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ON THE THEOLOGY OF THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES*

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Is there a way of doing theology in the Philippines today other than the Theology of the Signs of the Times? A good question, one raised by not a few Christian individuals and groups, among them university students, seminarians and ex-seminarians. A question too that seems to bring home our realization after Vatican II that what we call "the end of the Constantinian period" in the Church marks the end also of a whole period in the history of theology. It presupposes a recognition that, while the medieval synthesis in theology—a synthesis not so much in its elements or its individual parts as precisely in its comprehensive, synthetic view of God, man, and the world—, though perfectly valid for the Middle Ages and for the two or three centuries immediately thereafter, no longer really speaks to us. The Council of Trent, to be sure, as well as concomitant currents of theological thought, had brought it up to date and given it new life during the counter-reformation. With the dawning of the modern period, nevertheless, there emerged in the Church a new kind of theological construct, symbolized in a sense by new literary genres:

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the papal encyclical, the "constitutions," pastoral and dogmatic, the declarations and the decrees of the Second Vatican Council. Hence the confusion of the modern world noted in the introductory sections of *Gaudium et Spes*: theologians and Christian communities all over the Church, throughout the world indeed, reflect a sense of the need to raise up a new systematic construct, to articulate a new theological vision, as valid and relevant for us as the theological vision of the *summae* were for the people of the Middle Ages.

By a kind of prophetic inspiration, I think, the Holy Spirit has been leading the recent Popes and, most of all, the Second Vatican Council and the synods that have taken place since the Council to move towards a new direction, a new way of doing "magisterium theology." This way of doing theology has been given the name "The Theology of the Signs of the Times." It might be useful to ask ourselves something of the background (at least) of the name and then of the idea.

The expression, *the signs of the times*, is found in Matthew 16:2–4. Our Lord there uses it in speaking to the Jews. He says:

> In the evening you say, it will be fine; there is a red sky. And in the morning, stormy weather today; the sky is red and overcast. You know how to read the face of the sky, but you cannot read the signs of the times.

Our Lord is speaking about the messianic signs, that is, the miracles and the fulfillment of prophecies which were present in his life. He tells them equivalently that these miracles and these fulfilled prophecies point to himself and to the work that he is doing, of the fulfillment of what God had foretold to His people regarding the coming of the Messiah.

The theological meaning of *the signs of the times* is somewhat different. This was known very well to the special sub-commission—*de signis temporum*—which was created in the Second Vatican Council. Right away the commission tried to arrive at some sort of a new definition that would be used for the Council—an explanation of what was meant by "the signs of the times." In this, of course, they had been preceded by the man who first used the expression in contemporary "magisterium theology": Pope John XXIII. He was the first to bring the category of

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the signs of the times formally into the Catholic theology of our age, first in the bull *Humanae Salutis* which convened the Second Vatican Council, but most of all in the encyclical *Pacem in Terris*.

In *Pacem in Terris* every chapter ends with a section entitled (by its editors) "Signs of the Times." The title itself does not appear in the formal document, but some translations use it.

Pope John XXIII enumerates three major signs of the times as important characteristics of our age. *First*, he says, is that workmen all over the world today are increasingly seeking for a share in all the areas of human life. They are no longer willing to be treated as chattel. They are no longer willing to be treated as mere instruments of production. They are asking for some say in the decisions that affect their work and their lives, and are seeking for an access also to the power that will give them some say in political life. They want to participate in decisions pertaining to the general life and culture of their communities. The Pope's first point, therefore, refers to the aspirations of workers for dignity and participation. *Second*, he notes, is that women wish to be treated no longer as mere objects, as appendages in human community and society. They increasingly want a share in all aspects of life, participation in the decisions, in the activity and in the life of their communities. John XXIII sees women increasingly seeking an active role in human society. *Third*, the Pope points out, nations which once were colonies are now bent on shedding any vestiges of dependency on, and any sense of inferiority to, former colonial powers. They insist on genuinely equal status with all other nations in the councils of the world and for meaningful participation in the general running of world society.

