

Response

by

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Spaulding suggests that, unless holiness theology can be adequately “re-narrated,” “the gift” cannot “be given.” I presume that Spaulding means to say that Holiness theology is in such a crisis that, without significant repair, God’s gift of holiness is lost. Two particular issues arise in Spaulding’s work that seem intrinsically related, which I will address: 1) The implicit primacy of theology over liturgy; and 2) the suggestion that holiness is not fundamentally moral.

Liturgy:

The emphasis on an adequate theology of holiness seems to make theologians, not the Church catholic, necessary for God to give the gift of holiness. Spaulding suggests that “The future of holiness seems to be dependent upon our capacity to understand it within an ontology shaped by the triune life of God.” I argue that most of the saints of history could not have articulated an “understanding” of a Trinitarian ontology. Yet they all participated in the life of the Church, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

This is not to suggest that theological work is for naught, but it is not the only contingency that decides the future of holiness. Theology can help guide the practices of the Church toward faithfulness, but it is not so important that it can prevent the Gift from being given. Theology can only assist the Church in receiving that Gift — to help the Church give thanks (doxology). In the giving of thanks the reception of this Gift brings the nascence of holiness.

The “re-narration” of a theology (How does one re-narrate narration?) does not, and cannot, insure a future for holiness. Theologies can (and often do) exist that maintain notions of beauty, *poiesis*, and vision without a referent; they are merely thoughts. A clever thought does not necessarily invent something into existence. Thinking does not “make it so.” There must be something to which theology can gesture in order to make sense of its grammar.

On the other hand, the Church has long held the position that the Sacraments do enact something. They do make something present. Liturgy (*leitourgia*) does “make it so.” Spaulding is right to acknowledge the crisis in Nazarene liturgy, but not only as the symptom of a problem, as the cause of it.

Morality

Spaulding’s emphasis on theology over liturgy may explain his resistance to the notion of holiness as “moral discourse.” I agree that holiness is not primarily discourse; but if it is not moral, what is it? What would an “immoral holiness” be (except a disembodied mystical experience, which Spaulding rightly criticizes)? The problem is not thinking of holiness as moral; it is thinking that humans have a moral capacity aside from the gift of God.

The gift of holiness is not treated as a gift, if it is responded to as moral contract. A gift is not an economic exchange, but an erotic one. It is better represented by submersion in water and ingestion of bread and wine than in the publication of papers and correction of dogma or the enforcing of legal codes. Theology is only Christian when practiced in relationship to the sacraments.

Simply because holiness is not a moral contract, it does not follow that holiness is not moral. It is the avoidance of the moral nature of holiness (as witness to the gift of God), not some Nazarene obsession with morality that has crippled holiness discourse. Both moral contracts and experiential accounts of holiness focus primarily on the life of individuals and fail to account for the Church as a moral (and political) Body. Holiness theology is not overly “moral,” but so narrowly “moral” that it loses vision of God at work in the Church.

Ultimately, Holiness theology is lacking because it refuses to reflect upon embodied holiness in the life of the Church. Holiness theologians are quick to debate the coherence of certain soteriologies, but may have a difficult time accounting for the moral example of Christians from outside Nazarene discipline. How do we account for Roman Catholic exemplars such as Jean Vanier, Mother Teresa, and Dorothy Day? Was their perfection instantaneous or gradual? Is it in light of, or in spite of Roman Catholic dogmas, that these persons are exemplars of the Christian faith? It is toward the life of the faithful that all Christian theology must gesture, if it is to help sustain the promise of holiness.

The abstraction of holiness into theology keeps the Church (specifically theologians) safe from God. It is the embodied life of holiness that has led so many of those who have gone before us into martyrdom, and it seems to be quite difficult to be both martyred and tenured.

In conclusion, Spaulding rightly recognizes a crisis in the holiness tradition that is represented clearly in liturgical problems, which tend more toward consumerism than formation or doxology. His solution, however, is not a recovery of a faithful sacramental practice, but a “re-narration” of Christian theology that includes notions of beauty, *poiesis*, and vision. I argue that theology alone cannot insure a “future” for holiness. Holiness is a gift, given by God in faithfulness to God’s promise, not by the clever inventions of the few members of the Body of Christ who are also academics.

Indeed, the gift is being ever-given; that is the beginning of our existence out of Trinitarian ontology of which Spaulding speaks. (We live, know, and have our being by God’s “donation.”) It is in the ever-giveness of the gift that holiness begins within us as the Church. Whether or not this bears the fruit of holiness is more a matter of our erotic responses of surrender (Baptism), thanksgiving (Eucharist), and praise (doxology) than of our reflection and speculations. Does Holiness need a Christian Theology? Yes, insofar as theology can help guide the faithful practice of the Church. More importantly, however, we must ask if theology needs holiness to be Christian. Again, we must answer “yes.”