus of theology. According to the document, an end to the church’s difficult, oppositional relationship with modernity came only when the *sensus fidelium*, which supported a more dialogical relation with the world, was received at the Second Vatican Council (no. 55). To many theologians and church leaders this still would seem to be a major admission.

(4) In the title of the fourth section, “Responsible adherence to the ecclesiastical magisterium,” the qualification “responsible” catches one’s attention. It is not the task of theology merely to repeat what the magisterium teaches, nor to ignore magisterial teaching. This section offers a highly nuanced explanation in which the magisterium and theology are placed in a productive relation, and the space for theology is better articulated than was previously the case. Still, and perhaps not surprisingly, we get a repeated back-and-forth movement between creating room for theology and its subsequent limitation by the magisterium.

This section soberly describes the relation of the magisterium to theology within a perspective of fruitful cooperation. Both stand under the word of God (once again in reference to *Dei verbum*), and both have a common mission. At the same time, however, they also have their own goals: theology studies and articulates; the magisterium proclaims (nos. 37–38).

The document's following paragraphs carefully work out the magisterium's place and therefore make a sharp demarcation: "there is no place for parallel, opposing or alternative magisteria" (no. 39). At the same time, however, one can see in the nuances the attempt to make more room for theology with respect to the magisterium: there is "a certain 'magisterium' of theologians" (no. 39). I give three examples of this vacillation.

(a) The magisterium needs theology to substantiate the theological quality of its own positions:

On the one hand, the magisterium needs theology in order to demonstrate in its interventions not only doctrinal authority, but also theological competence and a capacity for critical evaluation, so theologians should be called upon to assist with the preparation and formulation of magisterial pronouncements. (no. 39)

The poor theological quality of a number of statements issued by the magisterium is a common criticism leveled by theologians—for example, the 2006 Notification on a book by Jon Sobrino.²³ The European Society of Catholic Theology noted in connection with this case that the Notification did not take into account any of the theological developments of the last 50 years and developed a deductive argumentation that suffers from a remarkable lack of hermeneutical-theological awareness.²⁴ Ensuring the theological quality of doctrinal interventions would certainly remove much frustration felt by theologians. Immediately thereafter ("On the other hand"), however, the document states that theologians must appreciate the magisterium's positive role, up to and including doctrinal interventions. Elsewhere I have noted that such interventions do not always promote the cause of theology, especially when they interfere prematurely in ongoing theological conversations: they thereby silence the self-correcting character

²³ See CDF, Notification on the Works of Father Jon Sobrino, S.J., http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20061126_notification-sobrino_en.html (and the subsequent Explanatory Note, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20061126_nota-sobrino_en.html). See Peter Hünemann, "Moderne Qualitätssicherung? Der Fall Jon Sobrino ist eine Anfrage an die Arbeit der Glaubenskongregation," *Herder Korrespondenz* 61 (2007) 184–88.

²⁴ "A Message from the Presidium regarding the Notification on the Works of Jon Sobrino," *Twelfth ET-Newsletter of the European Society for Catholic Theology* (March 16, 2007), http://www.kuleuven.be/eurotheo/newsletter/13/archive/page/3/#item_1; republished in records about this Notification in *Concilium* (2007/3) 125–34, at 125.

of the discussion between theologians and cause legitimation problems for theology in the modern university.²⁵

(b) Even though the magisterium has its own role, one that is not assumed by theology, theology's role is to distinguish between the various levels of doctrinal proclamations and to give "a correspondingly differentiated response on the part of the faith and of theologians" (no. 40). Indeed, precisely because of this differentiation between levels,

the obedience that theologians as members of the people of God owe to the magisterium always involves constructively critical evaluation and comment.²⁶ While "dissent" towards the magisterium has no place in Catholic theology, investigation and questioning is justified and even necessary if theology is to fulfil its task. (no. 41)²⁷

Immediately, however, the authors sharpen this statement, declaring that theologians may not express their consent to the magisterium merely formally or externally. Implied is that theologians owe the magisterium internal consent as well.

