

Are There Any Catholic Theologians?

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Almost thirty years ago (February 10, 1975, p. 33), *Time Magazine* published its report “The Hartford Heresies,” that is no less relevant for today’s pressing theological issues. A group of 18 Christian thinkers of nine denominations, after a weekend at the Hartford Seminary Foundation in Connecticut, joined in a dramatic warning that American theology had strayed dangerously far afield.

Their “Appeal for Theological Affirmation” condemned 13 pervasive ideas, all of which undermine “transcendence,” the essential truth that God and his kingdom have a real, autonomous existence apart from the thoughts and efforts of humankind.

Among the signers, who were able to agree on the protest with surprising alacrity, were Jesuit theologian Avery Dulles, Eastern Orthodox Seminary Dean Alexander Schmemmann, Lutheran theologians George Forell and George Lindbeck, Yale Chaplain William Sloan Coffin Jr., a Presbyterian, and Evangelical theologian Lewis Smedes of Fuller Seminary.

In 1,150 words, their statement took issue with some of the most popular liberal fashions of the past decade that have carried over into ours, including secular Christian, political eschatology and the human potential movement. The specific theses that the churchmen condemned as “false and debilitating”:

1. Modern thought is superior to all past forms of understanding reality, and is therefore normative for Christian faith and life.
2. Religious statements are totally independent of reasonable discourse.
3. Religious language refers to human experience and nothing else, God being humanity’s noblest creation.
4. Jesus can only be understood in terms of contemporary models of humanity.
5. All religions are equally valid; the choice among them is not a matter of conviction about truth but only of personal preference or life-style.
6. To realize one’s potential and to be true to oneself is the whole meaning of salvation.
7. Since what is human is good, evil can adequately be understood as failure to realize human potential.

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8. The sole purpose of worship is to promote individual self-realization and human community.
9. Institutions and historical traditions are oppressive and inimical to our being truly human; liberation from them is required for authentic existence and authentic religion.
10. The world must set the agenda for the Church. Social, political and economic programs to improve the quality of life are ultimately normative for the Church's mission in the world.
11. An emphasis on God's *transcendence* is at least a hindrance to, and perhaps incompatible with, Christian social concern and action.
12. The struggle for a better humanity will bring about the Kingdom of God.
13. The question of hope beyond death is irrelevant or at least marginal to the Christian understanding of human fulfillment.

After each of these assertions the statement added a qualifying paragraph explaining why the idea is wrong, even though it might sound beguiling and contain an element of truth. The statement nowhere mentions the people who have promulgated these false theses, but the discussions at Hartford included references to Harvey Cox (*The Secular City*), situation ethicist Joseph Fletcher and England's Bishop John Robinson (*Honest to God*). As for the pervasiveness of the thinking exemplified in the theses, Avery Dulles, S.J., now Cardinal, affirmed that the ideas were widespread in the Roman Catholic Church, particularly among popularizers of the late Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J., and liberation theologians who give the Bible a Marxist interpretation. A professor from Manhattan's Union Theological Seminary, an influential Protestant school, said that these theses summarized general belief there.

Rev. Richard Neuhaus, now editor of *First Things*, asserted that even the World Council of Churches had become "a gargantuan exercise in such cultural capitulation." Neuhaus and Peter Berger, Lutheran author and sociologist at Rutgers, were the originators of the Hartford protest. Exasperated by what they considered a church sell-out to such man-made ideologies as scientific rationalism and socialism, they wrote the original draft of the statement in 1974, mailed it to 50 churchmen for their reactions and summoned the Hartford meeting to prepare the final declaration.

Though the Hartford discussions brought forward many theological differences, conservatives and liberals alike agreed on the necessity of Christian social involvement. However, a paradox was noted. The declaration insisted that politically based theologies, which were created to foster social impact, had done just the opposite. Even political activist Coffin joined the group in condemning an idea on

which he had often preached, that “the world must set the agenda for the Church.” The view from Hartford was that Christianity will be too weak for sustained attack on social evils — or for anything else — unless it first seeks the transcendence, power and will of God. After all, the Hartford Eighteen declare, “We did not invent God; God invented us.”

