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**The Theologian at Work:
Philippines 1970-80's:
A Suggestion**

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The Theologian at Work. Philippines 1970-80's: A Suggestion

MANALO RADEL

"MAKE an attempt to tell your people the meaning of their life-experience." This is the mandate of the times to the native theologian. More precisely: "Open the book which is the life-experience of your people and your life-experience with them. Read it. Read it interpretatively."

1. Theological Activity

The type of theological activity demanded by our time and place is this: to reflect on the life-experience of our people and to interpret it.

A man who wishes to do theology casts his gaze around him. What does he see? He might see that common folk accept sickness, misfortune, a cruel death in the family in submissive faith ("Sinusubukan lamang tayo ng Panginoon." "Iyan ang itinalaga ng Panginoon.") Or: — that young people, specially from well-to-do families, experience a manifold alienation, from the values and life-style of their parents, from the institutions of their society. Or: — that an average religious person has learned to put relative stress on ritual rather than on effective concern for people. Or: — that preachers speak of love but fail to locate the critical area where that love is to be exercised. Or: — that dissent is overtly or subtly suppressed on the streets, in the Church, in educational institutions. Or: — that

free enterprise-and-liberal capitalism, which puts more value on capital than on human work, is the economic and quasi-religious credo of our business life. Or: — that the common people are living basically in an oppressive order, but are too weighed down by lack of knowledge, by tenets and attitudes that derive from religion and culture, and by the manifold hold on them of people who are far more privileged than they.

These are some disparate “chunks” of contemporary life. And it is people, events and facts such as these that one reflects on and interprets. One sees, for example, how (as a number of economists point out) large foreign-owned corporations siphon out the wealth of a poverty-stricken country through a system of trade, of investments, of ambivalent aid, of treaties; how a local oligarchy enjoys in luxury the biggest share of the fruits of the country’s economic activity while the vast majority shoulder the burden of costs in terms of hard work, inadequate wages dictated by free enterprise, regressive taxation; how the combined hegemony of foreign powers and the local oligarchy together, in fact if not always in intention, reduce the ordinary people to a life that is marked by poverty and powerlessness. These ordinary people are therefore reduced to a life which is, without rhetoric or exaggeration, oppressive and exploited. The theologian reflects on these realities, and in interpreting them, he finds in these realities the most intense human and religious contradictions.¹ He has thus made an interpretative reading of life, which is what theological activity is.

The heart of theological activity consists in the act of understanding *and* interpreting, or, in reading reality *and* interpreting it, or, in seeing-and-listening *and* discovering the meaning of events.

II. Theological Loci

If theological activity consists in seeing, the question arises: “Where does a theologian look in order to see?” *What is the area which he must understand and interpret?* Or “What is the

¹ See essay on “The Most Serious Problem of the 1970’s.” (in preparation)

material for his reflection and interpretation?" What is the *locus theologicus* for his theological activity?

There are two theological *loci* (which really are reducible to one). One is, of course, the *life-experience* itself of a people either in its total breadth or a segment of it. The other *locus* he will look at is: our *heritage of Judaeo-Christian revelation* with its own history, spirit and world-view. (Here, in this second *locus* he must pay particular attention to the *origins* and the *original spirit* of Judaeo-Christianity and he must have a critical understanding of its evolution through history. Not every theological development is equally faithful to the original inspiration of Judaeo-Christianity nor particularly helpful in interpreting contemporary reality.)

It is in the act or process of reading these two *loci together* that one does an interpretative reading of contemporary reality, i.e., one engages in theological activity. It is, for example, in the insight that neo-colonialism and modern feudalism (data of life—experience as *locus theologicus*) are a contradiction to the God of Exodus and to the Son of Man of the Gospels² (a datum of Judaeo-Christianity as a *locus theologicus*) that theological activity has taken place.

1. LIFE EXPERIENCE AS A LOCUS THEOLOGICUS. That life-experience is a *locus theologicus* is clear from the nature of the theological activity. It is also clear from the viewpoint that actual events and life are the stage in which God's revelation continues to take place. Thus, life, as it is lived and experienced by people, is invited to tell its tale. It is given leave to pose its different problems and most specially to pose its most crucial and painful Problem.³ In this conception, theology is not a storehouse of canned problems with their eternal solutions designed to service any particular reality; rather it asks that particular reality to yield its own Problem for reflection and interpretation.

