# As You Begin Your Seminary Studies

Dr. Justo L. González



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Atlanta, Georgia
August 17, 2023

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Good day.

If your class is in any way similar to my own class when I entered seminary almost seven decades ago, I suppose that some of you have received well-meaning but generally wrong headed advice warning you not to believe everything you will hear in seminary. This is not generally very good advice. But there are some cases in which it is appropriate. A case in point is what you have just heard from Dr. Smith regarding myself. Introductions are a particular literary genre which is characterized by exaggeration and unbounded positivity. So, please interpret what Dr. Smith has just said in that light. But thanks anyhow, Ted!

A few months ago, Dr. Smith was kind enough to invite me to address a very different audience on the subject "What God is doing today in theological education." In some ways, the subject for today is the same, even though the audience is very different. On that occasion, I was addressing a group of leaders in theological education who have been doing some groundbreaking reflection and writing on the theme "Theological Education between the Times." I suspect that during this particular course, as well as later in your theological studies, you will have the opportunity to read and discuss some of the results of that project, so I'll not say much about it right now.

Even though you are a very different audience, standing at a different point in the process of your own theological education, I believe that at least part of what I told that group on that occasion is also particularly applicable as a starting point for your own reflections as

you seek to place yourselves within this complex world –and to many of you a new world– of theological education. Therefore, I would like to begin my remarks today at the point where I concluded my remarks then. At that point, I said:

> Again and again, I am asked about the future of theological education. Again and again, I find myself wishing that I had a crystal ball in which I could see the future. But I find that when I look into a crystal ball most of what I see is a distorted reflection of myself. Sometimes I wish it were otherwise; but then I realize that what the future holds is probably much better than what I see in my own crystal ball. Now I find myself dropping the crystal ball and seeing it shattered into apparently meaningless smithereens. Like John wept when no one was found who could open the seal, I too am tempted to weep when I look at my shattered crystal ball. I even have reason to fear that if I touch the broken pieces they may cut and hurt me. I wish they were whole, and reasonable, and edgeless, like my lost crystal ball.
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> But then I look again at those shattered pieces of glass, scattered with little rhyme or reason that I can see, and as the light shines upon them I catch a glimpse of unexpected beauty that I would never have found in my original crystal ball. The light of the sun is reflected in many directions, breaking into multiple colors and rainbows that I could never have created or even dreamt. And then I say: 'Thank you, God, for this crisis of brokenness, through which you will guide us into a new wholeness not of our own doing; into a new obedience not out of our own desire; into a new beauty not of our own dreaming'.

This is what I said then. This is what I still believe most of the time. This is what still causes me to tremble. This is what repeatedly causes me to break out in praise. If in a few days you remember nothing of what I say here today, I hope you will at least be able to retain a vision of a divine activity and presence so overpowering, so mysterious, so far-reaching, that we cannot control it, we cannot foresee it, we cannot plan it. All we can do is catch a glimpse of the overwhelming beauty behind it and follow after it. As I now look at the shattered pieces of that former crystal ball, I see shimmering sparks that help us understand where we are today amid this beautiful mess that we call theological education.

We call this school a "seminary." Surprising as it may be, for approximately three

quarters of its history the church had no such thing as seminaries. Actually, that word was first applied in the field of theological education in the 16th century, when English Catholics, concerned over what they saw as the insidious infiltration of Protestant ideas into British Catholicism, proposed that "seminaries" be founded for the training of young men who would serve as Catholic priests. Until that time, the word "seminary" meant what today we call a "seedbed." Since it is difficult in a large garden to keep all the frail seedlings supplied with adequate water, and free from pests and disease, a gardener will plant all the seeds in a limited and well protected space where they can sprout and grow free from every menace of pests, disease, or drought. Eventually, when the seedlings are sufficiently strong and properly shaped, they will be transplanted to the wider field where they are expected to produce fruit.

Clearly, this notion of having seminaries for the training of priests drew from the monastic experience. Although when monasteries were originally founded, they did not have the purpose of producing priests; throughout the Middle Ages they did, in fact, become a source from which many priests and bishops were drawn. This made sense, for monastic institutions were characterized by a communal life of devotion, of study, and of reflection. When in the coming months you study church history, you will find numerous cases of people who set out to be monks and ended up being pastors and church leaders. Among these, one immediately thinks of Augustine, one of the most influential theologians of all times; Chrysostom, often considered the most eloquent of all preachers; and the Protestant reformer Martin Luther.