Theological Malaise and its Effects

Richard Ostling’s article, “The Battle for Latin America’s Soul” (*Time Magazine*, Jan. 21, 1991, pp. 46–47) describes the religious shift that is steadily gaining momentum throughout traditionally Roman Catholic Latin America. Evangelicals, as Protestants of all types are called, had increased in 1991 from 15 million to at least 40 million since the late 1960s. Catholicism, says the Rev. Paulo Romeiro, Protestant director of an interdenominational research institute in Sao Paulo, is facing “a serious crisis.” As the Evangelical movement grows stronger by the day, the Catholic Church is getting weaker and weaker.”

Two U.S. books describe this dramatic trend. *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?* is the provocative title of a volume by Stanford graduate student David Stoll, who argues that Evangelism’s spiritual appeal “calls into question the claims made for its great rival,” the Marxist-tinged liberation theology that was the hope of the Catholic left. By all appearances, says Stoll, “born-again religion has the upper hand.” In *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America*, David Martin, formerly of the London School of Economics, asserts that the growth of conservative Protestantism in Latin America, Asia and Africa is as significant as the rise of revolutionary Islam.

During Pope John Paul’s 1990 tour of Mexico, designed in part to counter the inroads of Evangelicalism, the Pontiff directed clergy to abandon “timidity and diffidence” in combating their rivals.

The Vatican is especially concerned about Brazil, supposedly the world’s No. 1 Roman Catholic nation, with 126 million on church rolls in 1991. Barely a tenth of those registered Catholics are regular churchgoers. That means that, astonishingly, there are almost certainly more Brazilian Protestants in church on Sundays than Catholics. Protestants in 1991 boasted a minimum of 20 million churchgoers and were expanding twice as fast as the overall population.

While there is much talk about their political meddling and impact, most Evangelicals appear to succeed because they usually preach a purely spiritual message. Henrique Mafra Caldeir de Andrada, head of the Protestant program at Rio’s Institution of Religious Studies,

thinks Catholic advocates of the social gospel failed to realize that “these people are hungry for more than just food. The Evangelicals meet the people’s emotional and spiritual needs better.” Or, as Brazil’s top Baptist, the Rev. Nilson Fanini, puts the paradox, “The Catholic Church opted for the poor, but the poor opted for the Evangelicals.”

Papal Concern for Solid Doctrine in Dialogue

John Paul II, at the Audience of January 19, 2001, in the light of theological problems in dialogue with world religions, confirmed the Notification from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Jesus*, January 24, 2001, and ordered its publication.

1. On the Sole and Universal Salvific Mediation of Jesus Christ

1. It must be firmly believed that Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, crucified and risen, is the sole and universal mediator of salvation for all humanity.
2. It must be firmly believed that Jesus of Nazareth, Son of Mary and only Savior of the world, is the Son and Word of the Father. For the unity of the divine plan of salvation centered in Jesus Christ, it must also be held that the salvific action of the Word is accomplished in and through Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of the Father, as mediator of salvation for all humanity. It is therefore contrary to the Catholic faith not only to posit a separation between the Word and Jesus, or between the Word’s salvific activity and that of Jesus, but also to maintain that there is a salvific activity of the Word as such in his divinity, independent of the humanity of the Incarnate Word.

2. On the Unicity and Completeness of Revelation of Jesus Christ

3. It must be firmly believed that Jesus Christ is the mediator and fulfillment and the completeness of revelation. It is therefore contrary to the Catholic faith to maintain that revelation in Jesus Christ (or the revelation of Jesus Christ) is limited, incomplete or imperfect. Moreover, although full knowledge of divine revelation will be had only on the day of the Lord’s coming in glory, the historical revelation of Jesus Christ offers everything necessary for man’s salvation and has no need of completion by other religions.
4. It is consistent with Catholic doctrine to hold that the seeds of truth and goodness that exist in other religions are a certain participation in truths contained in the revelation of or in Jesus Christ. However, it is erroneous to hold that such elements of truth and goodness, or some of them, do not derive ultimately from the source-mediation of Jesus Christ.
5. The Church’s faith teaches that the Holy Spirit, working after the resurrection of Jesus Christ, is always the Spirit of Christ sent by the

Father, who works in a salvific way in Christians as well as non-Christians. It is therefore contrary to the Catholic faith to hold that the salvific action of the Holy Spirit extends beyond the one universal salvific economy of the Incarnate Word.

