Contextual Theology and Prophetic Dialogue

Introduction: Contextual Theology as Prophetic Dialogue / Prophetic Dialogue as Contextual Theology

Doing *Contextual Theology* is an exercise of *Prophetic Dialogue*.¹ Prophetic dialogue is practiced in a dialectic of openness to the new, surprising, and sometimes disturbing, and fidelity to the traditional, kerygmatic, and sometimes confrontative. Contextual theology is done with the same dialogical openness, prophetic fidelity, and creativity. At Nicea, for example, there had to be an openness to a term beyond biblical language that would answer a question that only the Hellenistic context of Alexandria had given rise—*homoousios*; but at the same time this new term had to be faithful to what the Bible proclaimed and the Christian people firmly yet rather instinctively believed—that Jesus was Lord, that he had revealed the true face of God, that God had touched human life and so redeemed it fully.² In our own day, to give another example, we search for ways to affirm the insights of contemporary physics and evolutionary theory without abandoning our faith in biblical and traditional faith that “in the beginning ... God created heaven and earth” (Gn 1:1).³

At the same time, prophetic dialogue is an exercise of contextual theology. When do we keep silent and learn from the situation around us? When and how do we explain “the reason for [our] hope” (1 Pt 3:15) or decide to organize a demonstration against a nation’s military action? When do we organize a liturgy of lament after a tragedy like a bush fire or a typhoon, and when do we celebrate a liturgy of hope in a country torn apart by violence? When do we agree to accept an offer to celebrate a day of thanksgiving in an interfaith service, and when do invite non-Christians to join us in celebrating Christmas

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or Easter? Each one of these decisions depends on the context in which we live. The wonderfully moving film Of Gods and Men depicts how the monks of Tibhirine in Algeria made the prophetic decision to remain in their monastery despite almost certain capture and death by Algerian rebel forces. Such a decision was hardly a casual one. It was taken with a deep understanding of the meaning of their dialogical missionary presence among the local people, one that gave them the authority to confront a corrupt government as well as the rebels who menaced them.

This chapter will reflect on this close connection between the practice of prophetic dialogue and the doing of theology that is rooted in a particular context. Good theologizing is a reflection on faith that learns from experience, that illuminates it, and that sometimes challenges it. An attitude and spirituality of prophetic dialogue is rooted in the practice of theological reflection that honors, reflects on, and critically appropriates present human experience—or context. The chapter will have three parts. Part I will reflect briefly on the practices of contextual theology and of prophetic dialogue themselves. Part II will then reflect on contextual theologizing as a practice of prophetic dialogue. Finally, part III will reflect on the practice of prophetic dialogue as a practice of contextual theologizing.

Contextual Theology and Prophetic Dialogue

Contextual theology—or, perhaps better, contextual theologizing, since theology is more an activity than a content—is, as I have described it in my book Models of Contextual Theology, a way of doing theology that takes into account both past and present. It is a result of vigorous, mutually critically dialogue between the experience of the Christian past, preserved in scripture and tradition, and Christian experience in the present, in other words, in a particular context. Such context might consist of personal or social experience (a death in my family, Typhoon Yolanda in the Philippines, the Paris shootings in November, 2015), social location (male, female, rich, poor, disabled, gay), the web of meanings and power relations involved in culture, and social change (technology, changing attitudes toward sexuality) in a culture. Depending on how scripture, tradition, and context interact in this dialogue, I have suggested, there will emerge various models or combinations of models that guide and

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