² See essay on "Liberation." (in preparation)

³ "What is the most serious problem for the Philippines in the 1970's?" is a question the theologian will have to confront today.

a. *Self*. In focusing his eyes on life experience as a *locus theologicus*, the theologian will first look into his own *self*. His self is the privileged book from which he should seek to read the life-experience of his people. His own heart, the indispensable prism through which he sees reality, must, for this reason, be authentic. The theologian must be authentic, or, if he feels that he is not sufficiently authentic, he must strive towards authenticity through integration, exposure and experience with his fellow men. He should, when he looks into himself, discover a reflection of the joys, longings, ambivalences, growing pains, sufferings of his people.

b. *Other People*. Besides looking into himself, he must also look at the experience of *others*. In the lives of others he will find the faces of long-suffering, resignation, trust, simple faith. Of drive for profit and power. Of luxury in a sea of poverty. Of over-indulgence in the face of under-nourishment. Of oppression, crisis of credibility, corruption, suppression of truth. Of growth in consciousness and anger, passion for the masses and true concern.

c. *Present, Past and Future*. When the theologian consults life-experience as a *locus theologicus* he looks not only at its present history but also at its historical roots in the past and its extrapolated extension to the future.

d. *Local Color*. It is this *locus theologicus* which will give the resultant theology its local figment and color. The resultant theology is the theology of a people (or a group of peoples, if and in so far as they share the same history together). The resultant theology will come forth from our own life-experience and, in this sense, it will be the theology of a people (or group of peoples, e.g., the Third World⁴). It is an indigenous theology.⁵

⁴ The Third World refers to countries characterized by underdevelopment and poverty. Most of them were former colonies in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

⁵ Now, as things look, our contemporary life-experience is that of a society that knowingly or unknowingly seeks to be freed tomorrow from a manifold oppression, by means of a revolutionary change today. Contemporary indigenous theology will correspondingly have to be a theology from and for a life-situation of revolutionary change.

2. JUDAEO-CHRISTIANITY AS LOCUS THEOLOGICUS. It is, on the other hand, the other *locus*, i.e. Judaeo-Christian revelation, which will give this theology its Christian coloring. This *locus* is the sum-total of Judaeo-Christian heritage in the form of the *living history of God and people* from the patriarchs, through Jesus Christ, down to our own age, together with a prospective view of the future. In dipping into this source or *locus*, the theologian has for his special task to discern the physiognomy of God's dealings with men through his acts in history in the past. On the strength of what the theologian knows of God and His dealings in the past, and on the strength of God's promises given in the past, he must also discern God's actions in the present and his prospective actions in the future.

3. ONE, NOT TWO. These then are the two *loci*. The theologian may direct his gaze at these two *loci analytically*, separately, i.e., he may look at one, and then the other, and in a third step, read one in the light of the other. But this would not be the ideal. *Neither* is the ideal, however, to look at these two *loci synthetically* (if by synthetically is meant: the two *loci* are combined but remain basically two). Rather it is to see but *one* theological *locus* (which only upon analysis breaks up into two components). The theologian, that is, already sees or should see reality as bathed in God, be it His judgment or His grace. Thus, it is *not* that *first* he sees a situation of injustice and *then* sees that this situation is under the judgment of God. Rather he already sees the situation of injustice *as* under the judgment of God.

III. The Propaedeutic for Theological Activity

If theological activity consists in the interpretative reading of life or reality, are there other activities which are indispensable as *preparatory activities* to equip the theologian for his task? Yes. One indispensable preparatory activity is *STUDY*, i.e., the serious, scientific and scholarly study of the accumulated lore of *sacred sciences*, and, the study, or at least the serious understanding, of the *social sciences*. The other indispensable preparatory activity is *LIVED EXPERIENCE AMONG THE PEOPLE*.

1. STUDY. An understanding of Judaeo-Christian revelation, one of the two *loci theologici*, can be had mainly through serious, scholarly and scientific study of *sacred sciences* (Scripture, systematization and development of the Christian credo, history of the Christian People, etc.) The lineaments of God's history with men from the beginning in the past to the utopia in the future cannot be understood apart from scholarly study, involving historico-critical methods.