3. *On the Orientation of All Human Beings to the Church*

6. It must be firmly believed that the Church is sign and instrument of salvation for all people. It is contrary to the Catholic faith to consider the different religions of the world a ways of salvation complementary to the Church.

7. According to Catholic doctrine, the followers of other religions are oriented to the Church and are all called to become part of her.

4. *On the Value and Salvific function of the Religious Traditions*

8. In accordance with Catholic doctrine, it must be held that “whatever the Spirit brings about in human hearts and in the history of peoples, in cultures and religions, serves as a preparation for the Gospel (cf. Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 16).” It is therefore legitimate to maintain that the Holy Spirit accomplishes salvation in non-Christians also through those elements of truth and goodness present in the various religions; however to hold that these religions, considered as such, are ways of salvation, has no foundation in Catholic theology, also because they contain omissions, insufficiencies and errors regarding fundamental truths about God, man and the world.

Furthermore, the fact that elements of truth and goodness present in the various world religions may prepare peoples and cultures to receive the saving event of Jesus Christ does not imply that the sacred texts of these religions can be considered as complementary to the Old Testament, which is the immediate preparation for the Christ event.

A Call for a New Apologetics for a New Evangelization

Salvation has a specific content for Christians. It entails an interpersonal communion, made possible by Christ, between human persons and the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Human beings are called to nothing less than communion with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and with each other in them. The community of Christian faith affirms that the triune God could not bring about a more intimate union with created persons than that which as already been initiated in baptism and will be fulfilled for us in Christ. Ultimate communion involves nothing less than becoming part of the trinitarian family. The principle and agent of this communion is for us Christ. Just as Christ is Son by nature — a member of the divine family of the Trinity in virtue of his being the Son of the Father — so human

persons are called to be sons and daughters by adoption. Our fellowship with Christ and with each other in him brings us into the divine trinitarian family.

The Christian community of faith believes and teaches that the ultimate aim of life is a communion of life with the Father, through the Son, and in the Holy Spirit. This is a truth proclaimed by Christ and a destiny made possible for us by his passion, death, and resurrection. This is what Christians mean by salvation: the term embraces both the goal of ultimate communion and the empowerment to attain and enjoy it.

As a communion formed by preserving and sharing Christ's gifts, the church best fulfills her mission of apologetics and evangelization when she ministers with Our Lord's combination of respect for persons and for the truth that fulfills them. In other words the church is both Catholic and apostolic. As Catholic, she reaches out to everyone. But as apostolic, the church also reaches out with faith that comes to us from the apostles, without compromises that would contravene the dignity and vocation of beings made in the image of a self-giving God.

The liberal-conservative rift that undermines the Church's unity and mission can, at least in part, be explained by the failure to integrate the apostolic and the Catholic aspects of our ecclesial identity and the objective and subjective aspects of the human person. Political labels often prevent us from understanding the Church as she understands herself. Although labels do point to real and important problems, they can leave us divided and paralyzed unless we go beyond them to see the Church as a mystery of faith and love.

A new apologetics in a new evangelization will, following Christ's example, combine truth with charity. Apologists need both clear minds and open hearts. Since only the truth transforms and unites, much work needs to be done to understand and articulate the Magisterium's moral and doctrinal positions, with particular attention paid to cultivating an authentic understanding of conscience and religious freedom, as taught by Vatican II. Much of this work of telling the truth should take place in homilies, youth and adult catechetical programs, seminaries, diaconate formation programs, and Catholic schools and universities. The implementation of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* is a necessary first step toward a renewed understanding of how our faith supports and sustains in truth the institutions of Catholic higher education.

