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ACTION AND CONTEMPLATION*

2007 Graduation Remarks

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Of all academic rituals, graduation singularly marks a stop, a caesura, in the rhythm of school activities. Classes are finished, course requirements [are] fulfilled, and even the library [is] closed. At this moment of relative stillness, it may be appropriate, in accordance with the traditional custom of *pabaon* [parting gift], to offer parting remarks, some *pandesal* [salted bread] to tide us over as we, especially the graduates, once again step into the river of time.

These remarks relate to the process LST is currently undertaking, that of strategic planning, or, put in language more familiar to us, of discerning how best to incarnate in the coming years our vision-mission as an ecclesiastical faculty of theology. They will not rehearse minute details or complete outcomes of the process, as graduation is not the proper occasion for these. What they address is the interior meaning of this institutional process, interior to LST and interior to each of its stakeholders—here represented by the presence of our students, faculty, administration, staff, religious superiors, [and] local church leaders present in the person of Archbishop Angel Lagdameo, D.D., current president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP).

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At the outset—and here I must make a confession—I initiated this process simply as a necessary technical tool borrowed from the field of organizational development and meant to look at LST's programs and to shepherd its future directions. It seemed not much different from tightening nuts and bolts in a machine or setting up a curative and preventive program for health. This process, however, took a life of its own. As each cluster—first the Administrative Council, then religious superiors, faculty, students, and finally the staff—discussed the proposed directives for LST, the process of strategic planning became one of historical mediation, that is, how a school of theology becomes itself in a given time and space. Thus emerged underlying issues of what we and theology are all about.

Voices from all groups echoed one another:

"We may need to expand our theological reflections to address social and cultural issues";

"Is it necessary to have this as a directive if it is already a presumed part of our mission as a school of theology?";

"Provide a more experiential formation for the students, evoking passion for mission alongside academic formation, knowledge complemented by skills."

The frequency and intensity of such a call for deeper integration between theology and action were not surprising, given our keen awareness of the global suffering brought about by discrimination and injustice, poverty and violence, as well as the emerging critical, political, and liberation theologies familiar to all of us.

Let us remember, though, that this link between theology and action is not new and has always been characteristic of theological tradition through the ages. Expressed in different vocabularies, it has been constitutive of the theological enterprise, and has been recognized by the Church as such.

Gathered in its 7th Plenary Assembly, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) describes the work of theology as

> a service of life. It has to reflect systematically on themes that are important to the common journey of life with other peoples of Asia, and to the work of the Asian Episcopal conferences …. It is in this way that theology becomes a dynamic process giving meaning to and facilitating the Asian journey to life.[1]

What our own bishops say in their recently updated program for priestly formation about the aims of intellectual formation applies generally to theological education:

> forming people with a deep understanding of the mysteries of faith, a capacity for ongoing theological reflection, and pastoral skills and competence … in a world marked by many questions and concerns due to massive suffering and injustice, on the one hand, and new developments in the political, economic, social and cultural, technological, and religious life of the Philippines and Asia, on the other hand.[2]

Their words and our desire to deepen further this integral link between theology and action will continue to mark LST's strategic directions. Its faculty and leadership are committed to pursue it through active and dynamic collaboration with our students and religious superiors. I am convinced that our students—seminarians, religious, and lay—have extensive and deep pastoral experience which they need to bring to their classroom and which their professors need to address theologically.

There is, however, another correlative to theology that appeared to be absent in all cluster discussions. No one said, "My theological studies have helped my prayer-life," or "Theology must lead to the knowledge of God." Perhaps we all presumed this to be the case, but at this time, when we are faced with fundamental issues about who and what we are, it is incumbent upon us to recognize the relation between theology and contemplation. Like the link with action, this

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[1]Franz-Josef Eilers, ed., *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1992 to 1996*, Vol. 2 (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997), 226.

[2]*The Updated Philippine Program of Priestly Formation* (Manila: Episcopal Commission on Seminaries, 2006).

too has always been present throughout the theological tradition and therefore remains an integral part of theological work.

One could point to the medieval master, Thomas Aquinas, who begins his treatise by maintaining "that God is the subject of theology" and whose entire *Summa theologiae* aimed "to help us learn to follow Christ by teaching us the truth that God has revealed in Christ."[3] Or we could turn to the Sri Lankan Jesuit Aloysius Pieris, who fittingly entitles one of his major works "Love Meets Wisdom" and for whom theology must begin with the monasticisms of both West and East, Christian and Buddhist.[4]

In either case, the theological enterprise is seen to be profoundly related to the contemplative. It must not only begin and end in prayer the way our classes do, but also be undertaken from the stance of reverent listening (*hoeren*) that leads to obedience and belonging (*Zugehoerigkeit*) to the Eternal Word.

Our theological activity, then, must not only shepherd us to the field but also to the sacred space where we meet God. This is what LST has been committed to and will continue to be.

My dear companions and co-pilgrims, with these remarks, let us return to our common journey to life where we meet God in contemplation and service. And remember, you can always visit LST and there find an institution and a community ever striving through its work in theology to be hearers of the Word and servants of God's people.

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[3]Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, *Holy Teaching: Introducing the Summa Theologiae of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2005), 133.

[4]Aloysius Pieris, *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988).