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COLLEGE THEOLOGY SOCIETY PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

Theologians Minor: Embracing Our Vocation with Humility

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Amid multiple crises in our world, academic theology is facing a crisis in Catholic higher education, leading to a smaller place for theology and religious studies in increasingly precarious Catholic institutions. Rather than succumbing to despair or continuing in denial, this address encourages theologians to embrace the virtue of humility and the smallness of the vocation of the theologian in the midst of this turmoil. As "theologians minor" we are called to embrace our own smallness and our own importance in the church and the world, and to build communities closer to the margins of our church and world to which we provide a vital witness.

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The College Theology Society Presidential Address is a strange genre—both in its oral form at the annual convention and in this, the published version in our journal of fifty years, *Horizons*. It is an odd mishmash of

I am deeply grateful to the members of the College Theology Society for entrusting me with this position of leadership and to the members of the board whose tireless efforts made my service as president possible. I also want to thank my colleagues in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Marymount University whose friendship and love allowed me to pursue my work as a "small theologian" over the past fourteen years, especially Brian Doyle, Kathleen Garces-Foley, Sr. Jacquelyn Porter, RSHM, and Matthew Shadle.

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genres—part academic discourse, part stand-up routine, part sermon. I have chosen to lean into the sermon aspect, in a relatively classical way, by starting with some of the bad news, before we get to the Gospel, that is, before we get to the Good News.

The Bad News

If we want to talk about bad news, our world, our church, and our academy today have plenty. We live in a world of multiple crises, some of which Dr. Robert Orsi addressed during his plenary on Thursday evening, "Religion(s) in the Ruins of the Temples"—a world that is burning; a politics that is fractured, polarized, and in some cases seduced by neofascism; a world still recovering from the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic and still suffering, often due to our active refusal to attend to that continuing suffering; a culture of white supremacy, of disconnection and polarization; and churches that are wounded by sexual abuse, clericalism, sexism, racism, and heterosexism. My wonderful predecessor as president, Mary Doak, spoke in her presidential address two years ago about "studying and teaching religion in dark times" and about our calling and our practice in the midst of all of this.[1] Two years on, it almost feels darker.

And amid all of this we have another crisis, perhaps smaller in comparison, but no less real, because it hits so close to home to all of us who are members of the College Theology Society: theology as many of us have known it is dying. We live in a very different world than that of the founders of the CTS in 1954, and even in a different world for those of us who have been present for only the past few decades.

Some of what has already died off are the fruits of poisoned soils, and that is a *very good thing*—we are slowly beginning to have a theological academy that better represents the lived diversity of our churches and society, though with far more work to do. Laypeople, and especially laywomen, are part of the work of studying religion and theology in greater numbers than ever. I, as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, was able to serve as the CTS president and give this address. We are not only meeting each year with our colleagues from the National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion, we are doing our work ecumenically and interreligiously in ways that would have been unthinkable—and even deeply disturbing—to the founders of what was then "the Society of Catholic College Teachers of Sacred Doctrine."[2]

[1] Mary Doak, "On Studying and Teaching Religion in Dark Times," *Horizons* 48, no. 2 (2021): 477–89.

[2] For the full history of the CTS and its developments, see Sandra Yocum, *Joining the Revolution in Theology: The College Theology Society, 1954–2004* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 2007). For further thought on the relation between the CTS and the NABPR,

And yet, there has been a dramatic weakening of Catholic and other religious identities in our institutions as administrations and boards of trustees pursue an increasingly corporatized and increasingly desperate competition for students. This has led to an increasingly precarious professoriate, even for those of us lucky enough to get a tenure-track position, and to the weakening or elimination of the religion departments and core requirements that had provided a foundation for our work as theologians for much of the past fifty years. Universities are closing and will close; formerly tenured positions are being staffed by often underpaid, overworked, and undervalued contingent faculty; and even those in tenured positions, especially scholars of color and women and other marginalized genders, are being asked to do more and more, are being paid, effectively, less and less, and are hitting a breaking point of burnout, frustration, and despair. In the Catholic Church, there is an increasing lack of connection between the study of theology and religion that we pursue and the training of our seminarians and the life of the wider churches, despite some recent synodal initiatives.

