

From the Editor

What do we talk about when we talk theology?

I raise the question in reaction to a recent conference, the ninth edition of “Leuven Encounters in Systematic Theology” held at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, where the main topic was the liturgy and mystery (<http://theo.kuleuven.be/en/lest>). There the claim was made, in various ways, for liturgical theology’s centrality: the liturgy is *theologia prima* (Aidan Kavanaugh’s phrase, by way of David Fagerberg’s conference presentation). It’s a provocative formulation, one that I (a fundamental and systematic theologian) resisted. But it did get me to dig more deeply and ask what the focal point of our theological reflection is or should be, and if we have been true to that focus. What indeed *do* we talk about when we talk “theology” and when we talk about theology?

Here’s my bet: over the past few decades, it has been more often about identity politics, political theory, ecclesial polity, or epistemology (e.g., the discussions of relativism and secularism) than about the heart of the theological task: faith, grounded in discipleship, that seeks understanding and holiness. I will confess my own complicity in this. It has been quite a while, for example, since Jesus’ parables of the reign of God were adduced as primary evidence for any theological argument (perhaps the result of the divergent results of the so-called Third Quest for the historical Jesus). What we have instead is commentary drowning out the primary sources. To pick just two examples, the rise of Neo-Augustinianism over the past two decades and the burgeoning interest in Thomas’ *Summa theologiae* (especially, it seems, the questions on natural law) are worthy developments—any retrieval and application of the depth and richness of the Christian theological tradition can only be a gain. But Christian theology has an odd canon (different from, say, philosophy): it is front-end loaded (Scripture), while the rest is truly commentary. When the commentary becomes the default discourse that obscures the point of it all—discipleship, living a Jesus-like life in one’s particular historical and cultural context—the drift into ideology is not that far in the future, and in some cases has already arrived.

This is not a condemnation of any of the fine and indeed necessary work that has been done at the intersection of theology, culture, politics, and ecclesial life over the past half-century. None of this work is *ersatz* theology or avoidance of the issue—it’s the real thing, faith seeking understanding.

However, recalling the old “hierarchy of truths” or Melchior Cano’s *loci theologici* reminds us that the practice of theology is a hub surrounded by concentric circles. Some issues are at the absolute center; others, though important, are on one of the secondary and dependent rings, no matter how crucial they appear at the moment. The hub is conversion to discipleship and the desire for *theôsis*; one of the best examples is Bartimaeus, whom Mark’s gospel proposes as a model of the true disciple: on receiving his sight and activating his faith, he follows Jesus “on the way” (Mark 10:52) that leads to Jerusalem and the cross, and eventually to resurrection. The sea-change that many have detected in Pope Francis’ exercise of the papacy has its roots in his emphasis on the praxis of discipleship and his Christocentrism. It’s time for a sea-change in theology, too.