

Introduction

The single reading in this section—“Living Conversation: Higher Education in a Catholic Context”—was originally delivered by Boston College theologian Michael Himes, a diocesan priest, to all six gatherings in round one of the “Western Conversations,” meetings of faculty from the six Western Jesuit universities, with each school hosting one meeting. In readily accessible language for which Himes is justly famous, he lays out a theology of God (e.g., the least inadequate way to talk about God is as “the activity of loving,” as “pure and perfect self-giving”), a broad sacramental theology (“sacramentality”), an explanation of the Incarnation (God’s becoming human in Jesus), and its astounding implication (“whatever makes you more human makes you more like God”). And he explores belonging to a living tradition, to a continuing conversation, that is inclusive, that cuts across time and place (“you are freed from being merely a child of your [own] time and place”), and that engages in action toward social justice and reflection on that action (loving others as the only way to know God). Here, in a few short pages, is a compendium of theology and spirituality.



Understanding the Terminology: Suggested Readings from *Do You Speak Ignatian?*

- God
- Jesus
- Gospel

Living Conversation: Higher Education in a Catholic Context

Michael Himes

From Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education, 1995

I intend first to lay a theological foundation for what I’m going to say and then to build upon it four points that I consider to be very important for people engaged in higher education within a Catholic context to consider.

The Foundation

I’m convinced that any theology that pretends to be Christian must show its rootedness in two central doctrines: the Trinity and the Incarnation. If what a theologian says cannot be shown to be rooted in these two doctrines, it may be very interesting, valuable, and true, but it is not Christian theology. Anything claiming to be Christian theology must necessarily relate to those two doctrines.

To begin, what do we mean within the Christian tradition by the word *God*? *God* is not anyone’s name. There is not some person out there someplace, much older, much wiser, much more powerful than

you or I whose name is *God*. God is not the name of a class of which there happens to be only one member.

The word *God* is a bit of shorthand, a stand-in which functions in Christian theology almost as x functions in algebra. When working an algebraic problem, one's central concern is x . But x is the stand-in for the thing one doesn't know. That is how God functions in Christian theology. It is the name of the Mystery that lies at the root of all that exists. We must never forget that we are talking about mystery. That is a salutary reminder, by the way, for anybody doing theology, since our temptation is to natter on as though we know what we're talking about.

Now, we must be clear about what I mean by Mystery. I do not mean the mystery in Agatha Christie, the *Murder, She Wrote* sense of the word. I am not talking about mystery as a puzzle for which we do not have all the pieces but which, if we could find all the clues and juggle them into the right order, would click into place. Then we would know that the butler did it, and the mystery would be solved. No, the Mystery that I mean is much more like asking you who you are.

Who are you? That's a very puzzling question, because as we all know (on excellent authority) "a rose by any other name would still smell as sweet." So when I ask who you are, I'm not asking you for your name. I'm not asking when or where you were born, who your parents are, whom you are married to, where you went to school, what you do, or where you live. That is all description, and I'm not asking for a description but for a definition. And the definition I want is not that of a *human being* but of *you*.

Who are *you*? And of course, the more one thinks about it, the more one discovers that one does not have an adequate answer. Indeed, most of the questions for which we do have adequate answers are relatively trivial. When we come to the great questions, the central concerns of our lives, we find that we are at a loss to answer them fully and finally. I mean questions such as *why* you married the person you married. You might well reply that it was because he or she is good, kind, loving, patient, and a host of other wonderful things. But here, I retort, are 356,812 good, kind, loving, patient, *et cetera*,

people. Why did you choose this one rather than one of these others? It is very difficult to say *this* is the reason, isn't it?

I am frequently asked why I became a priest. And my standard answer is that to dig I am not able and to beg I am ashamed. In fact, I can't give an answer to that question. Certainly there is nothing more important in my own life than my decision to be ordained, but I cannot tell you with any definiteness why I made that decision. Was it twelve percent my mother's influence, ten percent my father's, seventeen percent the time and place that I was born, eight percent the example of this pastor, six percent the work of that teacher? I don't know. In fact, I'm still uncovering the reasons why I am a priest.

What I am aiming at is a Mystery that is mysterious not because it is so distant that it is hard to draw an angle on it, so remote that we cannot get the data needed. If you are as nearsighted as I am, you will understand at once that something can be impossible for me to read if it is too far away from me. Without my eyeglasses, everything from the elbow out vanishes into the mist. But something may also be unreadable if it is held too close. If I bring a book up to my nose, the print is as unreadable as if it were at arm's length. And the Mystery I mean is rather like that. It is mysterious because it is too close, too intimate, too central to us. It is in this sense that God is Mystery. God is Mystery as you and I are mysteries.

Having heard that, you may well say to yourself, "Well, if that's so, that God is Mystery and therefore you cannot finally speak about God, then sit down and shut up, Himes!" But, like any great religious tradition, the Christian tradition does think that, while it cannot say everything about Mystery, it can say something, even if falteringly. And what is it that the Christian tradition claims about the absolute Mystery that we call "God"? What is the fundamental metaphor that Christianity offers as the least wrong way to talk about God? I say "the least wrong way" because there is no absolutely right way. The least wrong way to imagine God, the Christian tradition says, is to think of God as love. The New Testament documents repeat this over and over again in parable and preaching, but it is said most forthrightly in one of its very late documents, the one we call the First Letter of John. In chapter 4, verse 8 and again in verse 16, we read that "God

is love,” but a very particular kind of love, for the word chosen in the Greek text is *agape*. It is not *eros*, which is a love that seeks fulfillment in that which is loved, nor *philia*, which is companionable love or friendship. *Agape* is a purely other-directed love, a love that seeks no response and demands no return, a love centered totally on the beloved. Because the English word *love* carries so many meanings, I prefer to translate *agape* as “self-gift,” the gift of oneself to the other without any regard to whether the gift is accepted or returned. And the First Letter of John maintains that God is self-gift. Now I could demonstrate at length that this metaphor is fundamental to the New Testament; I could cite text after text, example after example, to show that it appears again and again in the core documents of the Christian tradition, even if not as succinctly as in 1 John 4:8 and 16. But for brevity’s sake, I ask you to accept that *agape* is the fundamental Christian metaphor for the Mystery that is God.

