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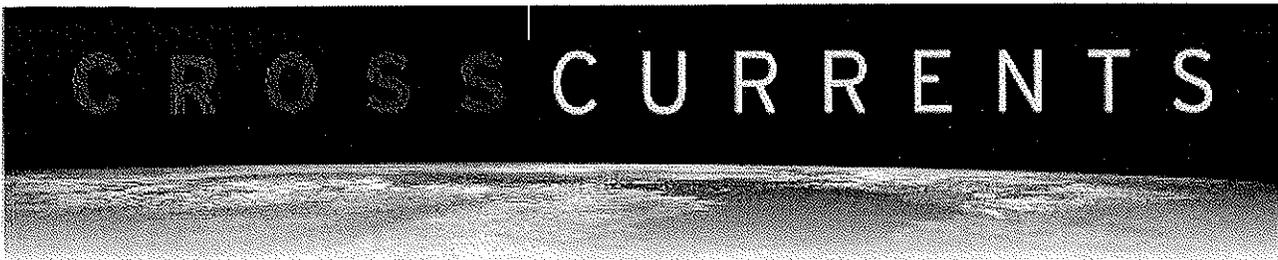
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DOING THEOLOGY IN THE CITY

by Paul Fitzgerald

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The author invites students to walk with the poor and to learn about their faith amid their struggles to survive.

The task of theology is often a lonely endeavor. The hush of the library or the archives, the still of the chapel, and the quiet discipline of one's desk are places where theological research and writing unfold, most often in solitary concentration. The classroom on the protected college campus or seminary, the academic conference in large hotels, and even the cherished conversation in the homes of colleagues do open the theologian to other minds and hearts so that theories and insights may be tested in dialogue. However, these exchanges are often located in affluent social contexts which cannot reveal the full import of the self-revealing Word of God. Certainly, the tradition holds that Christian theology is always done in the context of the thinking and worshiping Church, so the theologian is never alone in her or his work. More recently, theologians have become more intentional about the social and cultural contexts within which they theologize. Following the original example of Jesus and the more recent examples of Liberation Theology, Christian theologians have been moving among the poor, especially the urban poor, in order to discover and articulate a new word about God.

There is, I believe, a scriptural invitation to this type of socially contextualized theology in the seventeenth chapter of Matthew's Gospel, the account of the Transfiguration of Jesus. In an isolated place, high above the tumult of the towns and villages, Peter, James, and John accompanied Christ to a divine summit meeting. There they saw him in glory, and with him were Moses and Elijah. This epiphany gave the disciples a glimpse of the Word's relation to the Law and the Prophets. Perhaps in order better to investigate and contemplate this, the three disciples asked Jesus' permission to set up tents, that they might remain in splendid isolation on the mountaintop of revelation. Their request was left hanging on their lips by the voice of the Father, who identified Jesus as the beloved Son, the favored one, the one to whom they should listen. Awestruck, they fell to the ground. When they opened their eyes, they saw only Jesus, and at once he set off, back down the mountain. In order to fulfill their desires both to remain with him and to understand who he was, the disciples had to leave the epiphany on the

mountaintop and follow Jesus down into the villages. To make sense of the faith-vision (i.e., to theologize), the disciples had to accompany Jesus into the homes of sick and suffering people, into the palaces of pride and injustice, into the temple grounds of plots and confusion. These are the places Jesus desired to be. It was here, in the context of Jesus' interaction with people -- especially the poor -- that the disciples searched for the meaning of the Christ event.

Like these first disciples, contemporary Christian theologians who wish to say something meaningful about Jesus are invited to follow him out of the library, the chapel, even the university, and into the city, where he still moves among the people. In the city, we are challenged to see and hear and encounter Christ again and again, "in ten thousand places, / Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his / To the Father through the features of men's faces."⁽¹⁾ If we do so, then the Christ whom we discover anew in the lives of the poor and through the eyes of the marginalized will be the Christ whom we teach. Therefore, the city affords all students of theology, whether professors or undergraduates, a similar opportunity to contextualize their theological study within living human communities that reveal unique and essential aspects of the Christian tradition as well as offer a way into the ongoing Christ event.

