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THE REDISCOVERY OF GOD AND THE RECOVERY OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Questions for East Asian Contexts

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The topic of our conference is "systematic theology" in an East Asian context, and this very topic moves us to a fundamental question. In the face of multiple and complex contextual challenges that so much Asian theology has already addressed, as well as important and ground-breaking documents by the South Asian Bishops Conference in recent years, why turn to systematic theology again? What do we expect systematic theology as such to say to, much less *do* about the challenges arising from this East Asian context—or any other context, for that matter? After all, systematic theology concerns God, and more precisely the ways in which we can understand how God is revealed and encountered. It takes us into Christology and pneumatology, into anthropology and grace, and into ecclesiology and eschatology. Why specify systematic theology, as opposed to fundamental theology, biblical theology, moral theology, or ethics? Why, indeed, not turn to economics, agronomics, political economy, sociobiology, environmental biology, and other regional sciences? Are we asking too much of systematic theology in expecting it to be responsive to a vast East Asian context that involves so many parts, so many challenges? Do we risk reducing theology to a rhetorical construct if it only serves to justify a particular program of pastoral action? The topic forces us to look at the nature of systematic theology

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itself, for it is something other than an adaptation of non-theological projects, or the construction of a quasi-theological scaffolding from various elements of faith and the human sciences in order to build a pastoral program.

But no theology, systematic or otherwise, can proceed without due attention to context, or interaction with it. Why is this important? It is important because theological studies, especially at the pre-ordination level where people are preparing for lives of service to the People of God, can seem abstracted from the contexts of human existence in which the life of the Church takes shape and in which faith is lived. In many cases it seems that the call of the Second Vatican Council in *Optatam totius* to a new form of theological education, one that includes asking fundamental questions arising from the human condition, involving therefore a vibrant relationship between theology and philosophy, has not always been heeded.[1] Instead we still find curricula that are designed along rather predictable lines and with topics that often stand alone, like silos, having little relation to one another, and very little, it often seems, to pastoral and human realities. The *cursus theologicus* can therefore seem ahistorical, strikingly removed from the pastoral contexts of particular times and places. But these pastoral contexts are also culturally defined, and so courses of theology can also seem *a-cultural,* curiously blind to the need for an inculturation of faith if it is to take root in the face of so many dynamic forces ever threatening it. Further, these curricula can often be too formally removed from concern for knowing about the religions other than Christianity that might inhabit the worlds and contexts within which people are living their Christian faith.

Those who live in East Asian contexts—and I stress the plural here, for there are many East Asian contexts, and this includes Oceania—can better describe this need for an historically-aware, inculturated, and

[1]See "Optatam Totius," nos. 13–21, in A. Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* I 1988, rev. ed. (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1987), 717–723.

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inter-religiously sensitive theology than I can. Of course, there is so much that has already been accomplished in this area. Many Asian theologies have successfully addressed East Asian contexts already. If East Asia could be stretched to Sri Lanka, the pioneering work of Aloysius Pieris in *An Asian Theology of Liberation* beautifully blends concern for the poor with the opportunities offered in a religiously pluralistic environment, differentiating an Asian theology of liberation from the originating models from Latin America.[2] Of course, Jacques Dupuis left us a great corpus of work in comparative theology, although it was rooted in the Indian context, which is not that of East Asia.[3] But it serves as a model, however controversial it may have been in certain quarters, of responsible scholarship of the sort that should still be undertaken, not only in Hindu, but also in Buddhist and Muslim contexts. In his *Christianity with an Asian Face,* the Vietnamese-American theologian Peter Phan surveys the development of an inculturated theology and ecclesiology in several East Asian contexts, with a view toward how these are becoming further inculturated in the United States—a reminder of the global reach of East Asia and Oceania.[4] Phan takes into account multiple elements of East Asian contexts for theology today: immigration both within and beyond Asian countries, the role of philosophy in Asian cultures, models for understanding God and Jesus in particular, Asian understandings of *ecclesia,* inculturated catechesis, and bi-culturalism, versions of which can occur not only in countries of immigration, but in home countries as well in the face of a global marketplace and popular pan-culture.[5]

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[2] *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988).