In all these the Pope has discerned an emergent leitmotif. Through the rest of *Pacem in Terris* he returns to the idea that throughout human society today there is a growing desire for personalization and for socialization. Personalization, he stresses, on the part as much of individuals as of nations. They all want to come to full development, the individual, to attain to that full personhood whereby he can take his place in the community of men completely as an equal to every other man, and the nation, to arrive at equal rights with all other peoples

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within the community of nations. And socialization: men see that in the complexity of human life today the only way that they can accomplish what they want is by joining together in groupings which work towards the achievement of common purposes, and from these groupings emerges an increasingly multilateral network in human society, whereby groups interact with one another towards the safeguarding of particular rights, as well as the formation of common goals, common purposes, common activities, and common achievements.

Pope John sees these concretely (rather than by way of definitions) as examples of some of the major signs of the times and some of the major thrusts by which we are moving towards a certain development of mankind, a certain pushing forward of mankind.

Towards a Definition of the Signs

In 1964, the sub-commission *de signis temporum* came out with a first draft of their document (later to be known as the Ariccia document). Written principally by Father Bernard Haring, it states that *vox enim temporis, vox Dei est* (as is well known, the texts were written in Latin): "For the voice of the time is the voice of God." The commission preferred to soften the expression and explained it by saying that in the great signs of the times which we encounter within the human community in the world, we may see the visible presence of God. We see God's action leading men towards the fulfillment of His designs. In these great *indicia*, therefore, in these great movements and desires, in even the great secular developments that are taking place in history, God's mind and purposes are made manifest to us.

There is a section in the celebrated speech with which Pope John XXIII opened the Second Vatican Council which might be worth our time to touch on, even if briefly. It is the paragraph in which he speaks of the "prophets of gloom." It seems to me one of the more significant texts in all of Pope John's writings.[1]

[1]Walter M. Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II,* trans. Joseph Gallagher (New York: Guild Press, 1966), 712.

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Pope John says, "In the daily exercise of our pastoral office we sometimes have to listen, much to our regret, to the voices of persons who, though burning with zeal, are not endowed with too much sense of discretion or measure." Note this for a moment: he is faulting those people who are burning with zeal but are lacking prudence. Listen to what constitutes this lack of prudence. "In these modern times, they can see nothing but prevarication and ruin." People who see nothing but evil in modern times, he says, are being imprudent. "They say that our era, in comparison with past eras, is getting worse." People, in other words, who see our age as worse than previous ages, are lacking in prudence.

> And they behave as though they have learned nothing from history, which is nonetheless the teacher of life. They behave as though, at the time of former Councils, everything was a full triumph for the Christian idea and life and for proper religious liberty. We feel we must disagree with these prophets of gloom who are always forecasting disaster as though the end of the world were at hand.

The next sentence, I think, is one of the priceless things that should be placed in every biography of Pope John. "In the present order of things, Divine Providence is leading us to a *new order of human relations*." It is this new order of human relations which, the Pope seems to suggest, is leading to the fulfillment of the designs of God in the world. There is a great deal of wisdom and a lot of theology given in this particular insight which, I believe, we are only now beginning to understand.

Pope John's insight, one at once significant and precious, is that what other people might tend to interpret as a constant worsening of the world is really no such thing; that in the very process wherein a lot of people see worsening lies rather the beginning of a new era, a new age where human relations are moving toward new configurations, leading towards the fulfillment of God's designs in the world.

What then is the definition of the "signs of the times?" According to the conciliar sub-commission (two of whose experts were Abbot Canon Francois Houtart,[2] a Belgian sociologist, and Father Marie-

[2]See, for example, Francois Houtart, *The Challenge to Change: The Church Confronts the Future* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964).

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Dominique Chenu,[3] a French Dominican), the signs of the times can be seen as operating on two levels.

First, on the *sociological* level. The sub-commission sees the signs of the times, first of all, starting from the great changes in science and technology, in more complex organization. In the process of socialization, in communications, in transport, in the fact that the world is getting smaller, and that we are able to communicate with each other so much more quickly, in the speeding up of history, in computerization and the unrelenting development of microchips. They have noted the analyses that have been undertaken among the sciences of human society, inquiries made largely in terms of the effects that these changes have had on human consciousness and sensibility, on human knowledge, on man's aspirations and desires, and on the social life. The external changes in themselves do not necessarily constitute the signs of the times; they are, as it were, the *materia ex qua*, the matter from which the signs of the times arise. Pope John, indeed, is careful not to discover the great signs of the times in the facts themselves of technological and scientific change or in the surges of development in industrial society; he draws these signs rather from the human desires and questions that emerge *because* of these changes.

