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College Theology Society signals possible détente with bishops at annual meeting

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In the ongoing theological wars that have rankled the U.S. church in recent years -- marked by differences in opinion among bishops and academics regarding the role of the church's theologians -- you might say it was a bit of détente.

After a series of public criticisms since 2005 from bishops of some of the church's most heralded theologians, approximately 300 of the academics gathered Thursday to Sunday here for an annual conference that sent a sure, if nuanced, signal: We'll try it your way.

Well, maybe not the prelates' way. But perhaps something like it, at least.

Central to the signaling: repeated recognition from the scholars that many of their students have not been formed in the basic tenets of the faith and can't do the big thinking of theology without first a bit of catechesis.

As Aurelie Hagstrom, a professor at Providence College in Rhode Island, put it Friday afternoon at a plenary talk during the event: While there are some students in her classroom who are informed, active Catholics, the majority are "inactive, cultural Catholics that have not been evangelized."

If someone asked her if she taught theology or did catechetics, Hagstrom said, "I would say yes."

"This takes hard work, patience and scholarly creativity," Hagstrom told her fellow academics, who were gathered at Jesuit-run Creighton University under the auspices of the College Theology Society. "But the interplay between theology and catechesis can add energy to the classroom rather than drain it away."

The enunciation of the role of theologian as partially teacher of church basics, echoed both in side conversations and a plenary talk [2] Thursday from noted scholar Fr. Robert Imbelli, may represent a significant shift in how theologians talk about their role.

The group's meeting came days after the U.S. bishops announced [3] that a Jesuit known for espousing a similar view of the theologian's task was selected to direct the bishops' office responsible for investigating the church academics.

Part of his role at that office, Jesuit Fr. Peter Ryan told *NCR* Thursday [4], may involve making interventions in theological debates to "make sure that the faith is being handed down intact."

During the College Theology Society meeting, the academics focused on a similar theme: "Teaching theology and handing on the faith: challenges and convergences."

The meeting, the 59th of the society, saw a number of plenary presentations and nearly 100 separate sectional meetings where academics presented and critiqued papers on topics that included reflections on the spirituality of sports and the witness of Salvadoran martyr Jesuit Fr. Rutilio Grande.

But the central focus was on the idea of the handing down of the faith and what the theologians owe the church in terms of forming believers.

Hagstrom proposed that theologians might consider themselves "agents" of the efforts of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI to spur a new evangelization among Catholics.

While Hagstrom acknowledged that some in her field might bristle at the description, she said that bristling might be due to the fact many went to graduate schools in academic environments "that did not shape us to think and feel with the church."

"I think the bristling comes because this is a rhetoric that we're not used to, and it makes us nervous," she said. "Who are we and what do we do?

"Is teaching theology an ecclesial vocation?" she continued. "Do we see ourselves as part of the salvific mission of the church?"

Citing Second Vatican Council teachings, Vatican documents and New Testament passages, Hagstrom, who has focused on the ecclesiology of the council since writing her doctoral dissertation on the subject 20 years ago, laid out what she called a possible third way for theologians to follow in mixing catechesis and academic thinking.

That third way, she said, must separate itself from the formal handing down of faith done by bishops as successors of the apostles and from the informal handing down done in family life.

Hagstrom cited *Dei Verbum [5]*, the council's constitution on divine revelation, specifically the document's assertion that the Holy Spirit provides a "growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down."

"This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers who treasure these things in their hearts," Hagstrom said. "The faith of the church is enriched by our work. Is this not a third way?"

Several theologians asked Hagstrom what it would mean to focus their work on evangelization.

Dominican Sr. Carol Dempsey, a biblical studies scholar at the University of Portland in Oregon, asked whether the focus of the new evangelization was genuine.

"For me, the whole agenda of the new evangelization seems to be more of a proselytizing agenda than a true evangelizing one," Dempsey told Hagstrom.

"If it's truly evangelizing, then we'll focus on God's all-embracing love for all creation, with all its diversity -- and lots and lots of dialogue," said Dempsey, who has published a series of books on the Old Testament prophets. "And if the latter, we have a very different-looking church altogether."

Reframing thinking to work with the bishops

The question over finding a paradigm for the theologians to work in some ways as ecclesial functionaries was echoed in side conversations during the gathering. Speaking on background, several academics told *NCR* that

some in their ranks are beginning to wonder how to reframe their thinking in order to best work with bishops.