[3] See especially *Jesus Christ at the Encounter of World Religions* (Maryknoll: New York: Orbis Books, 1989) and *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997).

[4] *Christianity with an Asian Face: Asian American Theology in the Making* (Maryknoll: New York: Orbis Books, 2003).

[5] There are also, of course, several Asian theological journals, including the *East Asian Theologial Review, Philippiniana Sacra,* and *World Mission* magazine, as well as

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We all know some of the daunting problems that face us as Church—problems that describe the larger historical moment and cultural contexts for the doing of theology. Bishop Francisco Claver has further refined the question of context. In a recent talk given at Berkeley, he focused on the Philippine situation. Social analysis of Filipino reality reveals massive problems related to hunger, ignorance, sickness, and homelessness, pervasive and deep poverty, institutionalized social injustice, political powerlessness and rising oppression of the poor, and disregard for and deprivation of human dignity.[6] In the spirit of *Gaudium et Spes*, there have been many pastoral and ecclesiastical responses to these challenges in the Philippines, notably through the work of the base ecclesial communities (BECs)—a strategy that has proved effective in other parts of the world as well, particularly in Latin America. In addition to these challenges listed by Bishop Claver, I would mention the fact that Christianity, and certainly Catholicism, is a minority religion in East Asia (with major exceptions, of course), and that even where it is culturally important, as in the Philippines, we are looking at an environment of considerable religious pluralism as well as syncretism.[7] It would seem that no theology could adequately address the socio-economic and cultural challenges for faith that could not also engage in a meaningful engagement with these other religious traditions, precisely as they are being lived in East Asia. We also need to be mindful of the interrelated realities of globalization

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Asian publishers, many of them here in metro Manila. See James H. Kroeger, M.M., "Asian Resources for Developing Asian Theologies," Local Ecclesiologies in Dialogue Conference, Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University. http://www.jstb.edu/events/ecclesiologies.html (accessed July 1, 2009).

[6]Francisco Claver, "Strategies and Modalities of the Social Justice Engagement in the Philippine Church," Local Ecclesiologies in Dialogue Conference, Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University (May 29, 2009), 1–2. http://www.jstb.edu/events/ecclesiologies.html (accessed July 1, 2009).

[7]For a discussion of syncretism useful for systematic theology, see Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), 144–158.

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and migration, and of the fact that climate change interlinks East Asia with the rest of the world in new ways. The context, therefore, is extremely complex.

But, perhaps the question really is this: Not how theology can address context, but how context can address theology—how context can shape new theologies that are relevant to pastoral action. I would like to explore with you, therefore, the state of systematic theology and why it must interact with context. I will develop my thoughts in three parts.

First, we are living in a world of the rediscovery of God, of new modes of encounter with God. This has a bearing on how we will find any connection between theology and context. While this is a huge issue in the Northern Hemisphere, globalization makes it an issue for all of us. For God is also being rediscovered in East Asia.

Second, systematic theology needs to be renewed and rejuvenated as the reasoned response to the discovery of God. How, in an East Asian context, might this happen? How might East Asian contexts help bring this about?

Third, this discovery of God and the renewal of theology can result in pastoral strategies that are rooted in the radical vision of Christianity. Here I will take my cues from a non-Asian, Johannes Metz, one of the last of that generation of "greats" who lived and worked in the mid-twentieth century.

After these considerations, I will then pose some questions to help you to consider the function of systematic theology in an East Asian context.

The Rediscovery of God

God is being rediscovered. It might seem odd to say this, given that faith is so palpable among many people, not least among the impoverished. We all know stories of the indomitable faith of the very poor, or of those who are most oppressed by unjust social structures.