So, don't be surprised if when you reflect on your own life as a seminarian, and on what

is expected of you, you see among the shattered and apparently broken pieces of theological education fleeting sparks that remind you of the communal life and communal devotion of monasteries. Please do not disavow them entirely. Certainly, the image of a school of theology as a monastery has become increasingly untenable for a number of reasons. First of all, schools of theology are becoming less residential. When I first went to seminary, it would have been inconceivable to try to have a school of theology without dormitories, a common dining hall, and other such communal features. But even then, it was becoming increasingly difficult for schools of theology to be entirely residential. Then came the pandemic, and we were zoomed into forms of education in which interpersonal face-to-face relationships were less intensive and less significant in the entire process of education. While there is much to be said in favor of new patterns of education, it is important that we not forget that community life and communal devotion are an essential part of theological formation, because they are an essential part of Christian life. In a theological school such as this, which is no longer residential, it is absolutely crucial for each and every one of us to make room for that communal experience without which there is no proper theological education, no Christian formation, and even no Christian life.

But there are other models from the past. In the 16th century, while Catholics were founding what amounted to seedbeds for the planting and nurturing of the young seedlings that would eventually become priests, Protestants were following a different route. Protestantism was born in a university, when a monk who was also a biblical scholar and a person of profound faith found disturbing disagreements between the witness of Scripture and of the early church and the beliefs and practices of a church of which he was and wished to

remain a faithful child.

Being born in a university, Protestantism became known for its support of universities and of their reform. Luther's most distinguished follower and supporter, Philip Melanchthon, was so active in the founding and reformation of universities that he was generally given the title of *Praeceptor Germaniae* –master teacher of Germany.

The reason why universities played a central role in the early development of Protestantism was not only the general conviction of the early Protestant leaders that education was important, but also the overwhelming need to train and retrain thousands of pastors and preachers within the scope of a radically new understanding of the gospel and of the meaning of Christian faith.

Today we hear much about a crisis in theological education. But think of the crisis that took place in the 16th century, when millions of people who had been taught that eternal salvation was attained by means of good works now had to be taught that salvation is a gift of God's grace. People who had been taught that the souls of their loved ones could be rescued from purgatory by paying for masses in their name now had to be taught that there is no such thing as purgatory, and that there is no particular merit in having masses said. People who had been led to expect the church to be an infallible teacher of truth now had to be taught that it is otherwise. Now that is a real crisis in theological education!

In response to that crisis, Luther, Melanchthon, Calvin, and many others sought solutions by reforming universities, by proposing reformations at every level of education, by writing catechisms and orders of worship reflecting the new doctrines. Much of this made sense, and most of it succeeded. But God's response to the crisis at that time went far beyond

the plans of the wisest of reformers. And we are heirs, not only of those reformers, but also of the actions of God responding to the crisis of the time.

Today, if you have not already heard about a present crisis in theological education, I guarantee you will soon hear about it! Although people often speak of that crisis in the more practical terms of financial difficulties, demographic changes, new technologies, increasingly complex curricula, and many other such things, the fact is that the various models that shaped the background of most institutions of theological education –the seedbed, the monastery, and the university– are proving to be inadequate or at least insufficient. The seedbed model still seems to be the ideal of the very same people who may have told you not to believe everything that you hear in seminary. They do not want the seminary to expose you to new ideas, but rather to protect you from them. No matter what such people may think or wish, the notion of the seminary as a seedbed protecting students from contamination has become so anachronistic as to be not only impracticable, but even ridiculous.

We could easily spend much time discussing the reasons for the present crisis in theological education. All those considerations are important. They must not be set aside or ignored. But I would say that the crisis is much deeper than any of those issues, and much greater than all of them put together. The crisis is not primarily in the institutions to which we have somehow delegated the task of theological education. The crisis is rather in our very notion of what theological education is and what its primary locus should be.

If I may refer back to the very brief historical outline I have just given you, what I am trying to say should be clear: the proper locus and the main agent of theological education is not the school of theology, but the church itself. For some fifteen centuries, the church

survived, produced its own leadership –sometimes good leadership, and sometimes not so good– without what we now call schools of theology. But the church has always needed and practiced theological education.