Serious study is also necessary for the understanding of the other theological *locus* (the life experience of a people). *Social studies* and *social sciences* are a necessary key to the understanding of the life-experience of a people. What is called for is at least sufficient and serious understanding of the dynamics, contents and findings of the social sciences, specially socio-anthropology, economics and history (specially Philippine history). Particularly important for our day is a serious historical analysis of the political economy of our country. Does this mean that a theologian must also be a social scientist and economist and secular historian? Ideally perhaps. But in any case, this need not be an absolute imperative. Someone versed in the sacred sciences can and should team up with others trained in the social sciences, and engage together with them in that interpretative reading which is theological activity. People trained in the sacred sciences on the one hand, and people trained in the social sciences on the other, would pool together their resources and *work together* as a *group* or as a *team*.

2. LIVED EXPERIENCE. Besides formal study, the theologian will want to experience actual life with the people. He will want to spend some of his time to be with and to live with the people, if he is not already one of them. The would-be theologian goes to the people to *learn*, to *allow* himself to be *taught*, *not* to teach.

If indeed theological activity is reflecting on a life-experience and interpreting it, the theologian will want close proximity to his sources, participation and immersion in them. It is when the theologian is firmly situated within a life-experience

that he begins to know (in the biblical sense of 'experiential and comprehensive grasp') that life experience. 'Participant observation' is an activity that a sociologist engages in; the theologian must engage in 'observant participation'. The theologian must 'know' how a family grows hungry, how communities of settlers are ejected from their land, how the young clench their fist in angry protest. Thus *actual lived experience among men is an integral part of theological research.*

If we may say that, in the context of our present discussion, the scientific and scholarly study of the social sciences is equivalent to *theory*, and, lived experience is roughly equivalent to *praxis*, then we have the following relationship. *Praxis complements theory. And praxis corrects theory.* (Conversely theory complements and corrects praxis.)

This lived experience is a necessity. It is not a mystique. It is all the more necessary for the Filipino theologian today, because, more likely than not, he is by education and background culturally alienated from the biggest segment of our society. The case may be different with a European or an American theologian who more likely enjoys cultural and socio-economic homogeneity with his own people; he is one of them, and their problems are his.

Through this lived experience, the theologian gives himself a chance to understand a macro-problem (e.g., semi-feudalism) in its micro-manifestation (in a concrete relationship of a landlord and a tenant). In so understanding the macro-problem in its micro-manifestation, he perhaps begins to understand the macro-problem for the first time.

In this process of learning from actual life, the theologian might discover things his philosophy-and-theology has perhaps heretofore never dreamed of. Thus "tao" "karangalan" "kakan-yahan" and even "Dios or Bathala" might be notions so minted in the native soul that "person or personhood", "honor or dignity" "subjectivity or interiority" and even "God" remain but inadequate transliterations into the English language. And how different we may suppose the *ennui* or *Angst* of the Continentals

to be from the "boredom" or "fear" of the Asian peasant or even the Asian intellectual!

A theologian must then go to the school of experience. It is understood in all this that the theologian does not look upon the life-situation of a people as a laboratory-situation where people are vivisected and studied. Rather, he seeks, in the measure his strength will permit, to be in solidarity with them and to participate in what the people are and have (or better, do not have) and hope.

The theologian is a student of revelation, i.e., he endeavors to study or see where and how God's revelation is taking place and will take place. And where does contemporary revelation take place but in the actions, passions and relationships of concrete contemporary people?

Theology partakes of the nature of a science and of poetry. As science, it uses historico-critical methods, even statistics, rational discourse, in short, it uses scientific and scholarly tools. As poetry, it feeds on life and life-experience itself.

Our native theology has not yet been born. It is perhaps in its initial stages of conception. If theology is interpretation of experience and life, we have to make sure that at the very beginning (which is *now*) of our theological reflection we go to the people and we learn from life and experience. It is thus that we *genuinely* interpret their history, and we hope, our history with them. This we must do under pain of bringing to light a theology that is still-born or foreign or hybrid.

IV. Comparison with Other Instances of Theological Activity

We may now briefly compare this type of theological activity with other instances of doing theology.

1. **TRADITIONAL.** The more traditional type of theological activity may be said to use the following as its main *loci*: (1) *Sacred Scripture*; but at times, in a scholasticized form, with perhaps insufficient regard for historico-critical methods (2) *Tradition* as found principally (a) in the teachings of the *Church Fathers* and (b) *specially* in the official teachings of the *Magis-*

terium (3) *Reason* or *Philosophy*⁶ (4) *perhaps* too, more recently, the Modern Life-experience of *Western Man*.