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Jon Sobrino, writing from a context not dissimilar to some parts of the Philippines, notes that God becomes a problem in the face of catastrophic suffering, such as that brought about by a recent earthquake:

> … [Sometimes] … God is not part of the solution, but of the problem. The earthquake forces many believers today, like Job throughout history, to contemplate a questionable mystery (one that does not dazzle with its brilliance but casts a shadow with its terrible darkness) that becomes an enigma: the ineffable God becomes a "mute" God, like a sphinx.[8]

Yet it is in the catastrophes of history, including hunger, disease and poverty, that Christian faith is forced to grapple with God, and in some way, to discover God anew. This general idea is echoed, I think, in Clemens Sedmak's project of "Transformational Theology," which starts with the "raw revelation" of God that is not addressed by "protected" notions of revelation. For the divine freedom, "expressed in the works of the Holy Spirit who is sovereign in the where and when of revealing God's presence in the world … is incompatible with predicting and calculating the effects of divine causality in the world."[9] The where and when of God's revelation is explored on a case by case basis. Just as Sobrino asks where God is within the earthquake, Sedmak explores the scandal of world hunger as a *locus theologicus*.

The God who is being rediscovered and reflected in these theologies is not the God of the powers of "colonial religion" or of dogmatic theology. This is the God who yearns to be with God's people, to dwell with them in the deserts of their existence, and to deliver them from suffering. This is a God who suffers with, a God of what Johannes Metz calls *com-passion*—a notion to which I will return later. It is precisely this God of *com-passion* who is being rediscovered,

[8]Jon Sobrino, *Where is God? Earthquake, Terrorism, Barbarity and Hope* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 25.

[9]Clemens Sedmak, "The Disruptive Power of World Hunger," *Transformation Theology: Church in the World,* eds. Oliver Davies, Paul D. Janz, and Clemens Sedmak (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 116.

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not only by those who are suffering here in the Philippines and in other parts of East Asia and Oceania, but on a more global scale.

But there is more to the story. Even in the secularized West, there is a renewed fascination with God, a desire for a God of compassion, stemming perhaps from a drought begun in the Enlightenment that has run its course. God has, in a sense, returned to the forefront of human consciousness in ways that were not so evident forty or fifty years ago, at the height of post-war secularism. After a long dark night, God has reappeared, not in new-age religions, but in the rediscovery of the God who is revealed in the course of human events. Certainly the years following the 9/11 attacks document an increased interest in religion, in a rediscovery of the divine. Simultaneously, the rants of those atheists who express disdain for religion are evidence of this return, for as Karl Rahner pointed out, even the denial of God involves some implicit acknowledgement of the philosophical problem of God as ultimate horizon of our knowing. Philosopher-theologians such as John Caputo and Jean-Luc Marion have described the return of a sense of religion, of the numinous, of that which is given as gift—as lying at the heart of the secular life in the West.[10] In Europe and the United States, people are speaking of the emergence of a "post-secular" era.

This has global implications, for secularism is a Western export. In *God is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith is Changing the World,* John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge document how homegrown religions, not only Christianity and Islam, are growing in all parts of the world, including China.[11] Reza Aslan summarizes how this relates to the demise of secularism:

[10]For a comprehensive overview of the rediscovery of "god" in postmodern philosophy, see Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999). See also the work of Jean Luc Marion. A good starting point is *The Visible and the Revealed*, trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner, et. al. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

[11]John Micklethwait and Adrian Woolridge, *God is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith is Changing the World* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009).