Service-Learning Placements for Undergraduates

"My head spun amid the deafening screams and the frenzy of activity." "I was nauseated by the stench of urine and sweat." "My stomach was knotted in fear as I saw these unkempt men approaching." These are the reported reactions of undergraduate students on their first day working at, respectively, a family shelter, a convalescent hospital, and a soup kitchen. For the length of an academic term they were participant-observers, playing with the children of very poor parents, conversing at the bedsides of the dying, and serving meals to the homeless. These students were also learning theology: gathering data, testing hypotheses, discarding inapt models and stumbling upon new insights as they participated in an undergraduate course in Catholic Social Doctrine that I teach at Santa Clara University. Over the space of a few months, the poor people who had previously floated on the margins of the students' worldview moved to the center of their attention and concern. "Since these children deserve a good education, love and support from society, their families should be strengthened." "The dying should not be abandoned by society, even if their families have disappeared." "We can only solve the problem of homelessness if we truly empathize with these people, hearing their stories and weaving them into the story of the whole community." When asked to ground these prudential judgments and social prescriptions in theological language, students readily adopted and adapted the narratives that Jesus used to describe the Kingdom, or the theological language in the Book of Genesis that describes human persons as created in the image of God. The innovative articulations of these undergraduates, gained by coupling rigorous study with social engagement in the worlds of the poor, are fine testimony to the effectiveness of service-learning for teaching theology to college students.

Over the past few decades, service-learning has become a common feature in the curricula of many colleges and universities across America.⁽²⁾ There are many forms and a great range of intended outcomes for various service-learning

programs, so we must begin by making some distinctions and narrowing our focus. Here I mean to explore the value of a respectful presence among the urban poor that allows for the development of true conversation about the subject matter of theological study. Such participation in human communities serves as an essential context wherein the Judeo-Christian tradition in general, and the Roman Catholic theological tradition in particular, can be engaged, appropriated, and, indeed, extended by students. These persons enter into true dialogue with essential texts, the professor, classmates and interlocutors gained by means of a service-learning placement. A placement at a social service agency allows students to grapple not only with the "what" of poverty -- and not simply with the "how" of social or political remedy -- but also with the "why" of faith-based ethical advocacy for human persons in difficulty. In fact, it is this third level of articulation that is most difficult for students: they need help articulating the normativity that undergirds their real generosity and their deeply felt sense of justice. Sustained dialogue with poor people on the margins of society is marvelously effective in bringing students to explicit clarity about the hardest questions of faith and justice.

Service-learning differs from the many forms of volunteerism which students may have performed during their High School years in that service-learning is always linked to an academic course that includes a rigorous intellectual discipline.⁽³⁾ The subject matter of the academic component of the course (e.g., Modern Languages or Anthropology or Law) will determine the hermeneutic that should structure the interactions at the placement. Service-learning differs from internship or practicum (where already mastered classroom knowledge is then applied) because the experience at the service-learning placement has a real, normative role in the interpretation of theories discussed in class. The experience at the placement affects how students interpret texts and how they judge their interpretations. In the case of theology, key hermeneutics for the whole exercise arise from the central questions, concerns, and symbols of the faith tradition -- from the mysterious and gracious movement of God into our lives, our cares, and our commitments. Communities of the poor provide an essential and inalienable learning environment for the theology student. As the students serve the poor, the "poor" -- who always have and always will play a central role in salvation history -- serve as hosts and teachers to the students.