(c) The next paragraph once again creates space for theology, acknowledging—perhaps somewhat too optimistically—that bishops rely on the expertise of theologians for the formulation of their instructions and policy making, participate in theological conferences, and support theological faculties in their dioceses. Referencing John Henry Newman, the document states that tensions between theology and the magisterium need not be immediately assessed as problematic but rather as signs of life. Such tensions result from dynamic interaction, bear witness to vitality, and require dialogue (no. 42).

The conclusion, however, suddenly abandons talk about this dynamic interaction and simply subordinates theology to the magisterium:

Giving responsible adherence to the magisterium in its various gradations is a criterion of Catholic theology. Catholic theologians should recognise the competence of bishops, and especially of the college of bishops headed by the pope, to give an authentic interpretation of the Word of God handed on in Scripture and Tradition.²⁸ (no. 44)

Perhaps this back-and-forth abundantly illustrates that, no matter how nuanced and carefully the ITC-document discusses this criterion, the relation between the magisterium and theology is a persistent point of pain and

²⁵ See Lieven Boeve, "Theology at the Crossroads of Academy, Church and Society," in *ET-Studies* 1.1 (2010) 71–90, at 81.

²⁶ See ITC, *Ecclesiastical Magisterium and Theology*, Thesis 8, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_1975_magistero-teologia_en.html.

²⁷ *Donum veritatis* nos. 21–41.

²⁸ See *Lumen gentium* nos. 22, 25.

contestation in the church. From the perspective of theology this relationship remains an issue with respect to the doctrinal content (the theological quality of magisterial proclamations and ecclesial decisions), as well as with respect to discipline (the asymmetric power relations that in times of conflict especially work against the theologian).²⁹

Finally, in passing, *Theology Today* correctly criticizes the sterile opposition between so-called “scientific” and “confessional” theology within the framework of a short note about the freedom of the theologian (no. 43), a discussion that resurfaces later in the document.

(5) The fifth *locus theologicus*, entitled “In the company of theologians,” offers once again a dialectic between space and limitation. The section begins in a very open way but then quickly closes itself off; windows turn into walls. The final paragraph, however, returns to openness.

The first paragraphs situate theology at the intersection of church and academy and present a realistic picture of the manner in which cooperation (no. 45) and interdisciplinarity (no. 46) help the theological discipline move forward. Moreover, this cross-fertilization, by working “at the frontiers of the church’s experience and reflection,” is appreciated as a chance to understand the faith “in new circumstances or in the face of new issues.” In particular, the document commends the contribution of the growing number of lay theologians, who stand at the bridge between church and world more so than priests or religious (no. 47).

A warning immediately follows, however, even in the same paragraph! The authors appear to have become frightened by the deep trust they must place in the contribution of lay theologians. Therefore, for this new kind of theology “careful adherence to the fundamental criteria of Catholic theology is especially important. . . . Theologians should always recognise the intrinsic provisionality of their endeavors, and offer their work to the church as a whole for scrutiny and evaluation” (no. 47).³⁰ Here the criteria for good Catholic theology are clearly understood as walls rather than windows.

The next section is also suffused in a very strange atmosphere of openness and suspicion. On the one hand, the instruments for theological quality control are indicated, such as the *disputatio* and peer review. On the other hand, “[because] it can be a slow and private process, and, especially in these days of instant communication and dissemination of ideas far beyond the strictly theological community, it would be

²⁹ The lack of transparency and reciprocity in procedures of imposing the *nihil obstat* and issuing condemnations of the work of individual theologians remains a persistent point of critique by theologians; see, e.g., Hinze, “Decade of Disciplining Theologians” 33–36 and his many references to other determinations handed down; see also *When the Magisterium Intervenes*.