The type of theological activity proposed here takes Scripture and Tradition (=Judaeo-Christianity) as a *locus*, the proper understanding of which involves the use of historico-critical methods.⁷ Moreover, it puts equal stress on the life-experience of people; in our case, it is the life-experience of an underdeveloped Asian people. The theologian's access to this life-experience is mediated to him through *lived experience* among his own underdeveloped Asian people. It is also mediated to him through the *social sciences*, particularly, now in the 1970-80's, economics, history and socio-anthropology.⁸

2. LATIN AMERICAN THEOLOGY. Latin American (and African) problems are similar to ours. A theology, arising from these problems, is fast developing in Latin America. Though there is a great deal we can learn from Latin American theology, both regarding the method of reflection and the theological insights themselves, still we must exercise caution. One must be aware that similar as their problems are to ours, they are *not the same* as ours. We have to do our own theological work.

Thus, we should indeed read and reflect on Latin American theology and let it enrich our own, particularly by finding analogies and parallels. Secondly, we should be in a process of exchange with the Latin American theologians. Thirdly, we should work with them, particularly on topics of universal concern. But, in so far as our own situation poses problems of its

⁶ The Philosophy of Man has figured quite prominently, in more recent times, in both moral and dogmatic theology.

⁷ It should be noted that also at the heart of an integrated theological activity is PRAYER.

⁸ It might be noted here that this essay does not deal as such with the question of *what* to teach in a school of theology (e.g., the question of curriculum). Nor does it deal with the question of *how* to teach or study theological disciplines (i.e., the question of the activity of professors who teach and students who learn). Rather it makes a suggestion on *how to reflect theologically* in the Philippines in the 1970-80's. It deals therefore with the *theological activity* of the professional theologian. It proposes a *method for theological reflection*.

own, the starting point, the activity, the resources and the theology should be our own.

3. **NOTHING NEW.** The type of theological activity proposed here is nothing new. It is the most natural way to do theology, particularly in the Christian tradition. The Deuteronomist, together with the Yahwist, Priestly and Elohist writers were basically interpreters of reality, i.e., of God's dealings with the Israelites. So were each of the New Testament writers, not only Paul or John but also the Synoptics, even Mark. They were interpreting human history and human life in relation to Jesus the Christ and vice versa. Patristic theology was also in part interpretative and experiential.

V. "Indigenizing Theology" or "Indigenous Theology"?

The question is sometimes asked: "How do we indigenize theology?" This is really a wrong question because it presents a false problem. Theology, at least ideally speaking, is indigenous from start to finish. It is indigenous in its starting point, namely, the theological *locus* of life-experience seen in the dimension provided by Christian faith; it is indigenous in its resultant theology at the end of the theological activity.⁹ It is presumed here that "indigenizing theology" does not mean *translating*, say, the *Summa* or Rahner's *Schriften* or Ott's systematics from Latin or German into Tagalog. It is not a translation from one language to another language. Neither does "indigenizing theology" mean "applying" Rahner, Schillebeeckx, Metz or any European personalist, structural or secular theology "to the local situation." The question is not: "How can we adapt theology to our needs?" Rather: "How can our needs create a theology which is our own?"

VI. Conclusion

A theologian plants himself in the midst of contemporary reality — its passions, silences, injustices, kindnesses, placards,

⁹ An example of this indigenous theology is the theology that developed in the hellenistic churches after the young Christian Church had moved out of its Palestinian milieu. This theology arose from the life-situation of the Church in the Graeco-Roman world.

advertisements, shouts, armalites, corruption, concern, liberation. This reality presents itself in a certain configuration which Christian eyes see (and which non-Christian eyes need not see). This means that the theologian sees reality already within a certain dimension or horizon supplied to him by his Christian faith. This reality which he contemplates may yield to analysis and may break up into two elements; one, an element contributed by experience itself; another, an element contributed by the Judaeo-Christian dimension. This reality is what he reads and interprets. To engage in this activity, the theologian must engage in indispensable preparatory activities: lived experience and study.

The theologian's reflection and interpretation is the contribution he owes to society.¹⁰

¹⁰ The theological activity described in this essay has been engaged in by people — in lectures, articles, seminars — when and in so far as they have offered an interpretation of Filipino life based on (1) a serious historical analysis of Philippine life-situation and (2) an informed and critical understanding of the message of Christianity.