In this situation in which academic theology and religious studies finds itself, especially in the smaller, undergraduate institutions that have been the foundation of our College Theology Society since its beginning, what do we do? How do we find our hope?

False Alternatives

One way to work through this moment in our field might be to think through the classic stages of grief. And we know that these aren't clean stages so much as recurring impulses, often overlapping and reoccurring. Denial might be the strongest impulse—as scholars of religion, we talk about death regularly, but not usually our own or that of our ways of doing things. Some of us may respond by bargaining—*even if things are bad for my colleagues at other universities or at a different status at my own institution, my position is fine . . . for now*. We may respond with anger—and often justified anger—at the structures and systems of injustice that are causing this loss.

One particularly concerning and popular response is a form of nostalgia for a world that once was, even if that world was not perfect or just. This might be the most dangerous impulse, especially for a historically white-centered

particularly with regard to shared communion, see the Theological Roundtable on shared communion, with articles by Curtis Freeman, Timothy Brunk, Steven Harmon, Philip Thompson, and Sandra Yocum in *Horizons* 45, no. 2 (2018): 375–411.

society like our own.[3] It's easiest, perhaps, for those of us who would have gotten jobs in the year 1950 or 1960 to look back on that time as a kind of golden age in which students routinely took three, four, or more courses in religion just to graduate, and when theologians were not just needed but valued. Even knowing that, we all might look back at a period when teaching theology and religion was supported and rewarded, not only monetarily but through status, attention, and other forms of value. There's a deep irony that this collapse of theology and religious studies in higher education is occurring just when our ranks are finally beginning to reflect the diversity of the student bodies and churches that we serve.

The final impulse, and one that I'll confess has been part of my own discernment in the past years, is despair, sometimes lived out in either quiet desperation, ashy burnout, or fin de siècle irony. And so I ask again, How in this moment do we continue to do our work in hope? How do we give reasons for that hope? Where do we go from here?

I do not have the answer to that question. In part because there is not *an* answer, and in part because no one person should be giving a single answer. But I have two pieces of an answer, both drawn from the heart of my experience not of academia broadly or abstractly, but from my experience of the College Theology Society, of this community, of you. The first is embracing our smallness with humility and joy. And the second, and related, is the creation of the kind of community that allows that smallness to be valued and empowered.

Embracing our Smallness in Community

Before talking about the hope that comes from embracing humility, I need to pause with a caution. There is a major danger of talking about kenosis, smallness, or humility too glibly or without attention to injustice. As our colleague Annie Selak and many other feminist theologians have pointed out, "Kenosis can be used to oppress women and perpetuate cycles of violence and suffering, all in the name of Jesus."[4] The same is true of telling other individuals and members of historically marginalized groups who have been humiliated that they should be quiet, should speak less, and shouldn't be here. There is also an inherent danger in the language of vocation that I am going to use. Once again, women, members of underrepresented groups, contingent and

[3] Compare the Annual Volume from the 2022 meeting of the CTS: Catherine Punsalan-Manlimos, Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier, and Elisabeth T. Vasko, eds., *Why We Can't Wait: Racism and the Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2023).

[4] Annie Selak, "Orthodoxy, Orthopraxis, and Orthopathy: Evaluating the Feminist Kenosis Debate," *Modern Theology* 33, no. 4 (2017): 530–31.

underpaid faculty—we are all told to do lots of extra emotional and professional labor, and to occlude the injustice of our situations under the rhetorical banner of "vocation."

But yet there is something important and true, and deep in our particular society's spiritual DNA, that I think makes this language worth risking, of embracing the smallness of our vocation as scholars in acts of true humility that include awareness of our power and awareness of our limitations.

In his book *Humility: The Secret History of a Lost Virtue*, Christopher Bellitto distinguishes humility from humiliation by defining "humility" as "a positive sense of one's smallness."[5] An acceptance of our smallness doesn't mean we shouldn't still be fighting like hell for the living and struggling to maintain or reclaim justice in our churches and in our institutions of higher education. But in the midst of this time, a part of humility is realizing, with some beautiful and inspiring exceptions, that we are not in charge of our churches, or of our universities, or sometimes not even especially valued in either.