Second, on the *theological* level. The analyses of the human and social sciences in turn have become grist for the theological mill. Theologians have begun to reflect on the direction in which all this innovation is leading man, on the vector human history seems to be acquiring as a consequence of it. They have begun to ask the question of how God's plans are being fulfilled in it. Pope John's perception of its significance looms large amidst all this theologizing: a new order of human relations is leading us toward the fulfillment of the divine design. Here is where theology, the reflection of faith, enters to see just precisely how these developments are advancing the designs of God.

I should point out at the outset that what we are seeing here is the new methodology largely being adopted in the preparation of the

[3]Marie Dominique Chenu, "Les Signes des Temps," *Nouvelle Revue Theologique* (Janvier 1965): 29–39.

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Church's documents today. It appears first in *Gaudium et Spes*, the Second Vatican Council's decree on The Church in the Modern World. Paul VI's letter to Cardinal Maurice Roy, *Octogesima Adveniens*, written on the eightieth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, reflects the use of this same method, as do the two documents issued by the new Synod of Bishops of 1971: one on the "Ministerial Priesthood," and the other on "Justice in the World." The latter is perhaps the most important document for anyone reflecting on the task of the Christian community today.

The English writer Peter Hebblethwaite[4] points out that there are two major texts of Pope Paul VI which fall along the same lines: *Ecclesiam Suam*, the very first encyclical that he wrote, and *Populorum Progressio*, his encyclical on the development of peoples. Several of the documents that have come out within the last two years also use the same method, that is, first the investigation into empirical reality, its thematization, and then the reflection of faith on findings of that investigation.

The Theology of the Signs of the Times

We have, to this point, seen something in general on the meanings of the signs of the times and the meaning they have in the documents of the Church, something on the history too of the emergence of this idea in magisterial pronouncements, and a few of the documents that have used this particular methodology. It is a good time now to attempt some explanation of the *theology* itself of the signs of the times.

The theology of the signs of the times takes, as the springboard as it were of its reflection, neither scriptural text nor the data of Tradition but "what is going on in the world." We might say that the purpose of reflecting on what is going on in the world is to find out what is *going forward* in the world. For the question, "what is *going forward* in the world?" is for the believer, "what is developing God's plan?" or

[4] *Vid.* Peter Hebblethwaite, *Paul VI: The First Modern Pope* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), especially 380–383, and also his earlier work, *The Runaway Church* (London: Collins, 1975).

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"what is pushing forward God's design for the world?" Several bases are apparent in this reflection, in this theology.

I have already referred to the *empirical basis*: it has all to begin with data, the facts that are given to us. There is also the *anthropological* basis, which I would like to take up now.

The theology of the signs of the times takes for granted that its subject is man: man and the history of man. This is where it *starts* its reflection, and it leads hence to finding out what God's mind is on man and on his history. It must, therefore, start with a great deal of attentiveness to what is going on in man. That is why, if you look at the texts not only of the universal magisterium of the Church but also of various Bishops' Conferences, the recurring word, over and over again, is the word "aspirations": the aspirations of men. To cite but a few examples:

> [From the final message of the Asian Bishops' Meeting held in November 1970]: We have made every effort to open up our minds and our hearts to the needs and *aspirations* of our peoples so that we might make these truly our own also, and so that we might bring to them the wisdom that the gospel teaches us. (Para. 3)
>
> [Their conclusion]: We make ours in the most solemn ways, the hopes and *aspirations* of our fellow Asian brothers for a new Asia which shall be worthy of the future that is laid up in the heart of Asian man. (Para. 28)

Paul VI's letter to Cardinal Maurice Roy, *Octogesima Adveniens*, speaks continually of the "aspirations" of people. The whole effort of the Church today must be to locate these aspirations. As a matter of fact, in paragraph 22, which is the summary paragraph in which the Pope nails down one major theme of his letter, after the introduction, he speaks of the two great aspirations that are present within mankind today:

> While scientific and technological progress continues to overturn man's surroundings, his patterns of knowledge, work, consumption and relationships, two aspirations persistently make themselves felt in this new context. And they grow stronger to the extent that he becomes better informed and better educated.

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The *aspiration to equality* and the *aspiration to participation*. Two forms of man's dignity and freedom.

There is also the new document on "Justice in the World." The second paragraph states: "scrutinizing the signs of the times and seeking to detect the meaning of emerging history, while at the same time seeking to know and to share the aspirations and questionings of all those who want to build a more human world, we have listened to the Word of God."

