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Fr. Weinandy's Unfortunate Speech

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 19, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

The recent address by Father Thomas Wienandy, director of the USCCB?s Committee on Doctrine, has caused more than a few raised eyebrows. Coming on the heels of the same committee?s handling of Sr. Elizabeth Johnson?s book, Quest for the Living God, Weinandy?s remarks to the Academy of Catholic Theology have put him and his committee back in the headlines.

It is difficult to see how saying that some theologians can be ?a curse and an affliction? for the Church ? even if you believe it to be true ? is helpful. If you think many or most contemporary theologians are singing the wrong songs, it might be more productive to teach them new songs than to simply tell them to leave the choir. Besides, persons are never ?a curse? and such de-humanizing language ill befits a Catholic leader, still less a man of the cloth. If Weinandy had more carefully said that some theologies are a curse, his words would not have stung as they have done. But, he said what he said, and sting they did.

One of the reasons for the sting is that there is so little consensus about the role of theologians in the Church today. Weiandy is not responsible for creating the confusion, and very few people ? theologians, bishops, Catholic media ? have been willing to admit how deep the confusion is or how deep the roots of confusion are. The first great upheaval came with the French Revolution which shut down theology faculties across the continent. Previously, theological disputes were decided at the schools, and referred to Rome only for disciplinary measures. When the schools were shut down, bishops concerned about a theological issue started writing to Rome instead, and the pattern has continued. Despite the theological acumen of the current incumbent, who is probably one of my top three theologians of recent years, the Chair of Peter is not a faculty chair, and the theological schools must be brought back into the process of evaluating the work of theologians.

The second great disruption in the role of theologians began with Vatican II and is still a work in process. Before Vatican II, theology was done mostly by seminary professors who were also clerics. Today, there are four married couples on the theology faculty at Fordham. Theology has undoubtedly gained much from its integration with modern university life, but it has also lost some of the essential ecclesial mission at the heart of its intellectual task. I was a student of Father Charles Curran when the ax fell on him in the 1980s. He was a great teacher, the toughest I had in seminary. But, there was a certain intellectual unevenness among the seminarians and I recall one less intellectually gifted seminarian returning from Fr. Curran?s class to announce at the lunch table that Curran had said abortion, homosexuality and birth control we ?okay.? Of course, ?okay? was not a moral category Curran had ever used, but this is how that seminarian understood ? actually failed to understand ? him. If I was a bishop, and a seminarian of mine came back to say one of his professors thought abortion was ?okay? I would be deeply disturbed. Of course, today, theology exists for more than training of seminarians, but it does play a role in teaching the entire Church and always will.

The tension between vocation and professionalism is palpable as soon as you get three theologians in a room discussing their work. Sadly, as well, some faculties have tilted right and others have tilted left, so that, if the situation is not addressed, our theological schools could end up mimicking the divide between Fox and MSNBC, with everyone only listening to and speaking with people who largely share their viewpoints. That is

not good for theology no matter where you fall on the ideological spectrum. Indeed, I wish Weinandy had given this speech to the Catholic Theological Society, not to its conservative alternative: It takes no courage to tell people what they want to hear and confirm their prejudices, and it serves no ecclesial purpose.

I will grant that there are some more liberal theologians whose writings and talks make my skin crawl. Surely, something is wrong when the Church?s prophetic witness is believed to cohere so precisely with the editorial stance adopted by the New York Times. There is, as Cardinal George has written, as sense in which liberal theologies end up as ?chaplains to the status quo? and that is no place for a Christian to be. Of course, the same charge can be leveled at some on the right for whom Christianity is always an add-on, an ethical dollop of faith on top of a capitalist, American, neo-conservative sundae. I am as little interested in finding theological justifications for the sexual libertinism of our age as I am in finding theological rationales for the profit-motive.

Weinandy, then, has a point, but I can?t imagine why he chose to make it in such a non-evenly handed way, or why he made it in such a clumsy manner. Bringing up the ?faith lives? of theologians was another bizarre line of criticism: What does he know of the faith life of these men and women? Indeed, one of the things that Church authorities have tried to make clear is that when they consider a theology book, and criticize it, they are emphatically not criticizing the person, their intentions, their faith, or their integrity. It is their words that are subject to criticism, not the person. That is as it should be, but Weinandy?s somewhat nasty speech obscures that bright line.

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