Let me hasten to make clear that I do not mean that we should do away with schools of theology. What I mean is that in order to face their own crisis, schools of theology must find their own place within the total spectrum of theological education. As theological students, I would encourage you, as you pursue your studies in this school, to be thinking not only in terms of the place of a particular course in your curriculum, but rather in terms of a much wider picture of theological education and in terms of your own place in it even beyond this school of theology or your eventual theological degree.

Allow me to try to say this as starkly as I can: I would encourage you not to think of your time and work in this school of theology primarily as a requirement to be met, or even as a place where you will learn skills that you will be able to use in your later ministry, or as your place to find answers to your deepest questions. All of these may be true and valuable; but none of these goals –or even all of them together– are enough! If you think of your education just as a requirement to be met so you can be ordained or otherwise certified for a particular kind of ministry, you are wasting your time and cheating yourself out of most of what you could receive here. If you think of your years here merely as a way to learn skills that you will later use in your ministry, you will probably learn some such skills, but your ensuing ministry will probably burn you out rather quickly. If you are here in order to find answers to your deeper questions, I must honestly warn you that in the end you will have more questions than answers.

Instead of that, I would invite you to think about the possibility of viewing your time here as an opportunity to join in the task of theological education, not simply as it takes place in institutions such as this, but particularly as it takes place in the life and mission of the entire church.

In a few words, what I am trying to say is that theological education is not something reserved for particularly intelligent, particularly devout, or particularly called Christians. Theological education is at the very core of Christian life, and there can be no Christian life without theological education. If it is true that our own personal education did not begin when we first attended school, but rather when someone first related to us, when someone spoke the first words to us, when someone invited us to wonder at the marvels of the world, it is also true that our theological education began when we were first born of water and the Spirit, when we first were invited to marvel are the beauties of God's world. In everyday language, we may say that someone is uneducated. But the truth is that a person who has not been educated in any way whatsoever can hardly develop as a person; and that a Christian who has not even a basic theological education can hardly be called a Christian.

If this sounds harsh, it is because we are still thinking of education in elitist terms. We are still thinking of education only in terms of the sort of education that is reserved for a fortunate few and is not an essential part of Christian life itself.

When we look at the early church, we find that they did not consider theological education as something reserved for a better few. Indeed, when people who had no background in Judaism began requesting admission into the church through baptism, the church developed an entire program of education in preparation for baptism.

These candidates for baptism had already received some theological education from those who had first witnessed to them. At a time when persecution was always a possibility, it was highly unlikely for somebody to attend a Christian service without already being at least inclined to consider the Christian faith. That first inclination usually resulted from the witness of a friend or neighbor, or perhaps of a teacher or martyr such as Justin. Now, after they had attended church and listened to the exposition of Scripture for quite some time, if they decided to join the church through baptism, they were assigned mentors to teach them not only the doctrinal elements of Christianity, but also its ethical dimensions, which often presented a much greater challenge than doctrine itself. Normally, that process of preparation for baptism would last at least two years, and sometimes more. Shortly before their baptism on an Easter morning, these candidates for baptism received a final preparation under the leadership of the bishop, who taught them the creed and made sure that they understood what it meant. During all that time of preparation, these prospective Christians attended what was called the Service of the Word, which was mostly devoted to the reading and exposition of Scripture.

An interesting element of that entire educational process has to do with the relationship between theory and lived experience. Many today are surprised to know that even after all this preparation for baptism, candidates had very little idea of what would take place at their own baptism. First they would go through the experience, and then –usually during a week of further instruction– they were told what their experience meant. For instance, upon emerging from the waters of baptism the neophyte was anointed, without much further explanation. Later he or she would learn that they have been anointed because in ancient Israel kings and priests were anointed upon receipt of their office; and these new Christians had been anointed

because they had become part of the royal priesthood which is the church –royal because they are children and heirs of the great King, and priestly because part of their task is to bring the entire world in prayer before the presence of God. In a word, they first became part of the royal priesthood through anointing, and later they were told the significance of their experience.

I do not wish to paint too pretty a picture of the early church. It too, like our church, left much to be desired. It too had its flaws and shortcomings. I am simply suggesting that we should recover from that early church the notion and the practice of theological education as a continuum encompassing all of Christian life. Significantly, at the present time education in general is leaving behind the notion that theory precedes praxis –that one first learns and then and then applies what one has learned– and moving to a more complex and dynamic model in which there is a constant circulation from praxis to theory, back to further praxis, on to further theory, and so on.

This is why I say that when we use the phrase "the crisis of theological education," and by that mean simply the crisis in the finances, the curricula, and the vision of theological schools we have not even begun to grasp the extent of the crisis. The crisis is not just in theological schools; it is in the entire church itself.