The point I am driving at here, in stressing the anthropological dimension, is this: the Church feels that to know what the deepest aspirations of man are at this given moment is to know what God is telling us today. This gives us the place, the locus where Christian action must insert itself to help man to fulfill the divine design. Important, because it gives a whole new focus to the theological task. In other words, there is here an understanding, first, that human history has a purpose and pattern. We have too long, I think, divided human/secular history from divine/religious or salvation history. We have been quite willing to accept that God is working and moving, and has a purpose in religious and salvation history, but we have not seen that secular history itself also fulfills the divine design. As Christians we either admit or deny that God is the Lord of history. If God is the Lord of history, then secular history has a pattern and a purpose from God too. If it is God who has given to secular history a pattern and a purpose, this purpose has to be salvific. For God's purpose in his dealings with men can only be salvific. What is going on in secular history is ultimately salvific because it is God's design, a fulfillment of God's design.

There is an "upward curve" in what we call secular history, and God is moving through that upward curve. Nobody, perhaps, better than Teilhard de Chardin has given us this idea, that there are such things as stages of a developing design within human evolution in history by, and through, which God is leading mankind forward, step by step. Teilhard speaks of critical thresholds, moments in history when human growth, as it were, gathers itself around certain points and breaks through to a new level of consciousness. To get a sense where God is leading this development of history, we should trace the

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growth in human consciousness …. It is never very clear or obvious, but, as Christians, we *do* accept that there is a purpose and a plan to God and that, thus, we *do* have growth: something is going forward. Karl Jaspers, the eminent German philosopher, points out, I think, in his *Meaning and End of History*, that there are certain great moments in history when man makes a significant leap forward, again, largely in consciousness, in growth of self-understanding, of awareness of the world, the awareness of man's relationship to the world. The theology we are here dealing with proposes that we identify this thrust forward mainly through the aspirations of man.

Why? We might think of it as follows. God cannot speak to us except in one of two ways: first, by direct, personal or private revelation—as opposed to the revelation of Scriptures which is public revelation; and second, through "what is going on in the world." If the latter, we have to have a means of identifying what he is saying. The means of identifying it lies precisely in the discernment of human aspirations. Do we have a way of establishing the truth of this proposition? Our answer derives from the scholastic notion of *potentia obedientialis*.[5] To the question, "how can we know through natural reasoning that man is called to union with God?" the scholastic theologians replied: through man's innate desire for perfect happiness, the *desiderium naturale Deum videndi*.[6]

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[5] *Potentia obedientialis* [obediential potency]:

> the intrinsic aspect of human nature for self-transcendence and receptivity of God's self-gift of supernatural grace. The "potency" refers to this openness to the divine; the "obedience", highlights the fact that it is God and not the human who must initiate the encounter and freely given self-donation of grace. This concept is important in fundamental theology and in considerations of the possibilities of humans to receive and understand God's revelation as well as to have a certain sense of self-consciousness of oneself and one's relationship to God. (See James T. Bretzke, S.J., *Consecrated Phrases: A Latin Theological Dictionary* [Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998])

[6] *Summa Contra Gentiles* (*SCG*) III, 61: "That by the sight of God one is made partaker of life everlasting,"; 62: "That they who see God will see him forever,"; and 63: "How in that final happiness every desire of man is fulfilled." See also

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The reasoning behind it is this. In the statements, "God wills this," or, "God loves Juan," a scholastic thesis will tell you that, if you say, "God loves Juan," some change has to occur in reality that verifies it, that makes that statement true. God, states another thesis in scholastic theology, is unchanging—there can be no change in the reality of God. Therefore there has to be some change in created reality, some contingent modification of created reality, which would make that statement true. The scholastic theologians will say that the presence of the reality called grace in Juan is that reality which makes the statement that "God loves Juan" true. Otherwise, the statement would have no ontological validation. The *potentia obedientialis*,[5] the innate desire of man for perfect happiness, is that which tells us that God is calling this man to perfect happiness. You have to have a desire in man, a desire that can be experienced, that can be felt. This desire verifies that God is calling man to himself. It is the desire, it is the aspiration which is the "proof" that the call of God is genuine, is true.[6]

For those of us in the religious life the call to our vocation offers a fine example too. How do we know that God is calling us to the religious life, or to the priesthood? Basically, by the desire: you have the qualifications—fitness of health, fitness of mental ability, and all the rest are conditioned primarily by the basic desire. You know that God is speaking to you in your desire. The desire is the created reality that verifies the statement, "God is calling me to the priesthood or the religious life."