The insights which support this new teaching strategy are not new. Five centuries ago Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), founder of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), was already employing social context as an essential component of theological reasoning. In 1545, when Pope Paul III convened the Council of Trent, he asked Ignatius to send him three Jesuits who would serve as the Pope's personal theologians at the council. Diego Laínez, Alfonso Salmerón, and Pierre Favre were sent, but the latter died en route from Spain and was replaced by Claude Le Jay. Ignatius instructed them to be "slow and amiable of speech. . . listen closely, the better to understand the speaker's point of view. . . give countervailing reasons [to your own propositions] in order not to appear partial or to inconvenience anyone. . ." ⁽⁴⁾ In a word, Ignatius wanted his men to listen attentively to others, be sensitive to their ideas and opinions, and to put forth their own positions in a spirit of true humility. To give them the proper context within which to develop and maintain purity of heart as they participated in theological debate at the highest

level of the Catholic Church, Ignatius directed the three Jesuit delegates to live with and like the poor of the town, hear their confessions, preach in the streets, and tend the sick in the most wretched of the town's hospitals.

Beyond the value of poverty as a context for the development of humility and piety, I believe that Ignatius saw an added value. He knew that social context affects how a person reads Scripture and tradition; it must also affect how one does theology. In his method of prayer, Ignatius developed the use of the imagination so that he might place himself into the full social reality of the Gospels scenes (often marked by great poverty, illness, social exclusion, injustice, etc.), the better to appreciate and come to know intimately the fullness of the Christ event. In the movement from contemplation to action he had a similar desire for rootedness in the social context of the poor. In his mystical encounter with God at La Storta (in a wayside chapel on the road to Rome) Ignatius asked the Father to place him with the Son -- with Christ poor, Christ crucified, Christ scorned and discounted -- so that Ignatius might *gustar y sentir*, taste and sense the world from Christ's vantage point. Ignatius had fallen in love with God become human, a kenotic God, Emmanuel. In the spiritual tradition which Ignatius founded, the person discerning her or his vocation asks for the grace to stand with Christ's poor, to serve them, to befriend them, and to listen to their expressions of faith so as to be closer to Christ among the poor. This holy desire dovetails nicely with the strategy of service-learning. To enter into reflective and prayerful dialogue with the poor furnishes the student with the possibility of seeing Christ through the eyes of those among whom Christ wished to be.

Service placements at, for example, senior centers, shelters for battered women, and AIDS hospices afford students the opportunity to develop relationships with people "in poverty," broadly conceived. Multiple visits give students the chance to go beyond first fears and initial impressions. Extended conversations allow trust to grow in the hearts of visitors and hosts alike. Students gain confidence in their abilities to enter into conversation with people in situations very different from their own. With time, students can go beyond pleasantries to a level of dialogue that allows for theological reflection *with*, and not just *on* or *about*, the poor. Service-learning placements also give theology students an entree into multiple cultural worlds so that they can become conscious of their own cultural biases even as they learn about other possible worldviews.

A large part of university-level theological study is devoted to making belief more complex. Late adolescents and young adults typically discover at some point that the theological articulations learned in childhood are no longer adequate as they reconsider major life questions in the light of adult faith. Contextualized theological study helps students to move beyond simple answers to complex questions. It also helps students outgrow naive belief in their own objectivity. This sometimes painful, often disconcerting process is advanced by the give and take of true dialogue. Service-learning placements help students to avoid the lurking danger of complete relativism, the postmodern mistrust of all meta-narrative and any normativity, and the surrender to utilitarian individualism. Christian faith proposes norms and principles that do in fact claim a certain absolute priority because of the ultimacy of the One who is self-revelatory. The cry of the poor for justice and for bread, as challenging as it may be (especially if it obliges a person

to renounce advantage, comfort, and power voluntarily), gains credibility and attractiveness when it is heard directly from the poor, and from poor people whose humanity has become manifest through sustained conversation.

In my experience, Catholic social doctrine becomes intuitively compelling when it is engaged from the vantage points of the poor and within specific social contexts of human marginalization and suffering. The proximity to crisis and tragedy brings an urgency to the examination of that hierarchy of truths about God and the world that are revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The practical solutions to social problems may not be easy, and the specific demands of God may not be clear, but students' experience of struggling with difficult theological questions in the context of the real social world of the poor underlines the seriousness of the questions and the value of their pursuit. Further, learning to theologize in conversation with the poor is itself creative -- the back and forth reveals added layers of meaning about God and humankind, even as it affirms the perduring mystery of God.