³⁰ See *Donum veritatis* no. 11.

unreasonable to imagine that this self-correcting mechanism suffices in all cases” (no. 48). And precisely for this reason, the text continues, bishops must be able to intervene—as if the modern media had passed by theology and its self-correcting power and did not introduce new forms of theological quality control (e-reviews, blogs, etc.). That such a process of theological quality control would be slow and ad hoc stands in sharp contrast to what was previously stated about cooperation between theologians and bishops.

This section ends by again creating room for ecumenical conversation, research, and dialogue; theologians are called ambassadors of their church community who owe a “particular adherence to the criteria outlined here” (no. 49).

(6) The sixth and last *locus theologicus* specified is “dialogue with the world.” This section is very well written, resolutely crafted in the spirit of Vatican II, and contains no qualifying restrictions. It constitutes, as it were, an opportune *inclusio* contains the first section of the second chapter on Scripture. *Gaudium et spes* especially determines the tone of the text, in particular its call to read “the signs of the times . . . and [to interpret] them in the light of the Gospel” (no. 51). Because the church lives at the intersection of the gospel and everyday life, and since the church is part of human history, it is called to be dialogical (nos. 52, 54). And precisely for this reason theology should also be dialogical:

Theology has a particular competence and responsibility in this regard. Through its constant dialogue with the social, religious and cultural currents of the time, and through its openness to other sciences which, with their own methods examine those developments, theology can help the faithful and the magisterium to see the importance of developments, events and trends in human history, and to discern and interpret ways in which through them the Spirit may be speaking to the Church and to the world. (no. 53)

The church is part of history and should recognize its own historicity (no. 54). This means that the church is constantly involved in a learning process. The following paragraph immediately adds, however, that the church did not always react adequately, but often too cautiously, to the developments and ambiguity that characterize history; this was certainly the case in the modern era.

However, such attitudes have gradually changed thanks to the *sensus fidei* of the People of God, the clear sight of prophetic individual believers, and the patient dialogue of theologians with their surrounding cultures. A better discernment in the light of the Gospel has been made, with a greater readiness to see how the Spirit of God may be speaking through such events. (no. 55)

The rest of the text underscores the importance of the church’s dialogue with the world and focuses on the role of theology in tracing and developing connections between faith and culture.

The painstaking work to establish profitable links with other disciplines, sciences and cultures so as to enhance that light and broaden those avenues is the particular task of theologians, and the discernment of the signs of the times presents great opportunities for theological endeavor, notwithstanding the complex hermeneutical issues that arise.

This paragraph ends by recalling the important role that theologians have played in effecting the teaching of Vatican II: “Thanks to the work of many theologians, Vatican II was able to acknowledge various signs of the times in connection with its own teaching.”³¹ (no. 56)

The penultimate paragraph, referred in the first section above, affirms that dialogue with the world involves dialogue with other cultures and religions.³² And this dialogue too is a specific task for theology. (no. 57)

Chapter 3: Borders for Theology as a Rational Undertaking

In its third chapter, *Theology Today* discusses a number of themes connected with theology as “a rational, human endeavour.” In what follows I will indicate some important passages, including irregularities, where my reading key jolts us as we examine where and how space is made for Catholic theology. In these passages theology emerges as a dialogical reality that is limited but also inspired by its own nature.

(1) The first section on the rationality and scientific nature of theology takes up theology’s dialogical character—the topic with which the previous chapter ended. The text first clearly states that, on the one hand, reason helps faith become more insightful but does not eliminate the decision to come to faith; on the other hand, faith challenges reason (no. 63). A historical overview follows, showing how theology has maintained a constant dialogue with contemporary expressions of philosophy (nos. 65–71): from this dialogue, theology has repeatedly shaped itself as a form of science and rationality without denying its difference from ordinary forms of science and rationality. The problematic relationship between faith and reason from the end of the Middle Ages into modernity is explicitly mentioned, as well as theology’s self-critique in connection with this relationship. In a striking way, the defensive reaction toward the Enlightenment and the impoverishment of the Catholic understanding of revelation are mentioned, as are the productive results gained whenever theological dialogue with philosophy did take place—which then finally resulted in

³¹ See Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum concilium* no. 43, *Unitatis redintegratio* no. 4, *Dignitatis humanae* no. 15, *Apostolicum actuositatem* no. 14, and *Presbyterorum ordinis* no. 9.