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> Despite all the confident predictions one hears about the death of God, the truth is that religion is a stronger, more global force today than it has been in generations. At the dawn of the twentieth century, one half of the world's population identified itself as Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, or Hindu. One hundred years of social progress, technological innovation, and scientific advancement, and that number now stands at nearly two thirds … If secularism arose in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in response to the erosion of religious certainties, perhaps the rise of religious identities can be blamed on the growing disillusionment with secularism.[12]

Of course, some forms of this rediscovery of God are problematic, or certainly difficult to track, and much of it is mixed not only with cultural but also explicitly political agendae. Phillip Jenkins limns the future development of a global Christianity, where all these religious forces are unleashed in ways that make our current concerns seem quaintly controllable, especially with the emergence of sects and new forms of fundamentalism within all the religions. In specific reference to Asia and the convergence of so many religious forces here, he sketches a grim picture for the future, at least if we are to follow a pessimistic scenario where religions represent political and cultural ideologies:

> Even without the religious factor, this part of the Pacific Rim is going to be one of the major areas of strategic conflict over the next twenty or thirty years. As the People's Republic of China grows militarily, it will project its power in the China Sea, the vast maritime region bounded by Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Vietnam. … Religiously-based instability vastly aggravates the potential for great power conflict, especially when (as in Indonesia or Malaysia) anti-Christian violence is directed against ethnic Chinese.[13]

Not everyone agrees with this grim scenario, and Jenkins himself calls it a fantasy, a thought experiment. But there is no question that

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[12]Reza Aslan, *How to Win a Cosmic War: God, Globalization and the End of the War on Terror* (New York: Random House, 2009), 10.

[13]Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 222.

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various forms of religious revival, and what I am calling a rediscovery of God, for good or for ill, are underway.

The question for systematic theology, however, is this: Who is this God who is communicating to us in and through the renewed religious energy that we have described here? Who is this God that fascinates and perdures? What can be said about this God that will have any relevance to the East Asian contexts within which he is being rediscovered? Taking this into Bishop Claver's description of the East Asian context, a common denominator, it seems, is that the God who is being rediscovered is a God who suffers with his groaning people, who draws people into creative networks to help one another, who is enlisted by people in ideological wars, and who is the hope of the suffering and oppressed. This is a "portable" God, a God who respects no boundaries or borders, and who is found communicating in every dimension of the complex context that is East Asia, and not only within Catholicism or Christianity. This is a God who is being rediscovered within the living contexts of the people.

The Recovery of Systematic Theology

If this much can be said of God in an East Asian context (and probably very many others), then what about systematic theology? What about the theology that people study in theology schools for the purpose of serving the Gospel in contexts where God is being rediscovered?

This leads us to a consideration of what theology is. For before we arrive at theological genres, constructions, foci, or programs of praxis, we would do well to recall that theology begins in a human knowing of God—not a speculative knowing, but an existential knowing of the God who discloses himself to us, of the God whom human beings discover and, in different times, places and manners, rediscover. Theology begins and is rooted in this human knowing of God.

This is, of course, an ancient tradition, but it is one that we find clearly expressed by Thomas Aquinas in the first question of the *Summa theologiae*, where he inquires into the nature of *sacra doctrina*. As the late

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scholar of Aquinas, Walter Principe, pointed out, it is important to note that Thomas does not ask whether *theology* is a science, but rather whether sacred doctrine is. And by sacred doctrine he means first of all knowledge of the whole of faith as lived, both in speculation and in practical action. This knowledge is a response to something received. *Sacra doctrina* is therefore a science, a *scientia* or knowing, to the degree that it accepts as its starting point principles that have been disclosed by God, not necessarily self-evident to reason, but nevertheless valid on the basis of experience (e.g., earthquake, hunger, plague, war). Theology, in turn, is an understanding of that knowing of God, a knowing that is "subalternated" to the knowing that is given the blessed and which belongs to God. Principe adds:

> The religious value of this view of sacred doctrine, even in its scientific mode or aspect, is that sacred doctrine, as a science subalternated to the science had by God and the blessed, must always be dominated by and remain in contact with the mystery of God, with the Word of God; it must proceed from a living faith in order precisely to be a science.[14]

And further:

> Sacred doctrine considers everything it touches upon—man, sacraments, Christ, angels, sacred history—in relation to God, who is therefore the SUBJECT of all theology in all its branches.[15]

Finally, sacred doctrine is a wisdom (*sapientia*) of a twofold kind: that gained through study of the Bible and of the venerable words of other theologians, and that gained through "suffering divine things," i.e., through growth in virtue as the Holy Spirit works within our human experience, in the economy of salvation.[16] In asking whether *sacra doctrina* is a science, then, Thomas is asking how we can transform the content of the divine self-communication into an organized

[14]Walter Principe, *Introduction to Patristic and Medieval Theology*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1987), 274.