The particular desire for that reframing, several said, came after a meeting in March with members of the U.S. bishops' doctrine committee, the bishops' committee that has recently taken to looking into the academics' work.

During the March meeting, theologians with CTS and several of the other theological membership societies met for a day with both bishops and the members of the secretariat that staffs their committee to discuss how the academics could aid in the new evangelization effort.

Ryan, who previously served as the director of spiritual formation at the St. Louis archdiocese's Kenrick-Glennon Seminary, will become executive director of that secretariat in August. He replaces Capuchin Fr. Thomas Weinandy, who has held the post since 2005.

During Weinandy's tenure, the bishops' committee issued rebukes of five prominent U.S. theologians. Those rebukes have been the subject of criticism -- including from both CTS and the Catholic Theological Society of America -- because there was no consultation or dialogue with the theologians.

Among those rebukes was one made in 2011 of St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson for her 2007 book *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*. While Johnson has repeatedly said the bishops' criticism misrepresented her work, she also said [6] the bishops had confused it as an act of catechesis and not theology.

The College Theology Society, founded in 1953, represents lay and religious teachers of undergraduate theology from both Catholic and other ecumenical backgrounds. It meets annually in conjunction with the National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion.

Among the topics discussed during the conference's sectional meetings this year:

- The difficulties the college and university professors face when teaching students about Vatican II, as most are unaware of its significance or even its occurrence;
- The struggles parents face in raising their children in the faith as surveys show more young adults choose to remain religiously unaffiliated;
- Whether the notion of intrinsic evil -- frequently used in political and church debates as something of an ecclesial trump card -- is still a valid way to describe certain acts, including intentional murder and contraception, that some ethicists (and, more loudly, bishops) say always contradict the virtuous life.

The ethics discussion became heated when Jesuit Fr. James Bretzke, a theologian at Boston College, used the opportunity to critique bishops who used the 2012 election cycle to tell Catholics how to vote, either directly or indirectly.

Bretzke focused particularly on Madison, Wis., Bishop Robert Morlino, who released a letter in August defending Republican Rep. Paul Ryan, a vice presidential candidate and a Catholic, for budgets he has proposed in Congress that the U.S. bishops' conference has criticized for not protecting low-income families.

In that letter, released in Morlino's diocesan paper, the bishop names several things as intrinsically evil, including "abortion, euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide, same-sex marriage, government-coerced secularism, and socialism."

Joking about the last item, Bretzke asked if Morlino, a former Jesuit, would think "the religious vow of poverty and community constitutes the religious evil of socialism?"

But Bretzke continued: "This is a very real problem ... when ethical discussions are used for ends which are dubious at best and outright malicious at worst."

Responding to Bretzke, Michael Jaycox, a doctoral candidate at Boston College, suggested theologians begin to discuss such issues by the term "exceptionless moral norms" instead of "intrinsic evil."

Jaycox also suggested that theologians ask: "Which social groups get to elaborate these concepts, the privileged or oppressed?"

It might be more helpful to discuss the matter with those who feel oppressed, Jaycox said, "as they are more frequently victimized by those acts."

Vatican II and moving forward

Hagstrom, one of three professors who spoke on a panel about Vatican II, said the biggest challenge she faces is that students many times have no understanding of the differences in the church before and after the council.

"Now, there is no before and after," she said. "You might as well be teaching the Council of Chalcedon," referring to the fifth-century council noted for its conclusion of the dual human and divine nature of Christ.

"It's 50 years ago," she continued. "That's a long time."

Another major challenge, she said, is that academic and societal focus on the council has recently shifted from studying the event itself to discussing how to interpret what happened there and whether it happened, in the words of Pope Benedict XVI, as part of a "hermeneutic of continuity" or a "hermeneutic of rupture" from the last several hundred years of church teaching.

"My personal challenge is not to impose my own interpretation of the texts in my lectures," Hagstrom said. "Even if I am just 'teaching the document,' I have to ask: Am I not always giving my hermeneutic for interpreting the council?"

A reminder that catechetics or not, all teaching involves interpretation. And it will take some time to interpret what any détente in the theological battles of the church's culture wars mean.

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