The reciprocal movement between the service placement and the classroom mirrors an important aspect of the training that the Society of Jesus organizes for its own men in formation. Jesuits in training (often called Scholastics) begin with a two-year novitiate program. Even as they are deepening their habits of prayer and reflection, they engage in transformative experiments that cross political, economic, and cultural borders. This process of placing themselves among "the poor," broadly understood, is continued and deepened during Philosophy Studies and during the period of practical work that follows, often called "regency." All these experiments provide a great deal of personally important experience to be reflected upon in spiritual direction. These years of engagement and reflection lay a good foundation for a more sophisticated and variegated hermeneutic with which to engage theological studies, which follow upon the years of regency. All undergraduate students can profit from this kind of "back and forth" of service and study that is so deeply a part of Jesuit spirituality, a programmatic way to foster the Ignatian ideal of the "contemplative in action." Service-learning supports the possibility that a person's original intentions of generosity can be married to intellectually sharpened, academically probed skills and insights so that practice can become praxis and sentiment can become strategy. The importance of actual engagement in real social situations is crucial; developmental theorists Thomas Cook and Brian Flay remark that we are more likely to act ourselves into new ways of thinking than think ourselves into new ways of acting.(5)

The benefits of contextualized theology studies extend well beyond the desired goal of a better understanding of the tradition. For those students who are and will remain practicing Roman Catholics, a developed theological sensitivity to the catholicity of the faith (i.e., its unity in diversity, or better, its universality through its complexity) will make them agents for ever deeper communion in an ever more multicultural Catholic Church. The multiplicity of Catholicisms in North America has long been the fact and is more recently becoming the accepted norm. Greater sensitivity to, and curiosity about, the great richness of diverse cultural instantiations of Catholicism requires an ever greater ability for members of the Church (both for folks from mainstream society and for those upwardly mobile students from historically marginalized communities who will enter the

mainstream thanks to a good education) to be able to read, enter into, appreciate, and learn from other cultures. Beyond the Catholic Church, the ever greater and more appreciated multiculturalism of North American society means that these same habits of the mind and patterns of the heart will be ever more essential for all our students, who will assume positions of influence in professional and civic life after graduation.

I live and work in the Santa Clara Valley, known worldwide as the Silicon Valley, formerly known as the Valley of the Heart's Delight. In one of the richest places on earth, I invite students to walk with the poor and to learn about their faith amid their struggles to survive. The students make a conscious choice to shift their gaze from the richest, the fastest, and the latest to the poorest, the slowest, and the least connected. In so doing, the students move to the margins of society, to those blank spaces which normally funnel our attention toward the "important text" at the center of the page. In this they do as Christ did when he took women, children, foreigners, and the sick from the edge of the crowd and stood them in the midst of the assembly. Jesus did this to actualize the Reign of God, for the effects of his actions were to remind his hearers of the inalienable humanity of the poor. This type of action was both pastoral and prophetic, for it was both for the good of the person and for the well being of the whole human family.⁽⁶⁾ By engaging in service-learning placements, students confront the self-revelation of God in Scripture and the tradition in conversation with the people at the agencies where they are working. The placement gives them questions to ask the texts; the texts challenge them to see the fuller reality of the people at their placement, to see what is and intuit what ought to be. In the great conversation that envelops the placement and the classroom, students theologize in the difficult overlap between multiple contexts: their own personal histories, the life world of the poor, and the culture of inquiry in the university. What they tend to discover is that the poor continue to have a certain pride of place in the greater communal discernment of the past, the present and the future of God's steadfast, saving love.

The important work of theological education is, in my view, essentially the formation of men and women for adult membership in the Church, a vocation to active participation in the Church's primary mission, the evangelization of culture -- i.e., to bring the Word and the world into fruitful conversation. This involves not merely the transfer of information, nor simply the inculcation of skills, nor only the sharpening of prudential judgment, though all these are essential elements. There is also a passion for the truth of God that can and must be imparted, and I believe that it must first be modeled. Living human communities can do this. It is transformative to listen to human beings telling their stories in their own homes, in their own churches, in their own neighborhoods. It is absolutely fascinating to hear people speak of a God who is close to them, even as they struggle to make sense of scandalous human sin and God's irrevocable promise.