However, given our fallen human nature, the call to conversion at the heart of the Gospel will only be heard if it is made with love for the one who has not yet adequately accepted the faith. Since no Christian evangelizer preaches himself or herself, the call to conversion must be made with humility, and to all. And given our modern appreciation for the uniquely subjective dimension of any human act

and of human freedom, the call must presuppose the goodwill and respect the dignity of those in need of conversion.

Principles of Catholic Theology

Avery Dulles, in his article “Principles of Catholic Theology” (*Pro Ecclesia*, 7/1, 1999, 73–84), sets forth ten principles which he believes are indispensable for the unique service that Catholic theology can render to the church and to the world. Dulles contends that there is an intrinsic connection between the ‘Catholic’ mentality and the specific ecclesial affiliation. He presupposes that theology is *fides quaerens intellectum*, a disciplined reflection on faith. Taking its departure from the word of God, theology explores the content and the implications of divine revelation. This reflection is carried on, at least normally, from within the stance of faith (*fides qua creditur*), which in the case of a Catholic means personal adherence to a definite body of beliefs (*fides quae creditur*).

The tenets of faith are not isolated propositions that could be fed into a computer to derive logical conclusions. Rather, they are aspects of a synthetic vision consisting of elements that coalesce into an integrated whole that is perceived with the “eyes of faith.” Even in its positive phase, in which it establishes its data through biblical and historical research, Catholic theology operates by the light of faith, reading the sources from the perspective of the believing community. A Catholic believer seeking humbly and devoutly to attain some measure of understanding, fruitful through inevitably limited, of the faith of the Catholic Church.

Dulles affirms that theology, if it is to be Christian and Catholic, will be in quest of a plenitude that is already given but always in need of being more adequately assimilated. It will recognize that God, who contains in himself the fullness of truth and goodness, has communicated all perfection to his Son, the eternal Word in whom the Father says all that he has to say. In his incarnate life, death, and resurrection Jesus perfected the work of redemptive revelation in a definitive and unsurpassable way. The Church has received that saving truth with the mission of handing it on in its fullness to all generations.

Catholicity, therefore, in a Christian context, means the fullness of the given, which must be preserved, transmitted, and progressively appropriated and applied by the church and its members. Catholic theology, according to Dulles, does not generate its own object. It receives that object in faith. Cherishing what it has received, Catholic Christianity adheres to the fullness of the given, cleaves to God’s Yes in Christ, and rejects all that stands in opposition to him. Catholicity therefore implies both fullness and purity. Any version of

Christianity that is not Catholic is to that extent deficient. It lacks either the purity or the completeness that are connoted by the term “Catholic.”

Beginning with this concept of catholicity, Dulles lays down ten principles that safeguard the catholicity of theology.

1. **Esteem for the Natural.** In contrast with the dualism of the Manichaeans, Catholicism rejects any opposition between the gifts of creation and redemption. It esteems the order of creation as a reflection of the divine. The beauty of creation draws our minds and hearts to the glory of the Creator, whose eternal power and deity can be perceived in the things that are made (cf. Rom 1:20; Wis 13:3–5). Holy Scripture tells us that all creation is good, and indeed very good (Gen 1:31). Jesus Christ, the firstborn of all creation (Col 1:15), stands at the center of the universe. “In him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible. . . . All things were created through him and for him” (Col 1:16).

2. **Humanism.** The supreme masterpiece of the visible universe is the human person, fashioned in the image and likeness of God. This realization affords the basis for Christian humanism. Catholic Christianity affirms the dignity and rights of every human being. Catholic theology takes up this struggle with special attention to the unborn, the aged, the weak, and the marginalized.

3. **Respect for Reason.** On the ground that reason is a participation in the divine Logos, Catholic theologians will hold that faith is the friend of reason, not its enemy. The Catholic tradition rejects both a fideism that would spurn human reason and a rationalism that would contain religion within the limits of reason alone. No matter how much we know about the divine, there is always infinitely more to be known.