In some ways this returns us to our origins, to a society that was founded, with some clergy but mostly with many women religious, for scholars who were "only" teaching undergraduate religion rather than the "real" theologians, all clerics, teaching in the seminaries of the mid-twentieth century.

Appropriately for our history, it is a very Franciscan vision, a way in which we can embrace our status as "*minores*," as the "small ones," not in subjection to humiliation but through embracing the example of Christ and the closeness to the other *minores* of our worlds that being small enables. As Franciscan historian Michael Cusato writes, discussing the early history of the Franciscans and their development over time, "The early friars were not only *fratres* among other *fratres* [that is, siblings among other siblings] but *minores* among other *minores*," lesser ones among the lesser ones, those who, in Cusato's description, "are not the *maiores* of society—the people of wealth, power, and prestige—those whose voices are rarely heard or listened to, who have no social or economic value to the powerful (namely, the poor, the sick, the leper)."[6] Especially for those of us who have enjoyed the privileges of a brief golden age of tenured religious studies and theology departments

[5] Christopher M. Bellitto, *Humility: The Secret History of a Lost Virtue* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2023), 6.

[6] Michael F. Cusato, OFM, "*Esse Ergo Mitem et Humilem Corde, Hoc Est Esse Vere Fratem Minorem*: Bonaventure of Bagnoregio and the Reformulation of the Franciscan Charism," in *Charisma und religiöse Gemeinschaften im Mittelalter*, ed. Giancarlo Andenna, Mirko Breitensein, and Gert Melville (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2005), 348. See also Michael F. Cusato, OFM, "Highest Poverty or Lowest Poverty?: The Paradox of the Minorite Charism," *Franciscan Studies* 75 (2017): 275–321.

appropriately sized for the number of courses offered, or of robust undergraduate theology and religion requirements, or of a wide network of undergraduate Catholic and other religious institutions that put the humanities in general and religion in particular at the heart of their curriculum, what I am suggesting is that our return to doing theology as *minores* might be an unwanted grace.

It is also a grace that allows us to do our work more clearly and live out our vocations along with and not floating above the many, many other lesser ones of our world. In "Dispatches from the Wasteland," Natalia Imperatori-Lee points to this place where we approach the edge of our "nothingness" as precisely the place where, she writes, "God is making all things new." She asks, and I cite at length:

> Who is our theology for? God doesn't need our theology. Is it for ourselves and our careers? Our universities? The academy or the church? Or is it for the victims of history, the suffering, marginalized and the erased? Those who were abused & discarded? Or those who are lynched? Or those left to die in the Florida Straits or the Sonoran Desert? For the disheartened and disillusioned with nothing left to believe? Those who have nothing, have become nothing, are erased, like so much nothing. The God who became nothing on a cross. Let us remember. Nothing. And endeavor with the Holy Spirit to bring forth from our wasteland something new.[7]

How do we do this without being erased ourselves? While we know and may even have confidence that God remembers all and redeems all, where do we see the reality, the evidence even, that being "theologians minor," doing "small theology," embracing the humility of our vocations, beginning to participate in the reality of the paschal mystery, is the reality of new life?

Here is where I think we need to turn to a second part of the answer to how to be scholars and theologians together in these times, of creating communities together that allow our smaller voices to be valued and empowered. In their recent article, "Rethinking the Work of Theologians in the Pandemic's Wake,"[8] Kathryn Lilla Cox and Jason King provide a rich set of resources for thinking through our vocation as theologians in a number of ways, and especially in the importance of community to our work as theologians minores.

Kathy and Jason draw on their knowledge and experience of Benedictine life in exploring different ways of doing our work as scholars as a beautiful community rather than a continuing competition for status and achievement in

[7] Natalia Imperatori-Lee, "Dispatches from the Wasteland: Panel Presentation—The CTSA at 75: Looking Back, Around and Forward," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 75 (2021): 32–36.

[8] Kathryn Lilla Cox and Jason King, "Rethinking the Work of Theologians in the Pandemic's Wake," *Horizons* 50, no. 1 (2023): 1–31.

ways that undermine our relations with one another as academics, with our families and communities, with our own selves and, with God. They are particularly attentive to strategies drawn from the Benedictine tradition for how we might resist contemporary academic culture, including how we relate to time and how we think about our work in relation to our other commitments and relationships.