The Work of Theology

The teaching church is also the learning church, just as every good teacher remains a good learner. What theologians ask students to do must also be integral to the life and work of the theologian. Since it involves human communities,

theologizing in the context of the urban poor requires careful consideration. The poor are not the subject of research in the classical sense of controlled experiments and objective observation, nor is the movement into these communities the same as a trip to the library, to the archives, or even a short visit to a distant and exotic land. Institutionally structured, ongoing relationships between university-based theologians and urban communities of the poor invite the development of participant observation, fellowship in worship, and sustained dialogue which supports a common exploration of the meaning of faith. As St. Anselm continues to remind us, theology is faith seeking understanding, and ever more so, we know that this search takes place in the context of the specific communities to which we belong. Memberships in such communities are limiting and freeing at the same time, as Karl Mannheim reminds us.⁽⁷⁾ A person's point of view is always partial, always biased, for there is no Archimedean point, no vantage outside of social reality to afford us an objective view of our selves and our world. We can only view reality from within a life-world, and so we can only hope to make our view more complex, and critique our bias, if and as we move into other life worlds. Perhaps we can venture no further than the boarder areas of these new-to-us life-worlds. Modesty and candor impose on us the admission that we cannot be fully at home in multiple cultural worlds, but we can live the discomfort of being a regular guest in the world of the urban poor. There we may yet discover some new fruit that grows on the grafted limb of the tree at the juncture of two worlds. Through the engagement of multiple perspectives, and especially through perspectives that integrate lived faith commitments into their very being, we can gain a more catholic view, a more nuanced and complex view, and thereby a greater understanding of the truth beyond ourselves, a truth that attracts and impels us, a truth that grasps us fully even as we only grasp at it.

Many theologians have come to know the value of contextualized, hermeneutically self- and community-conscious research and writing. No finer example can be found than Bill O'Neill's work on the inclusion of the poor in the tasks of Christian Social Ethics.⁽⁸⁾ He makes the following point, which I think is key: "The epistemic or hermeneutical privilege of the poor, we may say, rests not in canonizing a particular point of view, but rather in revealing the partiality of [all] illusory or coerced consensus -- the 'systematic distortions' [quoting Habermas] of our communicative interaction."⁽⁹⁾ If the theologian remains ensconced in the library or the archives and does theology in conversation solely with one's peers, the fruit of this research would most likely engage crucial questions from within a single culture, most probably a middle class, academic, modern or postmodern one. There are, of course, other worlds just across town, life-worlds which we ignore at our peril.

Roberto Goizueta tells the story of a rather urbane abbot, the rector of the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, in Mexico City, who was forced to resign his post in July 1996 following the huge public uproar that ensued when he was publicly quoted as dismissing the historical reality of Juan Diego. More than impolitic, this event illustrates the dangers of theologizing apart from the lived faith of the Church, and apart from the faith commitments of the people at the base of the Church. Goizueta opines that any theology done apart from the lived experience of the poor will fail to grasp the fullness and the integrity of the Christian tradition. "The increased attention to popular religion *as praxis*, as the starting point of

theology, brings to light those aspects of [Gustavo] Gutiérrez's method too often underappreciated in the past, namely, the specifically *Christian* aspects of his definition of theology: 'critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word.' "(10)

To do theology in the context of communities changes the way we do theology, changes our concerns, exposes our biases, and suggests new avenues of exploration. Don Browning talks about this under the rubric of Practical Theology, an approach to theologizing that brings practical concerns into the process from the outset. "The theologian does not stand before God, Scripture, and the historic witness of the Church like an empty slate or Lockean *tabula rasa* ready to be determined, filled up, and then plugged into a concrete, practical situation. A more accurate description goes like this. We come to the theological task with questions shaped by the secular and religious practices in which we are implicated -- sometimes uncomfortably."(11) By placing ourselves in the social context of the urban poor, we can surface preexisting theories, biases, assumptions that undergird and influence the theology which we have done. Further, by participating in the religious practices of the poor, we can open ourselves up to new ways of viewing the world, new ways of conceiving God.