[15]Principe, *Introduction to Patristic and Medieval Theology*, 275. Emphasis original.

[16]Principe, *Introduction to Patristic and Medieval Theology*, 275.

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science of the speculative order without losing the historical texture and meaning of the economy of salvation. In other words, how can systematic theology prove relevant to the life of human beings who are the subjects of God's saving work in history?

And so, theology is a systematic way of understanding the saving self-communication of God, and the human knowing (*scientia*) of this communication. Both the divine self-communication and the human knowing of it take place in and through human experience. The systematic dimension of theology refers to the means by which this understanding is accomplished, the system that is employed to gain effective understanding, and this has classically been the function of philosophy in Christian theology. There must be some means by which the human mind can begin to approach the knowledge of things that pertain to God and to know them indirectly. Only with this understanding, which is dependent upon analogy, can we then speculate about how faith, as a knowing of the God who is communicating to us, can enter into the drama of the human condition and affect it, responding to the contexts within which human beings live their lives and gain earthly wisdom.[17]

One of the things that I wish to assert here is that systematic theology must have as its central question how and what God is communicating to us of Godself in the contexts within which we live and find ourselves. In contemporary terms, theology must first engage the rediscovery of God. Only then can a systematic theology proceed to a methodologically informed understanding of Christian faith, or of the construction or a project or the conception of a praxis. Too much that bears the name "theology" today does not first attend to this primary matter. It attends first and sometimes exclusively to context, and so it risks becoming irrelevant to the very human experience to which it

[17]In so describing systematic theology, I am of course selecting from among many typologies for theology that have variously been set forth. A helpful start for thinking about this can be found in Hans Frei, *Types of Christian Theology* (New Haven: Yale, 1992), esp. Chapter 4, 28–55.

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strives to respond. For that human experience centrally includes the experience of God—an experience that cannot be taken for granted and must be the primary question with which we begin a theology that is contextually engaged. I am not arguing here for a Platonic top-down understanding of systematic theology. For the experience of God cannot be severed from context. But neither can a legitimate and necessary concern for context, and how faith can respond to it, occlude the very matter that faith is about. That is the central concern of a systematic theology.

And in an East Asian context, as we have noted, we need to ask how and what God is communicating to us in the specific modalities of human suffering that mark this part of the planet. The result might be differently inflected than the result coming from another context. In the Philippines, at least, I would begin with Bishop Claver's broad categories of social analysis in order to establish that context, but then bring these into conversation with the broader religious and cultural realities that are found here.

Methodologically, this involves attending first to the ways that the wisdom of *sacra doctrina* is being discovered. This entails all the disciplines of theology, including and especially a rediscovery of the Word of God, with all of its liberating power, but also the practical wisdom that is gained through human experience, from fiesta and joy, to mourning and contemplation.

What is especially crucial to remember here is that theology in context is not an end in itself—a point made by Joerg Rieger—especially if we take into account the scope of human suffering in that context. In *God and the Excluded: Visions and Blindspots in Contemporary Theology,* Rieger cautions:

> Questions raised by human suffering and by the exploitation of all of creation can, in the long run, not be shut out where Christians reflect on the teachings of the Church and on God's relationship with humanity and creation. The crisis of theology is not primarily an intellectual crisis,

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> as many theologians still think, but the fact that we have separated ourselves from most of humanity. [18]

If theology is not to be separated from humanity, and if it is to bring to light the mystery of God in context, then what kind of theology are we looking for?