³² In this regard the document refers respectively to *Ad gentes* no. 11 and *Nostra aetate* no. 2.

the renewed understanding of revelation at Vatican II, to which the text implicitly refers:

At its best, however, Catholic theology also sought a constructive dialogue with the Enlightenment and with its philosophical criticism. With reference to Scripture and Church teaching, the merely “instructional” idea of revelation was criticised theologically, and the idea of revelation was reshaped in terms of the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ, such that history could still be understood as the place of God’s saving acts. (no. 70)

The new challenge for theology today, the text goes on, is to dialogue with a philosophy that, due to the postmodern crisis of classical understandings of truth and rationality, has become itself extremely pluralistic. Nevertheless, even though the metaphysical orientation that was important for “former models of Catholic theology” has disappeared, “Catholic theology is interested . . . in dialogue about the question of God and truth with all contemporary philosophies” (no. 71).

This last sentence is itself quite remarkable, not least because it inserts “all,” but particularly because the next paragraph legitimizes dialogue with contemporary postmodern philosophies by bringing John Paul II’s *Fides et ratio* into the argument (no. 72). Certainly this encyclical indicates openness to contemporary philosophy, but its overall view is that ever since the dawn of modernity, the relationship between faith and reason has gone awry primarily from the side of reason. The other reference in this chapter to *Fides et ratio* exhibits a much more premodern-sounding harmonious approach between faith and reason, theology and philosophy.³³ This is inserted in a paragraph that pushes the theological maxim that faith and reason cannot contradict each other because truth is one and originates from the same divine source, a claim that much of contemporary philosophy finds hard to accept.

(2) The next section goes even deeper into “the unity of theology in a plurality of methods and disciplines.” Once again the text emphasizes the fact and legitimacy of plurality in theology (nos. 74, 76–77) and of the question regarding its unity (no. 78). It relates theology’s plurality to its internal specialization in subdisciplines with the consequent diversity of theological forms of thought and methods that stem from the dialogue with other sciences, and with the plurality of different persons, places, perspectives, contexts, interests, and cultures that play a role in the theological enterprise (no. 76).

The document notes two important elements in the search for unity: the existence of a common theological tradition and the internal-theological

³³ “The dialogue between faith and reason, between theology and philosophy, is therefore required not only by faith *but also by reason*, as Pope John Paul explains in *Fides et Ratio*” (no. 64, emphasis added).

interdisciplinary conversation. It is noticeable that in both cases the document continues to stress that both elements in no way restrict either space or plurality in theology. Once again norm and space go together. On the one hand, “it is true that certain aspects of prior theological tradition can and must sometimes be abandoned, but the work of the theologian can never dispense with a critical reference to the tradition that went before” (no. 79); and on the other hand, “dialogue and interdisciplinary collaboration are indispensable means of ensuring and expressing the unity of theology. The singular, ‘theology,’ by no means indicates a uniformity of styles or concepts; rather, it serves to indicate a common search for truth” (no. 80).

Theology Today then goes even further in exploring the range of Catholic theology, noting that many other scientific dialogue partners, along with philosophy, present themselves. Here, on the one hand, theology in a critical-productive way should respect the integrity of the other sciences; on the other hand, it cannot allow itself to be reduced to these sciences. What is needed is a properly theological contact with the results won from other scientific methodologies. “The theologian should indeed take up and utilise the data supplied by other disciplines, but in light of theology’s own proper principles and methods” (no. 81).

