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Bishops' staffer on doctrine rips theologians as 'curse'

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 16, 2011

Capuchin Fr. Thomas Weinandy

Theologians can be a ?curse and affliction upon the church,? according to the U.S. bishops? top official on doctrine, if their work is not grounded in church teaching and an active faith life, and ends up promoting ?doctrinal and moral error.?

Capuchin Fr. Thomas Weinandy, executive director of the Secretariat for Doctrine at the U.S. bishops? conference, has warned of a ?crisis? in Catholic theology, caused by theologians who ?often appear to possess little reverence for the mysteries of the faith as traditionally understood and presently professed within the church.?

Those remarks came in a May 26 address to the Academy of Catholic Theology in Washington, D.C., and were published in July in *Origins*, the official documentary service of the U.S. bishops.

Weinandy is the head of staff for the bishops? committee that recently issued a strong, and controversial, critique of a book on the Trinity by St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson of Fordham University in New York. The bishops asserted that Johnson?s 2007 book on the Trinity, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*, ?completely undermines the Gospel and the faith of those who believe in the Gospel.?

Many U.S. theologians have rallied to Johnson?s defense, including the administrative board of the Catholic Theological Society of America.

In his address, Weinandy did not mention Johnson or any other theologian. His analysis, however, would seem to form part of the background to the dispute over Johnson?s work.

The divine call to do theology, Weinandy said, is ?one of the greatest honors that God can bestow upon a human being,? but that honor implies a responsibility of ?promoting, advancing and defending? philosophical and theological truth as taught by the church.

Too often, Weinandy said, theology degrades into an ?intellectual game,? based on ?the fun of being cleverly and sophisticatedly entertaining, or the thrill and buzz that comes with academic sparring.?

Weinandy stressed that theology should also be grounded in an active spiritual life, citing a 1990 instruction

from the Vatican?s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith that scientific research must be united with prayer.

Sometimes, Weinandy said, that doesn?t seem to be the case.

?Theology may be the only academic pursuit where one can seemingly be considered a theologian without actually having to know the subject matter,? he said. ?It would appear at times that a theologian need not actually know God.?

Weinandy, 65, holds a doctorate in historical theology from King?s College in London and is a former professor of theology at Oxford University. He?s served as the U.S. bishops? chief of staff for doctrinal issues since 2005.

In his May 26 address, Weinandy strongly defended the idea that a Catholic theologian should have a mandate, or license, from the local bishop. Such a mandate does not curb their freedom, he argued, but gives their vocation ?a dignity and gravity that it truly deserves.?

Weinandy devoted a section to ?the present crisis within Catholic theology.?

?Much of what passes for contemporary Catholic theology,? he said, ?often is not founded upon an assent of faith in the divine deposit of revelation as proclaimed in the sacred scriptures and developed within the living doctrinal and moral tradition of the church.?

Instead, he said, much Catholic theology has become ?an attempt by reason to pass judgment on the content of the faith as if it were of human origin,? with theologians as ?judges who stand above the faith and arbitrate what is to be believed and what is not.?

That approach, Weinandy said, ?sometimes undermines genuine faith within the body of Christ? and ends up leading people ?into the darkness of error.? It also, he said, ?inevitably produces fragmentation within the church.?

Weinandy acknowledged that over the centuries, the Catholic church has recognized different ?schools? of theology.

Yet today, he said, ?the church is experiencing not a debate among legitimate schools of theological thought, but a radical divide over the central tenets of the Catholic faith and the church?s fundamental moral tradition.?

?This is not simply an expression of a plurality of Catholic theologies,? Weinandy said, ?but the very disintegration of the Catholic faith itself.?

Weinandy says there must be a distinction between binding church teaching and the opinions of theologians, yet ?much of the present theological academy misunderstands, neglects or is simply unaware? of that difference.

The Academy of Catholic Theology held its first national conference in 2008, and according to its Web site, has roughly 80 members. Speaking on background, a prominent American theologian said the group was founded by colleagues who regard the Catholic Theological Society of America as ?too anti-magisterium in tone and too one-sided in content.?

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