A Theological Horizon Rooted in the Gospel

It might seem odd to turn to a German theologian to address the situation of systematic theology in East Asia, but I think that Johannes Metz offers a starting point that is not Euro-centric, even though he was theologically formed by Karl Rahner, and his fundamental question, 'Whither God after Auschwitz?' comes from a European context, but one of some universal significance. Still, Metz himself transcends the limitations of his own cultural horizons in search of a new horizon for systematic theology that is responsive to human suffering and the pluralism of human existence, including religious pluralism. His "political theology" is universalist in its intentionality.

The starting point for Metz is to question the starting point of the standard Christian narrative, which is usually cast as our engulfment in the sin of Adam, the original sin, and to ask how God justifies us in the face of our guilt. This is the classic Augustinian construction of the problem, the one that has dominated Christian theology and, arguably, missiology and pastoral practice. But this model leads to an absolutism of sin as the great barrier, or scandal, to human flourishing and union with God. Suffering is explained as a consequence of human sinfulness. But God cannot be questioned, because God has merely permitted the possibility of sin, not caused it. Human beings are responsible for the suffering in which they find themselves.

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[18] Joerg Rieger, *God and the Excluded: Visions and Blindspots in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 4.

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Metz, however, questions the adequacy of this narrative.

> … [I]n Augustine "salvation" now becomes thought of exclusively in terms of "redemption," as redemption from sin and guilt. What has been lost from view is all the suffering and histories of suffering which in our everyday experience simply cannot be traced back to sin or to a history of guilt, and which nonetheless make up the largest part of this world's suffering that cries out to the heavens.[19]

He does not deny the power of sin, and repeatedly claims that we must never let go of the dangerous memory of where it has led, not only in the story of Jesus, but in human history as well. But, he suggests, a biblical messianism yields a very different narrative. This is a narrative that does not begin in Genesis 2, but rather in Exodus 2, at the burning bush. And here we have the self-disclosure of a God who is reactive and responsive to human suffering, who does not want us to suffer. The focus of soteriology shifts from sin to human suffering, from redemption as atonement for human sin and guilt, to redemption as God's saving action in history, as liberation and freedom. And the question of theodicy shifts from putting God on trial through the protest of philosophical questioning, to the prayer of Jesus, stemming from Jesus' God-mysticism, that the world be renewed in the image of the Kingdom.

But this does not preclude questioning God, wondering why God has made things so. Metz is calling here not for an abstracted philosophical theodicy, but for a questioning that stems from suffering itself:

> Not vaguely undirected questions, but surely passionate and focused questioning belongs to that mysticism in which we have to form ourselves in order to find true consolation. And this above all if we do not forget that biblical-Christian mysticism is not really a mysticism of closed eyes, but an open-eyed mysticism that obligates us to perceive more acutely the suffering of others.[20]

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[19]Johannes Metz, "Theology as Theodicy?" in *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 61–62.

[20]Metz, "Theology as Theodicy?", 69.

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Suffering thus emerges as the horizon of encounter with God, the integrating focus of a systematic theology. The Logos enters into the world of suffering, in a mode of com-passion, a "suffering with." The Logos, becoming suffering human flesh, thus presents a "transcultural criterion" for approaching the human knowledge of God. And in its "dangerous memory," the Church understands itself in terms of discipleship of Jesus, whose gaze always turned first toward those who suffered. The compassion of God, revealed in the compassion of Jesus in the gospels, becomes the template for Christian discipleship, of a Christian way of being present in the world, and a way of the Church being present in the world. And this means that the God who is self-disclosing and who is being rediscovered, is a God not only of charity, but also of justice. To take on the compassion of that God is to take on a vision of *caritas et justitia* that will lead to a vision of coequality of all human beings, and of integrity and responsibility. It will also lead to a solicitude for the suffering of those who are of different religions or politics, and even to a compassion for our enemies. It will lead to transcending the narrative of sin and blame and to reconciliation of all parts into a living whole. And this is the work of love.