From this perspective, it is logical that the document consequently goes into the relationship between theology and religious sciences and indicates the difference between them, as well as the need for dialogue (no. 83). In a move analogous to the document’s earlier statement regarding the false difference between scientific (objective) theology and confessional (ecclesial) theology, the text now rightly refuses a similar dichotomy in terms of scientific religious studies and nonscientific theology.³⁴ To this point the next paragraph adds the critique of an ideological scientific atheism and emphasizes the special role of Catholic theology in the university, in particular to warn against absolutizing scientific rationality (no. 84).

Paragraph 82 is a strange insertion. Stating that philosophy, as in former times, still plays a necessary mediating role in theology’s involvement with the other sciences, it clashes not only with what came before, namely, the wish for theology’s direct dialogue with other partners, but also with the previous section’s theme that contemporary philosophy is itself internally pluralized (no. 71).

(3) The last section of the document clarifies the relationship between science and wisdom in the theological project and the invitation that

³⁴ This is an important position in the current worldwide university context. For my position on this see my “Mutual Interruption: Toward a Productive Tension between Theology and Religious Studies,” *Louvain Studies* 34 (2009/2010) 3–18.

thereby emerges “to recognise the transcendence of the ultimate Truth, which can never be fully grasped or mastered” (no. 86). After a fine biblical reflection on wisdom (nos. 87–89), there follows a statement on how wisdom adds a moral and spiritual dimension to theology (no. 90) and why theological study presupposes a spiritual life while at the same time forming the critical touchstone of the authenticity of such a spiritual life (no. 92). The spiritual character of theology in no way contradicts its scientific character (no. 93).

From the perspective of my reading key, nos. 95–99 form a suitable ending. Since theology participates in wisdom, it exceeds purely rational and systematic thinking, and this creates space for dialogue, including dialogue with other religious wisdom traditions (no. 95). Even more, because of this, theology is also aware of the limits of what it can say about God and thus of the negative-theological perspective within which it works (no. 96), although negative theology itself should also not be misunderstood (for example as a denial of theology) and set free from positive theology (no. 97). Certainly in a context such as ours, it is important to refer to the particularity of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ (no. 98).

In the concluding paragraph (no. 100) the text recalls its objective and speaks about the joy and passion of being a theologian.

GENERAL ASSESSMENT

Anyone looking for a catalogue of rules for Catholic theology will not be satisfied with *Theology Today*. The document tries in an authentic manner to develop a theological perspective on what theology is. It is led in this endeavor by a specific understanding of revelation, tradition, church, and theology that, in line with Vatican II, is strongly dialogical. This certainly coheres well with God’s revelation understood as a dialogical reality in creation and history that needs a dialogical church to receive revelation and a dialogical theology to reflect on it. Theology itself should actively dialogue with philosophy, religious studies, the other sciences, and involve itself in interdisciplinary conversation. For the sake of an adequate theology, theologians, from their commitment to Scripture, tradition, the magisterium, and in conversation with their colleagues worldwide, should engage in dialogue with the world as a *locus* for theology and therein recognize the *sensus fidelium* as a source for theological reflection.

The strong impetus from the principal documents of Vatican II is, of course, important, especially in a time when the heritage of this council is open to discussion. *Theology Today* clearly chooses to protect the fruits that Vatican II gleaned from the *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement* movements. At the same time, it is an additional advantage that theologians played a prominent role in the council, which the document itself

praises.³⁵ Even though many of the conciliar theologians often had problems with the magisterium prior to the council, they profoundly changed the face of the church through the insights they gained in the dialogue between tradition and the modern world, insights that were then written into the conciliar documents.

