

Reflections on being a Theologian *

Yves Congar O P

'What is my licence to say what I say?' You ask and prompt me to answer a question which, I must admit, I've never put to myself. I'm not given to self-reflection. I live. Life is its own certainty and justification. But now that you have asked me, I've put the question to myself and so I'll tell you why I practise theology, what theology I practise, and how.

In what name, in virtue of what? I myself see two decisive elements: on the one hand, my vocation as a friar preacher, which shapes and fills my life; on the other hand, circumstances and appeals. I'll start with this second element, because it's easier to explain.

I never had a plan. I've tried to respond to appeals, requests, circumstances. Most appeals came from outside, in the shape of requests. I receive them every day, often two or three times a day . . . If anything, I've accepted too many. That accounts for the quite ridiculous list of my articles, whether long and learned, or brief and popular. They amount to date to some 1630 or 1640 titles! But there are also the interior appeals, inspirations. These can range from the humble enough idea to read this, follow up that reference – yes, that's how I operate, I think that our lives are shaped even in these tiny ways – right up to the first great appeal, in the years 1928 – 1929, to dedicate myself particularly to the Church and ecumenism. Two things intimately inter-twined. Here I very soon saw what I had to do. It got more complicated as time went on, of course, but the through-line always remained the same. And I have to admit that I was filled to overflowing. I wanted to change something and I saw very clearly what it was. My brethren and friends, my comrades in arms, Pères Chenu and Feret, coined a slogan for our enterprise: to eliminate what we called 'baroque theology'. Yes, there was something I knew quite clearly I wanted to change. I articulated it in the advertisement for the collection *Unam Sanctam* in September 1935. But I was not to know – Another knew it on my behalf! – that this would pave the way for Vatican II. I was filled to overflowing. All the things to which I gave quite special attention issued in the Council: ecclesiology, ecumenism, reform of the Church, the lay state, mission, ministries, collegiality, return to sources and Tradition. . . . It goes without saying that inspiration has its reasons. It was in this way

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that when I published three volumes on the Holy Spirit (1979-1980) I was not only following an old and constant interest, not only broaching a topic of evident contemporary importance, but pursuing the conviction that I was coming into the unfolding of theological dialogue with Orthodoxy at just the right moment.

I've also said that my 'licence' derives from my vocation as a preaching friar, a vocation that is the substance of my life and being. The Order of Friars Preachers is dedicated to the service of the Gospel, especially under its aspect of truth. I've consecrated my life to the service of truth. I've loved it and still love it in the way one loves a person. I've been like that from my very childhood, as if by some instinct and interior need. When I was a young Dominican, I took over the motto of St Hilary which St Thomas Aquinas had first made his own (*Contra Gentes* 1,2) and which was reproduced on his statue, in the house of studies at Le Saulchoir: 'Ego hoc vel praecipuum vitae meae officium debere me Deo conscius sum, at eum omnis sermo meus et sensus loquatur' (*De Trin.* 1,37; PL 1, 48 C), 'For my own part, I know that the chief duty of my life is that all that I say and all that I feel speaks God.' The ways in which we can do this in the Order of Friars Preachers are many, the chief one being formal preaching. I've done this, I still do so, and I love it, but I've been called to teach and, especially since I've been confined to a wheel chair, to write a great deal.

Preaching and teaching publicly presupposes a canonical mission given at least in a global way. I was very impressed by the role which the sheer fact of having formally received this mission in the Church played in Luther's life: his being a doctor entitled, and even obliged him to speak. At the level of the lived and existential content of my conscience I seek no other mandate for my duty and my desire to speak God than my being a friar preacher in the Church. That's enough for me, that's my licence. That opens up so much for me, it gives me an enormous sense of liberty.

I've said advisedly: in the Church. That's essential. For me theology is the unfolding, the defense, the deployment of the confession of the apostolic faith within a communion that is fully catholic, in the service of people of today. This communion is a lived one. It does, of course, have its content of ideas, but for me an essential part of it is that it is celebrated doxologically in the liturgy. I don't just study the mysteries, I celebrate them, and this celebration is also a source of understanding of the faith. It's what gives it its solidity, its warmth. Theology is a matter not only of ourselves, but of the *pneuma*.

I've spoken of 'fully catholic communion'. What this means so far as the work of theology goes is a humble and avid, intense and docile openness to truth however it comes. There are two dimen-

sions here: the present and extension through time. The present comprises questions put, publications, the guidance of pastors, the contributions of dialogue, people in need of attention. I read a great deal, I try to remain in touch. But I do not meet people enough, young people especially. This is not just because of the state of my health and my life, it's also because of my own timidity, a somewhat inhibiting sense of my limits and, to boot, an insufficient interest in what makes people so different from each other. I make up by studying history. That's always attracted me. It's a school of realism and of truth. Recognising and becoming aware of the historicity of facts and texts resolves many critical difficulties. Theologically and positively it comprises the nourishing study of the witnesses of Tradition: Fathers and councils, liturgy, iconography . . . I inhabit the Church in which the Fathers and the liturgy speak. That's no doubt what weighs down my writings with an excessive charge of quotations and references, but all that nourishes me. And alike in Tradition and in our own time I naturally situate what is called the *magisterium* in its due place. I can't be accused of having neglected that, but it expresses itself in history: O bull *Unam Sanctam!* O *Syllabus!* O encyclical *Mystici corporis!* . . .