St. Thomas Aquinas[7] asks somewhere in his treatise on grace: "How do we know the presence of God in any desire or in any plan that we make in our lives?" He says: "In any given moment you cannot say, 'God's grace is here. It's here. God is really calling me.'" He points out nevertheless that "there is a *pattern* of desires that manifests itself

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SCG III, 37: "That the final happiness of man consists in the contemplation of God." See also, for example, *SCG* III, 18, esp. 4: "How God is the end of all things,"; also relevant here is *SCG* III, 53, esp. 3: "That a created intelligence needs some influx of divine light to see God in his essence."

[7] *SCG* III, 155: "Of graces given gratuitously."

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through years of our lives, and this *pattern* of desires manifests to us the will of God."

Short of direct revelation, the only way that God speaks to us is through our desires and aspirations. Therefore, the theologian says, if there are great widespread "positive" desires going through mankind, this is (interpretatively) the voice of God, because this is the only other way outside of direct public or private revelation that God can manifest his mind and his will to us. By searching out the great desires of men, therefore, we find out the movement of God's plan.

The Church does not decide for itself, "independently" of God, what it must do at any given moment of history. Its task rather is to find out what God is doing in the world, and to lend all its mind and all its will and all its effort to second the movement of God's doing. One privileged way the Church can find out what its task is then in this given moment of history is to listen attentively to the aspirations of men. Within the voice of men expressing their aspirations the Church can discern the voice of God. If the Church refuses to make the effort at keeping its ear close to the hearts of men, then it is failing in its essential duty.

The document on "Justice in the World," promulgated by the new Roman Synod in 1971, states: "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel." Constitutive, that is, of the Church's mission "for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation." Promoting justice is a constitutive element of preaching the Gospel. Interpreting this very text for the Philippine Bishops, Bishop Labayen declared that if the Church fails to listen to the yearnings of man for justice in these days, it fails in its essential mission of teaching the gospel. This is the direction God is leading mankind today.

This then is the *anthropological* dimension of the theology of the signs of the times: an understanding of the patterns of human history, an understanding of the centrality of man in this developing pattern of human history, and then an understanding that through the aspirations

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of man we come into living contact with the plan of God. When God wants to push mankind forward to its next stage, to a new stage of growth and evolution, he makes these desires general.

The theology of the signs of the times possesses a dimension too of the presence of the Holy Spirit, the *pneuma*—Spirit. The Church, in other words, accepts that the Holy Spirit is speaking here on earth not only within itself, the Church, but also from the "world." The Holy Spirit is at work in the world, because ultimately all secular history is a sacred history too. All of secular history is moving according to the plan of God. The Holy Spirit is, therefore, also speaking through secular history. What the theologians have stated is affirmed in *Gaudium et Spes*. In paragraph 26, it is said that in recent times there has been a great spreading of the advocacy of all human rights, and, the Council says, *Spiritus Dei huic evolutioni adest*—the Holy Spirit is present within this development. More and more throughout the world men are becoming aware of, and are fighting for, their rights. Within that movement, the Spirit is discerned as present. The Holy Spirit is moving through this great and widespread secular desire.

It has been asked, in light of this discernment of the Spirit in the world, is the Holy Spirit present too in such an ideological system as Marxism today? It is, after all, a powerful movement agitating the underdeveloped world. John XXIII, in *Mater et Magistra*, and Paul VI, quoting Pope John, in *Octogesima Adveniens*, state that secular movements, no matter how false some of their philosophical presuppositions, may be articulating some of the most legitimate desires of men, and may, indeed, be voicing some of the important values that come from the gospel. Some truths and values which have originated with the Gospel may break away from their moorings and "float free" in currents of contemporary thought and movements, and may, through these, touch men. Speaking somewhere about how salvation may extend to our brothers and sisters in separated Christian Churches, Pius IX's words may have some bearing on our present topic. He explained, in a text written more than a hundred years ago: like a piece of gold-bearing rock cut away from a mountain which itself bears gold, a separated Christian Church that breaks away from the Mother Church and takes

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with her the Scriptures and at least some of the Sacraments takes away with her some true means of salvation, and these are what can bring grace and salvation to her adherents.

