Past, Present, and Future of Theological Education (2/4)

Dr. Justo L. González

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info@aeth.org

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(2 out of 4)

First of all, a word of gratitude: Catherine and I are honored by your invitation to be with you, and grateful for your presence and your interest. And, as if that were not enough, we are also being fed! So, ¡muchas gracias!

The subject I have been asked to discuss is rather ambitious: "Past, Present, and Future of Theological Education." If we begin with the times of the New Testament, I have a maximum of 25 minutes to summarize about 20 centuries. Counting on a minute for the introduction, I now have 24 minutes –about 8 each for the past, the future, and the present.

Obviously, this is an impossible task. I will have to bypass many themes and even several centuries. But in many ways, this works to my advantage: whatever I do leave out, is not my fault, but yours!

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But then, I have another excuse for what I am about to do. In his long discussion about time at the end of the *Confessions*, Augustine says that the past is no longer, and exists only in memory; the future is not yet, and exists only in expectation; and the present is that infinitely small and fleeting moment when the future becomes past. So, while not following this to its extreme consequences, I feel justified in spending most of our 25 minutes on the past and the future. After all, you probably know the present better than I do!

When it comes to the past of theological education, the first and probably most surprising fact is that for a long time –actually, for more than three quarters of its history– the church survived and at times even flourished without seminaries. There were certainly schools founded by famous leaders. The earliest that we know of is the one established by Justin Martyr in Rome, where he taught what he called "the true philosophy." A bit later, there was a school in Alexandria, led first by Clement and then by Origen. And there was also a school in Antioch, led by Lucian of Antioch, where most of the early leaders of Arianism studied –which shows that a bad school can also have bad consequences.

These schools, however, were not designed as a place to prepare future pastors and church leaders. Justin's school seems to have been mostly an apologetic enterprise, trying to convince pagans of the truth of Christianity. The schools of Alexandria and Antioch were designed originally for candidates preparing for baptism and then for Christians who wanted to learn and explore more of the faith.

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Most commonly, when a church needed a leader, this person was elected from among its membership, or from the members of a nearby church. The newly elected bishop or pastor would then expound his faith in a document submitted to nearby bishops. If these approved, they attended the ordination of the new pastor as a sign of his being a true representative of the entire church. In short, the theological education of most bishops was simply what they had received in the church itself and in its life and in its worship.

In a further development, by the 3rd century, and more commonly in the 4th, there were bishops who created semimonastic communities where they lived with those who were preparing for positions of leadership.

Even so, there were no academic requirements for ordination. Normally, since they had to interpret and apply Scripture, pastors were expected at least to be literate. But we know cases where the bishop was not able to read, and simply commented on a passage read by the reader. By the early Middle Ages, we hear of bishops who barely knew the Decalogue, the Lord's Prayer, and the Creed.

There were, however, others who became pastors or bishops on the basis of their knowledge and wisdom—knowledge and wisdom most of them had acquired through a secular education, through their participation in a monastic community, or through both. These monks had joined a monastery to prepare for heaven, and not to prepare for the pastorate. But even so, many were called from monasteries to serve as church leaders.

When we come to the 13th century, we find the great universities that produced scholars such as Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure. But, again, the purpose of these universities was not to prepare clergy or leadership for the churches, but rather to explore fine points of faith and theology. In fact, many studying or teaching in the universities were supported by being theoretically in charge of church positions from which they received the income, but for which

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they did not provide any form of pastoral care.

It was only as late as 1556—less that five centuries ago—that British Cardinal Reginald Pole proposed that “seminaries” be founded for the formation of Catholic clergy. At that time, the word “seminary” meant what today we would call a “seedbed.” Thus, what Pole proposed was that semimonastic houses of study be founded in which young prospective priests would be formed while being protected from any contamination from heresy or from the ways of the world, in order later to be transplanted to the place where they would perform their ministry.

The story was different in the case of Protestantism. Protestantism was born in a university, and most of its early branches emphasized the importance of studies that would prepare people to be pastors and teachers. This was particularly important given the need to teach the entire church a very different understanding of the gospel than they had been taught for centuries.

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All of this is the background of what today we call “seminaries.” The seminaries most of us have known in the latter part of the 20th century, and even into the 21st, are or were in different degrees combinations of a seedbed, a monastery, and a university.

If we then turn very briefly to the present, one could well suggest that the present crisis of identity, mission, and even finances in modern seminaries and schools of theology is the result of a time when the very notion of a school as a seedbed where students are kept away from all

contamination has become obsolete to the point that it is even ridiculous. It is due to a time when it is no longer possible for our institutions to function and live as if they were monasteries. And it is also due to a time when the option of becoming like a university or being part of one tends to leave out some fundamental issues in pastoral ministry.

At present, these three models—the seedbed, the monastery, and the university—pull our institutions and programs in different directions. This is part of the present crisis in theological education—to which should be added financial difficulties, demographic changes, cultural challenges, new technologies, and many others.

Again, you know the present better than I do, and therefore I shall not dwell on it, and move quickly into the future of theological education.