Let me point out something very odd about that fundamental metaphor. Notice the First Letter of John does not say that God is a lover. It does not claim that the least wrong way to think about God is as one who loves. Rather, it says that God is love. Love, however, is not the name of a person or an agent, but of a relationship. It is more like an action than an agent. In other words, within the Christian tradition, the word *God* is really more of a verb than a noun, the name of something one does rather than of someone who does. It is the name of a relationship.

“Ah,” you say, “we’ve been willing to listen to you this far, Himes, but what are we to make of this silliness about God being a relationship?” Well, as it happens, Christianity has made this claim again and again. The problem is that most of the time we don’t take it seriously. That, alas, is too often the case with religious claims that we repeat again and again, especially religious statements about absolute Mystery and most especially religious statements that we address to absolute Mystery in prayer. Indeed, if we stopped to listen to some of the things that we say when we pray, we might cease to pray at all because we would find ourselves unsure of what our words mean. One of the things that we say in prayer most often is that what we are about to do is done “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of

the Holy Spirit.” There you have it: we are talking about a relational God, not the One but the relatedness of the Three. That is what we mean by the doctrine of the Trinity. I think I can say, without too great an exaggeration, that the entire doctrine of the Trinity is an enormous gloss on that phrase in the First Letter of John that God is self-gift. From that metaphor spins out the whole of Trinitarian theology.

Unfortunately, most of us don’t take the Trinity terribly seriously. For most Christians, including most Catholics, the doctrine of the Trinity functions as a sort of divine test of faith, as though God were saying, “I’ll tell them I’m one God in three Persons, and if they can believe that, they can believe anything.” The Trinity doesn’t make much *difference* to people. I have often remarked to students that if I and my fellow preachers mounted our pulpits some Sunday and announced that we had a letter from the Vatican saying that there are not three Persons but four, most people in the pews would simply groan, “Oh, when will these changes stop?” But to most of them it would cause no problem other than having to think about how to fit the fourth one in when making the sign of the cross. And that is a tragedy, for we are dealing with the deepest claim that Christianity offers about the Mystery that undergirds our existence, that is least wrongly named as the relationship of self-gift. That claim shifts everything. It is a unique way of thinking about reality. What we say about the Trinity affects the way we live marriage, raise children, choose professions, spend money, vote, and, I hope, teach. You have noticed, I am sure, that the Trinity is not an item in the creed but rather the basic form of the creed. We do not say that we believe in the Trinity along with a number of other doctrines. Instead, we say that we believe in the doctrines of Christianity in terms of the Trinity: “We believe in one God the Father who . . . ,” and then we profess faith in the doctrines of creation and providence, “and in the Son who . . . ,” and then we proclaim the Incarnation and redemption, “and in the Holy Spirit who . . . ,” and then we affirm the Church, the sacraments, and the eschatological doctrines. We never actually say that we believe in the Trinity. The Trinity is not a doctrine next to other doctrines of the faith; it is the *only* doctrine, and all the others are

expansions and explanations of it. The Trinity, which is the unfolding of the fundamental Christian metaphor that God is self-gift, is the clue to everything.

If that is true, then it is also the answer to that whopping good question that students seem so often to ask and that Martin Heidegger maintained was the origin of metaphysics: why is there being rather than nothing? The Christian response to that question is based on its fundamental claim about the Mystery that lies at the heart of all that exists. Christianity answers that the reason that there is something rather than nothing is that it is loved. All that exists is loved into being. All that exists, *everything* as well as *everyone*—you and I, the chair you're sitting on, the pen you're holding, the podium that I'm standing at, your pet cat, the farthest supernova, and the rhododendron outside the window—all that exists is loved *absolutely*.

Why absolutely? Because that, you see, is how God does things. God being God does not do things partially. What God does, God does *as God*, which means absolutely. Everything that is loved by God—and that is everything there is—is loved totally, completely, perfectly, absolutely. And that is why it exists. Not to be loved by God is not to be damned; it is simply not to be. The opposite of being loved by God is not damnation; it is nonexistence. Saint Thomas Aquinas (always a good source for a Catholic theologian to trot out) raised the question: if God is everywhere, is God in hell? His answer is, yes, God is in hell. Then, with his usual rigor, Thomas asks the next question: what is God doing in hell? And he replies that God is in hell loving the damned. The damned may refuse to be loved and they may refuse to love in response, but the damned cannot cause God not to love them; they cannot make God be not God. They exist because they are loved and loved absolutely.

One way I like to put this is that from God's "point of view" there is no difference between Mary and Satan. God loves both perfectly. The difference is that Mary is thrilled and Satan hates it. From God's perspective, everything is loved. As chapter one of Genesis insistently tells us, "God looked at it and saw that it was good."

Now, there is a traditional theological name for this "agapic" love that undergirds all that exists, a name for the self-gift of God outside

the Trinity: *grace*. Grace is the love of God beyond the Trinity. To quote the most important Catholic theologian of the twentieth century, Karl Rahner, there is "grace at the roots of the world." The universe is rooted in grace. It exists because it is loved absolutely.

—AN—
IGNATIANT
SPIRITUALITY
READER


EDITED BY
GEORGE W. TRAUB, SJ

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