In paragraph 30 of his celebrated letter to Cardinal Maurice Roy, *Octogesima Adveniens*, Paul VI recalls distinctions made by John XXIII in *Pacem in Terris* about philosophical teachings. Once drawn up and defined, Pope John writes, philosophies remain always the same. Movements, however, tied up as they are with historical situations, tend to develop constantly. They are deeply influenced by their specific contexts and often undergo remarkable sea-change as they are passed on from place and time to place and time. "Besides," John XXIII continues, "who can deny that these movements, in so far as they conform to the dictates of right reason and interpret indeed the lawful aspirations of the human person, contain elements that are positive and deserving of approval?"

It is clear, therefore, that the Holy Spirit can be present within secular movements, even within those which, at first blush, would seem to be wholly antagonistic to the Gospel. Gospel principles and values, whatever the media through which they eventually reach us, derive still from God. It follows that dialogue with the world is not just useful for the Church; it is necessary, because, through the world too, the Holy Spirit does speak to us.

We have now seen two dimensions of the theology of the signs of the times: the *anthropological*, in the aspirations of men which can be indicators of the purpose of history, and the *pneumatological*, in our discernment of the Holy Spirit as speaking to us through the world. There is a third: the *christological*, expressed most succinctly and, perhaps, most pithily, by St. John in the prologue to his gospel: all things were made by him and without him was made nothing that was made.

Father Andre Feuillet,[8] the Sulpician exegete in Paris, perhaps one of the preeminent living interpreters of St. Paul, says that in the

[8]Andre Feuillet, *Le Christ, Sagesse de Dieu d'apres les epitres pauliniennes* (Paris: Gabalda, 1966), especially 163–273. Also by Andre Feuillet: *Études johanniques* (Paris-Bruges: 1962).

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Wisdom texts of the Johannine gospel and the Pauline letters, John and Paul, when speaking of wisdom as present in the world, do not refer to the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity as envisaged *before* the Incarnation. They refer rather to the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity portrayed as *already* incarnate. Christ is at the beginning of creation. All creation, indeed, was founded in him. St. Paul's letter to the Colossians (1:15–20) expresses it well: there God the Father is pictured as creating the world, keeping before him as his model the incarnate Word. The Son incarnate. God fashions the world according to what he sees. This is the vision of Colossians 1:1–20. What is going on in the world, therefore, has ultimately a Christic shape and a Christic pattern. St. Paul here says that the whole world fits together now in this moment of history; the whole creation stands together in Christ. It is summed up in him. Its movement is a movement in Christ and it moves toward a purpose which is Christ. It has fulfillment of its whole being in Christ.

Father Claude Tresmontant,[9] in his book on the theology of St. Paul, equivalently tells us that we did not need Teilhard de Chardin to remind us of all this. It was St. Paul who first told us clearly of this Christic finalization of all the universe. It could not be clearer in Paul, in the letter to the Romans or in Colossians. The whole purpose of created reality is to be fulfilled in Christ. The world, as it exists today, already has a Christic pattern, and has present within it its ultimate thrust toward Christ. God cannot be defeated. The ultimate purpose for which the universe was created, which is hidden as a seed in the heart of the world, will be fulfilled. Unerringly, no matter what man tries to do to frustrate it. All of human history, all of secular history is leading toward Christ.

Is, therefore, everything that man desires to be fulfilled in Christ's design? Is, therefore, the clamor of men and secular movements, is all this the voice of God? Is everything that is taking place in this world designed in the pattern of Christ?

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[9]Cf. Claude Tresmontant, *St. Paul and the Mystery of Christ* (New York: Harper Bros., 1957). See also Claude Tresmontant, *Introducción al Pensamiento de Teilhard de Chardin* (Madrid: Taurus Ediciones, 1958).

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Simply, *No!* And in our answer lies the reason—one major reason —for the Church. For it the Church exists in the world. Three grand truths articulate it best.

First, in the Incarnation God has once said his "Yes" to the world and to man. Karl Rahner expressed it well in his beautiful Christmas meditation:[10] the Child in our arms on Christmas Day is God's "Yes," his final and definite and irrevocable "Yes" to the world and all humanity. God has, in Christ, re-accepted the whole reality of the world, the whole reality of history, the whole reality of man. He has assumed it all in himself. St. Paul, in Second Corinthians 1:19–20, writes that Jesus is the "Yes" of God to all the promises made by the Father. Jesus is the irrevocable "Yes" that the Father speaks, his response of salvation. This is the first truth. We accept that the whole movement of this history has already been assumed in Christ.