4. **Universalism.** Catholic theology recognizes that the triune God is the maker of heaven and earth, and of all things seen and unseen. It is alert to find evidences of grace in all religions and cultures. The truth of the gospel in its full Catholic form is intended for all humanity. Catholic ecumenism will be alert to recognize and profit from all the authentically Christian elements in other churches and traditions.

5. **Mediation.** Dulles believes that mediation is the Catholic principle par excellence. If the Protestant principle is to repudiate any confusion between the divine reality and the visible symbols that point to it, the Catholic principle of mediation is the imperative to acknowledge the divine wherever it is at work. The paramount instance of the self-mediation of the divine is the incarnation, the central truth of Christianity. Catholics believe that the unique mediatorship of Christ does not exclude the cooperation of holy persons in communicating the fruits of God’s redemptive action. The intercession of the saints is a participated mediation, deriving all its efficacy from Christ the One Mediator, showing forth the greatness of his gift. Catholic theology emphasizes the mediation of the church which has received through Christ the fullness of revelation and the fullness of the means of grace.

The mediation of the church is further specified by Dulles’ next three principles: the dogmatic, the sacramental, and the hierarchical.

All three are so closely intertwined that they may be regarded as inseparable from one another and from the mediation of the church itself.

6. **The Dogmatic Principle.** Christians must submit to the truth as something definite, formal, and independent of themselves. They are bound to receive, defend, and transmit the faith they have received. By the “dogmatic principle” is meant the obligatory character of revealed truth, its power to require our assent. Catholic theology must have the courage to assert a definite claim of truth. The mind is made for truth; God has revealed the truth, and Christians have no right to obfuscate or conceal it.

The very idea of a deposit of faith (e.g. 1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 1:13–14) seems scandalous in an age when freedom is interpreted as a matter of keeping one’s options open. Catholic theologians enjoy a doctrinal heritage, conscious that the Holy Spirit has been with the church in every age. Grateful for what has been handed down in the Catholic tradition, Catholic theologians are liberated from the incessant need to reopen questions that have been authoritatively settled in the past.

7. **The Sacramental Principle.** Sacramentality in the broadest sense views the whole of creation as a mirror in which the features of the Creator are reflected. The self-manifestation of the divine in historical persons and events has a quasi-sacramental transforming power. Christ himself may be called par excellence the “sacrament of God.” The sacraments of the church are the sacred actions in which Christ continues to make himself salvifically present through the Holy Spirit in a covenanted way. Theology is not Catholic unless it accepts the efficacy of the sacraments. They are not mere signs or celebrations of grace already received; they are also mediations of grace.

8. **The Hierarchical Principle.** For Catholics the ministry consists of a hierarchical priesthood in which the office of the apostles is perpetuated. The bishops possess the fullness of this ministry and exercise it in communion with the whole episcopate, which looks to the bishop of Rome as the center of its unity. The ministry cannot be understood as if it were purely human or autonomous power. It is a priestly office exercised in obedience to Christ, the great high priest. In the church’s ministry of teaching and sanctification, Christ himself is at work, and the ordained ministers are his instruments.

Like other Catholics, theologians accept a living authority that has the power from Christ to oversee their teaching. The bishops, with and under the pope, have the right and the responsibility to establish doctrine in the church. Dulles affirms that theology is not fully Catholic unless it accepts its own subordinate status and recognizes its accountability to the church and the hierarchical magisterium. By applying rigorous critical standards according to the norms of its own discipline, it seeks to understand the meaning and coherence of revelation as mediated through the church.

9. **The Principle of Consensus.** According to Catholic doctrine the Holy Spirit is present in the whole church and sustains the faith of all its members.

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To the extent that they are docile to the Spirit and are truly formed by the mind of the church, the faithful as a body possess a kind of instinct for discerning what is and is not in accord with the faith. The sense of the faithful, rightly understood, is not simply a matter of statistics. It cannot be ascertained by public opinion polls. Rather it depends on insights derived from a faith personally appropriated through affiliation with the believing community. There is no *sensus fidelium* that is not *sentire cum ecclesia*. To have doctrinal weight in the church, Dulles affirms that the sense of the faithful must agree with that of the pastors, who are themselves, in a distinctive way, members of the faithful. The saints, who live the gospel to the full, are pre-eminent bearers of, and witnesses to, the sense of the faithful.