Systematic theology, then, will attend to the nexus between God's communication to us and the contexts within which that communication is taking place. One cannot be fully appreciated apart from the other. For, as Karl Rahner taught, theology and anthropology are closely linked and correlated with each other. To ask after God is to ask after the human, and to ask after the human is to ask after God. More specifically, to ask why there is so much suffering, we are asking not only a question of theodicy, but to borrow from Sobrino, anthropodicy as well. And this leads to a different agenda for God, as co-sufferer, as well as for human beings, who are called to compassion. The specific revelation of this God in Jesus Christ thus becomes central. The *lucha* between good and evil is not a cosmic war, a Manichaean standoff, but, as in the person and practice of Jesus, the original healing and renewal of the human, and of creation, as the Gospel is lived. A systematic theology thus understood becomes ethics and then becomes eschatology in a final vision of harmony, what John calls love.

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Questions of Context

How to take the next step, to transpose this understanding of systematic theology into the particularities of the East Asian context, is not something that I can prescribe here. But we can consider some questions that might serve as starting points toward further reflection.

First, how can systematic theology, as it is taught in the theology schools, prepare pastoral people for discerning God's self-disclosure within East Asian cultures? What is happening in your particular cultural contexts that commands your attention and asks after God? For example, what do patterns of immigration, from the rural countrysides into the cities, reveal to us about how God may be at work in human lives? How does the changing role of women in Asian societies force us to ask what God may be communicating to us as God's desire for humanity? How do pastors live in this world, not simply as counter-signs, but as disciples, with compassion and a well-ordered love for the world?

Second, how can systematic theology proceed methodologically so that it attends to human suffering in a central and organizing way? How would an attention to God's response to human suffering as the central narrative of Christian faith shape our understanding of God, of Christ, of Trinity? How would it affect our understanding of human beings and the roles of sin and grace in their lives? How would it change, if at all, our ecclesiology, and how we organize church in relation to society? How would it affect the relations between Christian people and other religions?

Third, how can systematic theology enfold the good of interreligious understanding, either through formal comparative study or through dialogue and conjoined efforts for justice, so that appreciation of religious pluralism and difference is a central constitutive dimension of theological understanding? As disciples, can we move beyond tribal loyalties, on the one hand, and mere toleration, on the other, toward a questioning after how God may be speaking to us through the religious others?

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Fourth, how can systematic theology be in itself ethical—not in the limited sense of a theological ethics or a moral theology, but as a theology for ethics, so that it intrinsically concerns right action? Another way of looking at this: How can systematic theology move beyond the silos of Revelation, sin, Christ, Trinity, grace, Church, sacraments, morals and eschatology, where ethics is a topic, toward a theology that is always concerned with the ethical, even in its most speculative moments? We would thus have a Christian ethics that derives not from a Christianization of a philosophical ethics, but from the heart of the Gospel. And what accents would this take on in an Asian context?

Finally, how can systematic theology, as a response to the divine self-disclosure, as sacred doctrine, lead to the practices of love and justice? If God is being rediscovered today, especially in the crucibles of human suffering, can systematic theology be recovered, in Asia, as a pathway to Christian praxis? For if theology has God as its subject matter, and if God is love, then should theology not be centrally concerned with where this love will lead human beings, i.e., toward a more just world?

In one sense these last five questions could be directed to people in the United States, in Latin America, Africa, Europe, or the sub-Continent. Such is the case in a globalized world. But it so happens that we ask them here in East Asia. I would like to leave you with the thought that it could well be that the recovery of systematic theology of which I speak could become the gift of the Churches of East Asia to the rest of the Church. It is possible that it could be happening here already, precisely in a part of the world where, with few exceptions, Christianity is not presumed as normative or culturally central, where other forms of wisdom are to be found in great abundance, where human suffering abounds as a visible and not hidden part of human life, and where God may well be appearing in ways heretofore unimagined and where the thirst for God is real. The future of systematic theology in East Asia is therefore a sign of hope for the world Church.

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