The dimension of time in my theologian's communion not only includes the past but looks to the future. There's been a lot of talk recently about how knowledge of the past and of our roots enables us to situate ourselves in the present with a view to the future which is being prepared there. I have myself quoted a saying of St Bernard, subsequently taken up, about the Church 'ante et retro oculata', looking behind and before. In order to open up the future I've put a lot of effort into passing into circulation certain profound principles of the past: a *retro* with a view to *ante*. I've articulated this in terms of the two dimensions of fidelity. It's not a question of two fidelities, there's only one, but it's not one-dimensional. I am in communion with John Paul II and today's Church, but also with Newman and Möhler, with Thomas Aquinas and Anselm, with Augustine and Athanasius. And that opens me up, beyond the particularities of the Church today, to larger dimensions which give me the space in which to work for the nourishment of the future. The condition of my doing so, however, is that I am alert to the appeals from the future which make themselves heard in the present.

All this has an ecumenical application. Ecumenism is a present enterprise which draws its life from a movement towards eschatological realisation. It essays anticipations in history of the full unity in Reality. I devoted my lectures for the year 1979–80 to the theme: How much diversity is compatible with unity of commu-

nion? Unity will not consist in uniformity. It will admit of something in the nature of what the Lutheran world federation calls 'reconciled diversity'. This presupposes the review of particular Confessions and traditions in the light of ancient Tradition: by way not of repristination but of critical correction in accordance with the movement of their living progress in history. Nor do I exclude my own Church from this process of revision, which I call a "re-reception" of Vatican II, just as there is at present a process of "re-reception" of Chalcedon, or of the dogma of original sin. . . .

History – or, rather, Tradition – also serves as my guide in the attempt to place myself in the present crisis. I want to be open. I am aware that those who prepared and realised Vatican II tend to stay put there and to say: *Non plus ultra*. I may even have been like that myself; certainly I should not refuse to take up this stance if there were any question of opposing excesses that amounted to betrayals. But I do want to remain open to new questions and contributions whilst at the same time maintaining a strict fidelity to the profession of the apostolic faith. This has been my position in *Concilium*. You need only to look at what I have written to see that my position does not coincide one hundred per cent with that of *Concilium*. On the other hand, I know of no other review which offers me the same sort of documentation and the thinking of intelligent collaborators with different perspectives from my own. Being rather too much of a home-bird by circumstances (and also rather by taste!) I need this enlargement.

I'm aware of the limits of my knowledge. My biblical learning is not extensive enough. It's too fragmentary, if not occasional. My questions, my documentation remain too clerical. At the Brussels congress, Jean-Pierre Jossua said that we have the theology of our way of life. How true this is! I am dedicated to paper, to books, to the regular life. Above all I'm too tied to the middle class, from which I spring and which still supplies the greater part of the faithful in France. I have openings into the Third World, and even certain connections with it, but I'm not really in touch with the workers or with the poor. My practice of theology has been only very partially modified by the life of action, by socio-political involvement in the way that, to take a notable example, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's was. At the same time it has been enriched in its time by the Young Christian Workers and today by contact with my confrères who themselves are in touch with the workers, society's losers. . . . I gained a great deal from my experience in the prison of war and from my fine comrades to whom I remain bound. I've learned and continue to learn from the questions and contributions of my non-Roman friends; I've always gained a great deal from all my exchanges with the Orthodox. Finally, I'm as open

as my circumstances allow to whatever is being born or seeking to be born in the world and particularly in the Church. I'm very alert to the extraordinary and perpetual renewals of the Gospel that characterise our time and everywhere construct parcels of the Church from the ground upwards. Parcels . . .

I am no philosopher, I lack that capacity for philosophic reflection which enables the possessor to deepen concepts and to systematise thoughts. This is one reason why I've scarcely responded to the programme which Rahner has formulated as follows: a Christian theology for today's pagan; 'to rethink and preach the traditional Gospel message about God, Jesus Christ and his grace in such a way that it can be understood and received by the pagan world today' (*Theology Digest*, Winter, 1967, p 272). Each person his own charism. Mine is not the highest, but it's the one God has given me. Glory to him!

(Translated by Marcus Lefébure O P)

The Church in Peru

Peadar Kirby

Maria is 21 years old. She lives in a poor barrio in the suburbs of Lima and studies economics in one of Lima's universities. She also works as a catechist in her local parish. "I think that in the past two years there have been great advances," she told me, "the people now are very much more conscious than before". She sees her work as a catechist as a preparation for what she calls "political militancy". As an example of this she told me of a march which the catechists had been involved in a month before when 2,000 people went to the Ministry of Housing banging empty cups demanding a decent water supply for their area. "Us young people accept marxism, communism, without any problem", she added.

Senora Isabel lives in a nearby parish and at 79 has seen some more of life than Maria. When she first arrived in the area 19 years ago she used to make a meagre income by selling holy pictures of St Martin de Porres. Through the 'hermendad' or sodality of which she was a member she began to go along to meetings organised by a local priest. From there she progressed to be a member of the Movement of Christian Workers and for the past number of years has gone along to the annual summer schools in theology organised by the Catholic University. As her understanding of her faith