For contemporary theologians, *Theology Today* does not offer any surprisingly new perspectives. Much of what it says about theology is considered by the majority of Catholic theologians to have already been achieved and is therefore considered to be only a starting point for further development. Yet it must be acknowledged that all in all this document makes more room for theology than is often attributed to documents issued by the Vatican, at least based on the skeptical assessments of many theologians. More than in other documents, *Theology Today* assumes an appreciation for and trust in the efforts of theologians, even though traces of distrust are still present. In this sense it remains a remarkable document, one that is worth being studied by theologians, certainly by church leaders, and—to the extent that they are familiar with the often high church theological vocabulary—also by university administrators.

The text has both merits and drawbacks. Besides a number of limitations inherent to the genre itself (see my section, “A Critical Empathetic Reading,” above), let me briefly discuss three other interrelated issues.

(1) First, there is the *locus theologicus* of the dialogue with the world. By *locus*, a term derived from the tradition, the document’s authors mean a “fundamental reference point” that qualifies the theological task. I indicated that the document does not really devote itself to a discussion of the relative weight of the *loci* with respect to one another (no. 20). However positive and surprising the mention of dialogue with the world might be on first sight, I already indicated that the document appears to undervalue dialogue, unless it would already be acknowledged as at work in the other *loci*. After all, if it is true that the church is a historical reality (no. 54) continuously moving in the intersection between evangelization and daily life (no. 52); if it is true that theology lives from the true interdisciplinary dialogue with philosophy, religious studies, and the other sciences (see *Theology Today* chap. 3) and its historical stature and failings are hereby connected (no. 70); if it is true that dialogue means more than confirming one’s identity, but also involves questioning, critiquing, and renewing this identity (no. 56); then dialogue with the world is not simply a *locus*, but rather it provides the background for theology’s

³⁵ For a recent lexicon of the most important participants, theologians, and church leaders, see Michael Quisinsky and Peer Walter, eds., *Personenlexikon zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2012).

dealing with the other *loci* in its reflection upon God's revelation in creation and history. In addition, the reference to how the *sensus fidelium*, prophetic voices, and the patient dialogue of theologians with the surrounding culture have allowed the church to straighten out its relationship with modernity (no. 55) illustrates this point. Finally, the fact that dialogue with the world as a locus changes everything also explains the interest of the document in the (dialogical) texts from Vatican II. Revelation, faith, tradition, church, and theology are the fruit of dialogue with the world and recover themselves only as they continue to engage this dialogue.

Further, if a larger plurality exists within theology today, it is precisely because of the increased interest in dialogue with the world. According to *Theology Today* (no. 1) the diversity within present-day theology itself results from the fact that there are new theological voices, namely, "laymen and women." Later the document states precisely that laymen and women, rather than priests and religious, have experience with "particular areas of interaction between the Church and the world" and are busy with "an initial articulation of "faith seeking understanding" in new circumstances or in the face of new issues" (no. 47). (As noted, however, a warning soon followed this acknowledgment.) Furthermore, new contexts (theology is now practiced around the world), new themes ("peace, justice, liberation, ecology and bioethics"), and new conversation partners prompt theology toward ecumenical, interreligious, and intercultural dialogue (no. 1). The document later complements this list of causes for theological pluralization with new items. Along with internal theological specialization, the document, on the one hand, points to the various philosophical and scientific conversation partners that instigate different methodologically theological ways of thinking; on the other hand, it notes an increasing number of "subjects, places, institutions, intentions, contexts and interests" and a "new appreciation of the plurality and variety of cultures" (no. 76). Time and again, it is the dialogue with conversation partners who are "strange to" or "other than" the Christian church and faith that has challenged theology, through a plurality of voices, to take up its task of "faith seeking understanding."