Browning goes on to suggest that it is in moments of crisis, when religious theory and practice are so out of joint that they are unable to afford solutions to major community problems, that we are forced to construct a new integrity of theory and practice. This reconstruction begins with practice, with the lived faith of the community. While I agree with him, I think too that there is a way that members of the middle class can and often do avoid facing the many current crises of the poor: high crime rates, high poverty rates, high incarceration rates, high rates of illness and low access to medical care, decent education, economic opportunity, social respect, and political power. By agreeing to leave our protected enclaves, we can proactively move into social settings where our theologizing may become rooted in the lived faith of urban communities of the poor, and there we can seek for a new integration of theory and practice. We can purposefully choose to enter the crises in which the poor live. We can give them a preferential place not only in our care but also in our thought.

What I am suggesting is that, by placing our students and ourselves with the poor, and by sharing faith with them, we will enrich our theological thinking to address problems in new ways and find new solutions. Christian theologians fulfill their vocation by remaining with Christ and searching for new words that will say something meaningful about Christ. In the twenty-fifth chapter of his Gospel, Matthew reports Jesus' clear conviction that he remains always present among the hungry, the naked, the imprisoned, the ill. Indeed, Jesus identifies with them in an absolute and categorical manner. Today's cities are the places wherein students of theology can encounter Christ again, where they can test out in rigor and dialogue the insights and the intuitions they first heard whispered on the mountaintops of retreat and withdrawal.

Notes

1. [Back to text] Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J., "As Kingfishers catch fire" in *The*

Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins, ed. W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 90.

2. [Back to text] For a fine general introduction to this rapidly growing field, see Barbara Jacoby and Associates eds., *Service-Learning in Higher Education: Concepts and Practices* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996). For up-to-date research on the effectiveness of service-learning, see Janet Eyler and Dwight E. Giles Jr.,'s extensive work, including *Where's the Learning in Service-Learning?* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999).
3. [Back to text] Service-learning differs from community service (even if the latter contains a schedule of reading, reflection and discussion) most clearly in that students are primarily seeking understanding of a given academic question (Psychology, Sociology, Theology). Students are serving to learn and not learning to serve.
4. [Back to text] Quoted by Jean Lacouture in *Jesuits: A Multibiography* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1995), 80. On the apostolic strategy of Ignatius and his early companions, see John W. O'Malley, S.J., *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993). On the importance of the urban setting for Jesuit ministries, see Thomas M. Lucas, *Landmarking: City, Church and Jesuit Urban Strategy* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1997).
5. [Back to text] Thomas Cook and Brain Flay, "The Persistence of Experimentally Induced Attitude Change" in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, ed. L. Berkowitz, V, II (New York: Academic Press, 1978).
6. [Back to text] In his encounter with Jesus, Zacchaeus gains grace not only for himself but for his entire household, to which has come the Reign of God (Luke 19:1-10).
7. [Back to text] Still the best treatment of the social embeddedness of all human thought, see his classic *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, first published in 1936 in German. There is a fine English translation by Louis Wirth and Edward Shils, published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
8. [Back to text] "No Amnesty for Sorrow: The Privilege of the Poor in Christian Social Ethics" *Theological Studies* 55, no. 4 (December 1994): 638-56.
9. [Back to text] *Ibid.*, 648.
10. [Back to text] R. Goizueta, "A Ressourcement from the Margins: U.S. Latino Popular Catholicism as Lived Religion" in *Theology and Lived Christianity*, ed. D. Hammond, Annual Publication of the College Theology Society, vol. 45 (Mystic, Conn.: Bayard, 2000), 13.
11. [Back to text] Don Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 5-6.

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