10. **The Doxological Principle.** God is best known, according to the Catholic view, when he is praised and worshiped, because it is in prayer that our minds enter most consciously into communion with him. We know God less through concept we from of him than through our love and our yearning for a vision not attainable under the conditions of the present life. Thanks to the stirrings of God's Spirit within us, our minds are carried aloft on the wings of love.

Union with God is assisted by participation in the traditional symbols and social actions of the liturgy, charged as they are with biblical and doctrinal overtones. To be a reliable index of faith, Dulles believes that our worship must be integrated into that of the church. Within the Body of Christ and the Temple of his Spirit the maxim holds: "The law of prayer establishes the law of belief." Employing this norm, the Cappadocians rightly appealed to the rite of baptism to defend the doctrine of the Trinity against Arian distortions. Augustine, invoking the same principle, defended the doctrine of original sin on the basis of the practice of the church in baptizing infants.

The principles of Catholic theology are generally contested by a rampant secularism that recognizes no higher sovereignty than the human will and rejects in the name of autonomy the very idea of a divine intervention in the world.

Catholic principles regarding the integrity of creation and the inherent dignity of the human person are vexing to utilitarians and hedonists, who feel entitled to deplete the resources of nature and redefine rights according to the demands of convenience or the prevailing fashions of the day. Respect for reason is difficult to maintain in an age when people's emotions are continually being stimulated by lurid advertising, dazzling spectacles, and startling revelations of sex and violence. Familiarity with multiple civilizations of the past and present can unsettle people in their allegiance to the ideas and values of any single religion or culture. The rapid developments of science and technology create the illusion that there is not such thing as abiding truth.

The Catholic concept of dogma stands in the midst of the fray. The universality of dogma is challenged by versions of multiculturalism and social fragmentation in which different social and ethnic groups aspire to full autonomy. The stability of dogma is thrown into

question by historical relativism, which treats truth itself as a function of transitory cultural conditions. The authority of dogma is resented as a legalistic imposition on intellectual freedom.

Tradition must struggle to maintain itself. Whereas earlier theologians sought to be self-effacing and faithful to the patrimony handed down and cherished orthodoxy as a badge of honor, the contemporary climate induces theologians to seek independence, creativity, and openness to fresh currents of thought. Some boast of following what is called the "heretical imperative." They are urged by publicists to say something new and surprising, rather than hold to what can be viewed as "party line."

The sacramental principle is also called into question. Catholic theologians, under pressure from the modern "turn to the subject," are often reluctant to speak of sacraments conferring grace. Some shy away from the very term *ex opere operato* as a vestige of magical thinking. But the principle behind such thinking is one on which Catholics cannot yield. If they allow the efficacy of the sacraments to be thrown into doubt, as though the subjective attitude of faith were all that mattered, they will soon find that the whole system of mediation, including the doctrine of the incarnation, begins to crumble.

Can we still speak of God's self-mediation through history? Under the pervasive influence of a secularism that denies God's action in the world, theologians are tempted to cast doubt on God's mighty deeds on behalf of his people, including his coming in the flesh. The Christology of the ancient councils is embattled. Claiming to correct the Monophysitism of the past, some fall into a crypto-Nestorianism that treats Christ, at least for practical purposes, as a human person vaguely linked with the divine. The uniqueness of Christ as universal Savior is frequently dismissed as a kind of confessional arrogance.

False notions of freedom and egalitarianism, in lethal combination, undermine the authority of the apostolic office. Authority is perceived as the willful self-assertion of a dominant elite and as an unwarranted intrusion on the right of individuals to follow their own judgment. In universities the principle of academic freedom is sometimes formulated in a way that would exempt theological research from the surveillance of the magisterium.

Equally hostile to hierarchical government is democratic egalitarianism. Office is considered to have no authority except that willingly conceded by the community. But Catholics, committed to the sacramental principle, recognize that episcopal ordination in the apostolic succession confers a distinctive grace. By honoring the biblical dictum "He who hears you hears me" (Lk 10:16), they are better positioned to hear the word of God.