(2) In light of this first observation, it is of course evident that *Theology Today* is written almost entirely from the church's viewpoint. This should not surprise anyone, considering that the ITC, itself an advisory body of the church, is the author of *Theology Today* and recalls that this document is primarily meant to answer a question posed by the CDF. At the same time, such an approach does not address the entire reality in which Catholic theology is operative. Rather than being an instrument to help the church deal with the university and the world (i.e., culture and society), theology stands today at the very intersection of church, university, and

culture/society.³⁶ I have indicated elsewhere that, through sociocultural developments (such as secularization and religious pluralization), theology in these three different places has shifted to their margins, rather than remaining in the center of them. Such marginalization puts theology under pressure as an academic discipline and as relevant for contemporary cultures and societies, and it threatens to drive theology back inside the church. This is pernicious both for theology and the church, because it robs both of conversation partners that are vital for a dialogical church and theology. Only if theology once again is prepared to develop its credibility and relevance at the crossroads of all three realities will it be able to fulfil its role with respect to each of these—including the church. The marginalization of theology in each of these three realities is undeniably a problem, but it also offers the possibility that theology might take on once again and in new ways its task as critical-reflective partner in the church, university, and society.³⁷

(3) My most important observation with regard to *Theology Today* builds on the two critical thoughts already mentioned: the document too easily presents the diversity of theological ways of thinking and methodologies side by side, as if it does not matter which way of theological thinking one chooses. In this respect, the understanding of both diversity and unity remains too formal and too abstract. The document too easily relativizes the diverse theological claims that are made in the different theologies (because, after all, do they not concern the same truth?). It too quickly forgets that such claims, made by the different voices that constitute theology's plurality, pertain to the whole of theology. Moreover, these claims have been brought forward with regard to specific contexts in which these theologies took shape. Usually these particular theologies have addressed a particular underlying situation of injustice or alienation, or a compelling challenge, complaint, or question. Consequently the diversity among theologies does not simply form a harmonic choir with many voices, but each particular theology aims at a critical interaction that has consequences for the whole of theology (and so too for the other voices within the diversity of theologies). For hermeneutical theologians, for example, the meaning of a foundational religious text cannot be read

³⁶ See Boeve, "Theology at the Crossroads."

³⁷ "Theology indeed finds itself at the crossroads, and is pushed, challenged, questioned, inspired and engaged back and forth, from one location to the other. It is dynamically related to all three of them, indeed involved in what is really at stake in them, without exclusively belonging to any one of them. Moreover, . . . theology puts its project at risk, when it forgets that it is located at the crossroads, or is made or forced to forget this positioning. And, as a matter of fact, the areas themselves are likely to suffer from this as well" (ibid. 72).

apart from its historical context; political theologians see every theology as woven into a theory-praxis-dialectic; for non-Western theologians all theology is irreducibly contextual (including Western theology); for feminist thinkers the development of inclusive thinking is an assignment for every theology, not simply for feminist theologies; for liberation theologians any theology that pays no attention to social injustice and structural sin is self-deceptive; for postmodern and postcolonial thinkers all theologies should be aware of the power relations in which they are inextricably interwoven; for ecumenical and interreligious theologians, theology can be credible only when it refuses to cut itself off from dialogue with the Christian and religious other, etc. The unity of theology, therefore, does not simply express itself in many voices, but demands that theologians relate the diversity of claims to that unity made by the different voices. Obviously this will be the object of theological self-critique and evaluation, exchange and discussion, testing and further refining. Catholic theology today, therefore, should definitely question itself along the lines of the twelve criteria specified in the document. At the same time, however, it cannot withdraw from the lessons to be learned from the diversity of theological voices, because these also concern the unity of theology and are critical for its future.

Finally, I return to the case with which I began this article: "Is comparative theology Catholic?" I can now offer my conclusion: It certainly is, according to the theological approach described by the three panelists of the American Academy of Religion discussion session. At the same time, it is most definitely Catholic theology, because it places the dialogical principle of revelation, tradition, church, and theology at its center, and opens theology up to new questions: How does God reveal Godself today in (our comparative reading of) religious foundational texts and in (our study of) interreligious contacts and communication? And which forms of theology are attentive to such a revelation, and which are not?