Editorial: Theology Today

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The recent document from the Roman Catholic Church’s International Theological Commission (ITC), entitled Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria,1 is likely to be of interest to readers of this journal not just because of the detailed analysis of the enterprise of theology that it offers, but more specifically because it particularly stresses that theology, of its very nature, is an ecclesial activity. In what follows, I shall offer some general comments about the ITC and the origins of the document, and then give a brief overview of the latter’s contents, highlighting various points.

General Comments

The proposal that there should be an international commission of Catholic theologians was actually made in 1967 by the newly formed Synod of Bishops at its first meeting.2 Just as the Synod, called for by the bishops at Vatican II3 and already announced by Pope Paul VI at the start of the final session of the council in September 1965,4 was an attempt to perpetuate the collegial

3 See Vatican II, Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church, Christus Dominus (1965), §5.
4 Pope Paul announced his intention on 14 September 1965 and the Synod was duly established by his motu proprio, Apostolica Sollicitudo, the following day.
experience of the bishops at the council, so the formation of a commission of theologians would enable the fruitful cooperation between pastors and theologians at the council to continue in some fashion. Pope Paul duly approved the statutes of the ITC in July 1969 and it held its first meeting very soon afterwards, in October 1969.

The ITC consists of thirty theologians of many different nationalities, appointed by the pope on the basis of advice from national episcopal conferences around the world, and the members of the commission serve for periods of five years. After each quinquennium, the commission is reconstituted, with some members staying on, others stepping down. I was appointed as a member in 2004 and reappointed in 2009.

The prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) is ex officio the president of the ITC, so Cardinal Ratzinger served in that capacity from 1981 until his election as Pope Benedict XVI in 2005. As a theologian, Joseph Ratzinger was actually one of the founding members of the ITC and served two terms. He was not eligible to serve in the third quinquennium that began in 1980, since by then he was a bishop, but in 1981 he became prefect of the CDF and so returned to the ITC as president. So, in one capacity or another, the pope emeritus has been involved with the ITC through most of its history.

In 1985, Cardinal Ratzinger made the following comment, which has quite a bearing on the document being considered. “The special contribution of the Commission is to gain a hearing for the common voice of theology amid all the diversities that exist. For notwithstanding the legitimate pluralism of theological cultures in the Church, the unity of theology must remain and empower theologians to offer some common account of their subject.” The ITC has treated various specific issues throughout its forty-year history, and produced some twenty five documents of varying lengths, including one on theological pluralism, one on the relationship between the magisterium and theology, and one on the interpretation of dogma, but never until now has it considered theology as a whole and tried to give a ‘common account’ of it with a ‘common voice’. What makes for the ‘unity of theology’ amid the vast multiplicity of its forms is precisely the theme of the new document.

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7 He became Archbishop of Munich in 1977.
9 Theological Pluralism (1972).
10 Theses on the Relationship between the Ecclesiastical Magisterium and Theology (1975).