The Christian principle that men and women have equal dignity is sometimes interpreted as though every opinion had a right of existence within the church. Consequently, the faithful are bombarded by strange and novel theories that have no foundation in Catholic tradition. The theological world is turned into a jungle of competing

opinions, all of which aggressively propagate themselves. Theology is practiced in an individualistic way, without sufficient regard for the requirements of prayer, worship, communion, and faithful discipleship on the part of the practitioners.

Vigilance is needed, therefore, in regulating the flow of theological ideas. If drugs must be approved by governmental agencies to protect the health of citizens, there is no reason why ecclesiastical authority should not indicate what theological ideas are compatible with Christian faith. This, one may surmise, is the very purpose for which Christ instituted an apostolic college with authority to teach. Dulles believes that to promote deviant doctrines as Catholic is to be guilty of false labeling. A theology that forsakes its principles in the face of new challenges is not worthy of them.

Theologians who wish to grow into the plenitude of the Catholic heritage, and pass it on to others, cannot allow themselves to be carried to and fro by the shifting tides of popular opinion. Theology must indeed strive to progress in understanding the faith, but for the sake of authentic development it must abide in the truth that has been given. Fidelity to the past and communion with the whole Body of Christ are essential.

Endnote

Many of the concerns of the Hartford “Appeal for Theological Affirmation” are reflected in Timothy Wallace’s table of the fundamental differences between God-centered and man-centered theology (See timothywallace.com) Wallace is convinced that the attributes listed on the God-centered side are much more fully biblical, and therefore much more in line with God’s will for an authentically Christian life. He believes that the man-centered side reflects the spiritually unhealthy and unbiblical perspectives and attitudes that have crept into Christian thinking, particularly in the Western “evangelical” community.

A God-Centered Theology . . .

. . . magnifies the Giver of every gift (including life itself), aiming ever better to both know Him and make Him known.

. . . sees the purpose of all creation (including one’s self) as chiefly for God’s pleasure, and humbly gives thanks with some measure of joy, whatever the circumstance.

A Man-Centered Theology . . .

. . . magnifies the gift and the recipient’s possession and enjoyment of the gift, often forgetting the Giver altogether.

. . . sees the purpose of creation as largely for man’s pleasure, and so often assumes some measure of perceived entitlement or ‘right’ to some quality or possession in life.

... yields humble gratitude for God's sovereign and gracious salvation (and every other ounce of grace poured out on one).

... sees salvation in Christ entirely as the gift of God, through faith, which itself is entirely a gift of God — not a reward for good works; the Christian is the humble recipient of something which could never have been earned.

... sees one's own good deeds as an expression of eager and overflowing gratitude for the kindness of God.

... is motivated in evangelism chiefly by a heartfelt, irresistible desire to proclaim the greatness of God to others, a divinely inspired love for the lost, and a humble (if not fearful) sense of obedience.

... places the cross ever before one's eyes.

... aims to retain the recognition that one is a vile wretch apart from God's goodness and so yields humble thanksgiving for God's mercy and grace.

... hates sin because it goes against the very nature and character of God and His standard.

... aims to subject all thought, emotion and desire to the truth of God's Word.

... retains for one's self some measure of prideful self-congratulation (however well-hidden) for one's role in appropriating that salvation.

... presumes to have done (or to be doing) some work either adding to or accomplishing the salvation offered by God in Christ, unwilling to surrender the unbiblical notion that works somehow merit the favor of God.

... sees one's good deeds as a dutiful effort to please God and earn favor or respect from God (and/or men).

... adds to these (again) some measure of prideful self-congratulation (however well-hidden) for doing works for God.

... tends to put the cross behind one.

... renders some measure of priority to nurturing one's self-esteem, self-image, and personal worth.

... is more preoccupied with what apparent human loss any given sin inflicts, and so is more vulnerable to relativism.

... tends to assign legitimacy to—and justify—selected thinking, feelings and intentions, in spite of any evident conflict with the God's Word.

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