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There are several ways of speaking of the future. One is to analyze the past and the present and project the most likely outcomes. Another is to look at both the past and the present, project the best possible future, and then use the present to move into that projection. The first tends to look at the future as an unchangeable given. I prefer the second, for I refuse to believe that there is nothing we can do about the future. I am not particularly interested in predicting the future, but rather in shaping the future.

So, allow me to take my crystal ball and try to describe the future of theological education as I

see it in my more optimistic moods.

In those optimistic moments I see a future in which theological education is considered too important to be delegated to a small part of the church, such as a seminary or a theological school. I said earlier that the early church had no seminaries or schools dedicated to the formation of its leadership. The other side of that coin is that the entire church was convinced that a fundamental part of its task was the formation not only of its leadership, but of the entire body of Christ. The theological education of a nonbeliever began the moment he or she first heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. It continued when they first decided to attend Christian meetings. Once a person decided to become a Christian, their theological education included some two years of preparation for baptism. Finally, through worship and through the entire experience of being part of the body of Christ, theological education continued during the rest of a person's life. In short, in its fullest sense, the best theological education is a process through which people are progressively shaped by their participation and for their participation in the body of Christ. This means that theological education is a continuum involving the totality of Christian life, from beginning to end.

This may seem to be so obvious that it does not need to be said. Yet, as I think of my entire career first as a church member, then as a theological student, then as a professor, and eventually as a promoter of the theological education of Latinos and Latinas, I see and I must confess that this has not always been clear to me.

In earlier times, I frequently thought and spoke of the process of theological education as a pipeline. In the early years of the Hispanic Program within the Fund for Theological Education, and then also in the early years of its successor, the Hispanic Theological Initiative, we spoke repeatedly of creating a pipeline that would move students through college, into seminary, into doctoral studies, and eventually into a teaching career.

I still think that we need to find ways so that a sufficient number of our people reach the more advanced levels of theological education, where we are still grossly underrepresented. But now I am convinced that a change of metaphors is necessary. Rather than speaking of a pipeline, I would now speak of a system of irrigation hoses—of perforated hoses distributed throughout a field so that the entire field may be properly irrigated and fertilized.

I think that this change in metaphors is important because it clarifies the nature and purpose of theological education. The success of a pipeline is measured in terms of how much liquid gets to the end. Any drop that does not reach the end of the pipeline is considered a failure. In a way that is strangely parallel to the image of a seedbed, education as a pipeline implies not paying too much attention to the environment—and we all know the ongoing debate about the negative impact of pipelines on the environment through which they cross. Brought to the field of education, the image of the pipeline means that we consider those students who are more likely to go into the next step of education to be our “better” students, and therefore we concentrate our attention on them and see them as our greatest chance for success as

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theological educators.

In contrast to that, consider the image of an irrigation system. That system is not evaluated on the basis of how much water gets to the end, but on the basis of the degree to which every inch of the field is properly irrigated. A drop of water that leaks out at the very first hole in the system is no less valuable and no less useful that a drop that gets to the very end. The purpose of such a system is not to carry water to some other place, but to fertilize the land in which it stands. Certainly, we need a sufficient amount of water at the very end of the system, just as we need a sufficient amount of water at the beginning.

If we replace the image of the pipeline with an irrigation system, we will no longer speak of theological education as a task entrusted particularly to seminaries, to Bible institutes, and to schools of theology. Certainly, such institutions have a place in the system. But their place is no more important than the theological education and Christian formation that takes place in a worship service, in a Sunday school class, or in a soup line.

In a word, we are theological educators, not because we have PhDs, but rather because we are baptized! Every baptized Christian is called to be a theological learner and a theological educator.

So, I see the future of theological education as an enterprise entrusted to the entire church and

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embraced by the entire church. I see the essential task of theological education, not as helping an intellectual elite move along as far as possible, but rather as making sure that every Christian, that every congregation, that the entire church, are equipped to irrigate the land where they find themselves, and there to grow and flourish.

And, as leaders in the church and in theological education, I see our most urgent task as that of creating a continuum of theological education embracing every moment from baptism to death, and enabling every Christian, young or old, male or female, powerful or powerless, to irrigate the land in which they stand.

But then, the image of a series of perforated hoses in an irrigation system differs from the image of the pipeline in another way: The building of a pipeline requires planning so rigorous and so fixed that the pipeline will have to stand for years and generations in the same place and in the same form in which it was built, and will be expected to continue functioning as it was originally intended. Actually, much of what we now have in our theological institutions—our buildings, our staff, our libraries—was built with a sense of permanence similar to that of a pipeline. All of these are assets that we must continue using. But we must not use them with the purpose of building a more permanent and enduring pipeline. In contrast to a pipeline, an irrigation system can be changed as the need arises. The future shape of theological education must not be fixed, as in the case of a pipeline. It must be flexible, able to adjust to different circumstances, able to reexamine the lay of the land constantly, and to adjust to it as necessary, so that, as the prophet

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Isaiah announces, “the wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing” (Is 35.1-2).

So be it!