One of those strategies is the creation of buffering communities that "emphasize[s] the value of the person, especially when it is being challenged by others."[9] To cite them at more length, they write:

> Thus, to address issues of status, theologians should foster these buffering communities, communities ultimately rooted in seeing Christ in self and others. Faculty need to see one another's dignity and their work as a common endeavor, working together. They need to see that good work done by one person is a good for the whole, that everyone is better when individuals do well. This community does not come easy. It is why the practices noted previously, practices where faculty are formed to view others and all their labor as positive, are so important. If they are sustained, the buffering can shape people's horizon so that they see their value by being with people instead of apart from them. Theology faculty should lead the way on this perspective.[10]

This should especially be a priority for scholars who look like me or those of us with tenure or chairs or wide platforms—to use what remaining power we have not in a futile quest to maintain the fragile status that we have, but to empower the voices of those we most need to hear in our church and our world in this time of change. A similar question was asked of the CTS by Emilie Townes:

> CAN WE BE FAITHFUL REPRESENTATIVES OF THE GOSPEL AND HAVE SUCCESS BE THE ONLY WORD IN OUR VOCABULARY?
>
> the agenda of scholarship and ministry (lay and ordained)
>
> must be more than the number of students in our programs
>
> more than being the influential voice in professional meetings and gatherings
>
> more than the number of placements we do

[9] Cox and King, "Rethinking the Work of Theologians in the Pandemic's Wake," 28.

[10] Cox and King, "Rethinking the Work of Theologians in the Pandemic's Wake," 29.

> the number of local churches, parishes, and agencies associated with our seminaries or departments
>
> these concerns are minor notes to our world of chaos and hope[11]

The ironic yet evangelical response I want to suggest is that it precisely by being "less" in the eyes of the world, that we, together, can aim for the "more" that Townes identifies. Our disciplines of theology and religious studies are being marginalized—some of us have often been doing our theologies at those margins, but for those of us who haven't, we must be ready. This can become a moment in which we enter more deeply into that experience, or in which we fight it kicking and screaming, injuring others on the way down, or in which, in the words of Hanna Reichel in their plenary, we can begin to "build community without ownership, without building higher and bigger walls."[12] This brings us back to empowered humility in relation to God and to others as an essential virtue for creating these communities together. As Chris Bellitto writes, "Humble people build communities. They share questions and answers. They know they need help."[13]

It is not surprising to me that Kathy Cox and Jason King are such longstanding pillars of the CTS or that their article was published in our own journal—because one of the great charisms of our society has been and will continue to be a society that aims, however imperfectly, at this kind of belonging. We have been and can yet be a buffering community against the forces of marginalization and humiliation that are undermining academic theology as we have known it, and a womb for the new ways of doing theology humbly, on the margins, in exile, in the "ruins of the temples," that the Holy Spirit is already conceiving in our midst.

Some of that might come from the "visioning process" that the CTS is beginning this year, and from the participation of all of us in thinking through how we as a society can continue our work together in this new academic world. But we are only going to get there, in my opinion, by accepting the reality in which we as scholars of religion and theologians now find ourselves and our fields; by embracing the power of being small and, with sufficient caveats, the paschal mystery that it is in choosing to lose our lives that we receive them; and by doing so together, with critical attention to the boundaries and ownership of belonging that we are always tempted to construct. It strikes me that we,

[11] Emilie M. Townes, "Recentering the Theological Canon and the Future of Religious Education," in Punsalan-Manlimos, Tiemeier, and Vasko, *Why We Can't Wait*, 61.

[12] Hanna Reichel, "Be/longing: a public feeling?," Plenary Address at the Annual Meeting of the College Theology Society, Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT, June 2, 2023.

[13] Bellitto, *Humility*, 9.

as the College Theology Society, are uniquely ready for the task of imagining new ways of doing theology. It has been an honor to serve these two years as your president, but more important than honor, it has been life-giving to serve these two years as your president because of the hope that you inspire in me that however challenging, however messed up it might be or might get, however messed up we might be or might get, in our shared love for God, for our churches, our students, our colleagues, and for one another, we might be some of the mustard seeds that God is using to make all things new in our world. I'm so looking forward to seeing, and being part of, whatever you, whatever we, come up with as we laugh, dream, and work together.