Second, as Christian doctrine affirms, it is part of being a Christian that one accepts the reality of sin in the world. All attempts to deny the reality of sin are simply and totally wide off the mark. Sin, ultimately, is selfishness and egoism; it frustrates God's plan for the world. Sin is a reality out there.

Third, where sin did once abound, grace now abounds much more. Only the Christian believes this. Although sin is tremendously visible in the world—an almost self-evident fact, as Cardinal Newman said not long ago—the unfaltering affirmation of the Christian is not the reality of sin as present through all mankind but the reality of Christ as having conquered sin. The presence of grace in the world is stronger than the presence of sin. Grace is infinitely more powerful than sin, and we, as Christians, believe this.

To bear witness to these three truths—because of these indeed—the Church has to be present in the world. Some theologians have

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[10]See Karl Rahner, "The Birth of the Lord," in *The Content of Faith: The Best of Karl Rahner's Theological Writings,* eds. Karl Lehmann, Albert Raffelt & Harvey D. Egan (New York: Crossroads, 1999), 286–289. The selection reproduced by Lehmann, et al., in their volume is from Karl Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, trans. Kenneth Baker, S.J. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965), 146–150.

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lately defined the Church as a hermeneutical community, a community that discerns. The new synodal text on "Justice in the World" says it explicitly. The purpose of the Church is to discern first what is going on in the world, where God is doing his work, so that it can say its "Yes" continually to that. We have said that, in the first movement in the Incarnation, God said his "Yes" once and for all in the Word. The Church is present so that it can say, "This is where God is saying his 'Yes' to the world." The Church is, moreover, needed in the world so that it can say its "No" to where God is saying "No" to the world. Wherever human selfishness and egoism are trying to thwart the purposes of God, the Church has the duty to say "No"—"No" in the name of God and "No" in the name of the Gospel. And, finally, wherever it sees grace overcoming sin, the Church is present to put all its forces, all of its energy, its whole direction, toward advancing the purposes of grace in the world. This is why the Church exists.

The Church exists as a discerning community, therefore, as a prophetic community, and as a saving community. *Discerning*, so that it may say its "Yes," its echo to where God is saying "Yes." *Prophetic*, so that it may say "No" as an echo to where God is saying "No." *Saving*, so that it may marshal all its purposes, all its efforts, all its initiative, to push forward the victory that grace—God's work—is already winning in the world.

By Way of Final Summary

The theology of the signs of the times is not a theology for the man at the desk. It is a theology that is meant to lead directly to action. It is a reflection that begins not from above but from what is going on "below." Its first task is to listen to the aspirations of men, to listen to what men are longing for, so that it may hear where God is calling it. It is a theology that derives from reality, from what is going on in the world, and it has to bring its truth into emergence in its own consciousness, in the consciousness of the Church. *Secondly*, it is a theology that discerns: a theology that is constantly seeking where to say the Church's "yes," where to say "No," where to offer its

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service. Once having answered "Yes" or "No," it is a theology that drives immediately into action. It demands action because grace is at work and the task of the Church is to be at work with grace, to press forward with it and beneath it and exercise itself totally in the realm that grace creates.

The theology of the signs of the times is eminently a theology for men of action, for the layman above all whose task is to actualize Christian presence in the world. It is a theology that must constantly be operative and at work. It cannot accept the findings of fifty years ago simply as applicable today. It must renew its hermeneutic in prayer every day, in contemplation, in dialogue, so that it can steadfastly move forward there where God himself is moving among men.

Is there any other way of teaching and doing theology today? It is difficult to say if there is. All the work of traditional theology is a preliminary to this. Everything else we have heard about revelation from the Scriptures, about tradition from Christian history, is only made to prepare us to *do our thing* in the world. For the Christian believes that, ultimately, what his *thing* is is his obedience to God's *thing*. What is God doing in the world? I must obey what God is doing, and *that* I must try to do myself.

Where is God doing his *thing*? In the Church? In the world? Our answer, normally, would be, in the Church. The theology of the signs of the times would say, No. God is doing his *thing* first of all in the world. The task of the Church is thus to enter into the world to find out where God is doing his *thing*, so that it too may do its *thing* in obedience to the Lord.

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