It is easy to see how this has happened. For over 1700 years, throughout most of the Western world and even beyond its bounds, Christianity has enjoyed the support of the surrounding culture, and most of the time also the support of the state and its institutions. In those circumstances, we began to take for granted that the essentials of Christian faith and character would be learned automatically by a sort of cultural osmosis. Preparation for baptism

or for church membership, when not completely left aside, was reduced to a few classes explaining what it means to be a Methodist, a Presbyterian, or a Baptist. Church services were no longer considered times for education and Christian formation, but only for praise and exhortation. A simple example of the result is what has happened to the notion of the church is a royal priesthood that I have just mentioned. Ask in any of our churches what is the meaning of the universal priesthood of believers, and quite often you will hear the commonly held but profoundly wrong assertion that the priesthood of believers means essentially that I don't need anybody else to serve as my priest, because I am able to approach the heavenly throne directly. (If you do not see the difference between this and what was conveyed to new believers in the early church, I'll gladly explain it; but that very fact confirms my point).

The real crisis is that we have lost the notion of theological education as a continuum, with the results, first, that our learning also is constantly interrupted by having to unlearn what we were taught; and, secondly, that it is in seminary that we hear for the first time thinks that we should have been taught by the church itself.

I have often tried to express this notion of a continuum in theological education by means of an illustration that is also a confession of my own shortsightedness. When, several decades ago, I joined with a number of colleagues to try to respond to the lack of Latino and Latina presence in theological faculties, our favorite image was that of a pipeline. We would build a pipeline that would take people from college through seminary, then through doctoral programs, and eventually to teaching and tenure. Today I have many reasons to rejoice that this was done, for the pipeline that we envisioned has produced significant fruit. (Right now here at Candler, when you attend chapel and are led in worship by Dr. Tony Alonso, you are

reaping some of the long range consequences of that pipeline.)

But our earlier image of a pipeline has significant limitations, and for that reason I now prefer the image of an irrigation system composed mostly of drip-hoses. Both such a system and a pipeline have the purpose of moving a liquid from one place to another. But while the success of the pipeline is measured by how much liquid reaches the end, and any leak along the way is considered a loss, the success of a system of drip-hoses is measured by the degree to which, as the water moves through the system, each drop finds its proper place to irrigate the land. If we understand theological education as essentially a pipeline, we will consider our best product those few students who are called, willing and able to move further along the pipeline. In contrast, if we understand theological education as similar to a system of drip-hoses, the purpose of such education is to make certain that each drop finds its proper place in the task of irrigating the whole field. The drop that reaches the very end of the system is no more a sign of success than the drop that leaks out at the first hole. Actually, the only real failure is the drop that remains in the pipeline and never irrigates the land. In contrast, when the church has a functioning drip-hose irrigation system of education parents are able to articulate their faith to their children; the care of the ill, the homebound, and the grieving is not left in the hands of the pastor; and evangelism is no longer a matter of church members knocking at doors and inviting people to come hear some great evangelist (which in fact is tantamount to saying, "I cannot tell you about the gospel. But this great evangelist preaching tonight can tell you.")

All of that, and much else along these lines, I have said before in many forums. To all this, however, I need to add another advantage of the irrigation system over the pipeline: the

pipeline requires so much planning, work, and investments, that we tend to be committed to it well beyond the point of its usefulness. Think of the Alaska pipeline, and the investment that went into its construction in terms of human labor, engineering skills, millions and millions of dollars. If in a few years we find that we no longer need oil and are able to move to alternative sources of energy, we shall still be so invested in that pipeline that change will be very difficult. The same thing happens in theological education when we are so invested in our structures that they are as difficult to change as it would be to close down the Alaska pipeline. Our systems may be obsolete; but our investment in them does not allow for the creativity that new conditions require. In contrast, an irrigation system composed mostly of drip-hoses can easily be moved as conditions change.

Today, at this moment in your life when you are entering into a new form of theological education, I dare offer you no great prediction, no crystal ball, no assured outcome. I can only invite you to rejoice with me and give thanks for these many shattered pieces of glass which we call a crisis, but are in truth a promise, and then say with me: “Thank you, God, for this crisis of brokenness, through which you will guide us into a new wholeness not of our own doing; into a new obedience not out of our own desire; into a new beauty not of our own dreaming.” So be it!