

11. Women's Theology: Insight and Guidance

This course underlines the importance of women doing theology in their own right and as a corrective to a tradition of male-dominated theology. Seminal theological ideas, garnered from the theologies of these four women Doctors of the Church, are numerous and diverse. Each reader will reverberate with insights that are most relevant to her/his own life and spiritual desires. Highlighted in this penultimate lecture is a selection of themes that seem particularly resonant with our time.

I. Theology Written by Women: It is cause for rejoicing that scholars and laity are reading, analyzing, and learning from the theological texts of women authors in the Christian tradition. Catalysts for this retrieval are various movements, beginning in the nineteenth century, which sought to lift up the creative legacies of women with an eye to enhancing their value and dignity. For millennia, women have been told that they are not smart enough; strong enough; holy enough; or significant enough to have their thoughts about God taken seriously.

Recovering theology written by women reminds us that the identity of the theologian matters. Often, we are not aware that what we know as "theology" does not reflect the experience of women. 1. Just as women are likely to experience life and God differently from men, so they are likely to do theology in a different key. Cultural devaluation of women as theologians meant that, in order to survive, they had to speak of their female sex as weak and ignorant. Their lives and theologies belie this negative assessment. We are grateful that women persevered in the face of so many obstacles, leaving a legacy of creative, honest, and insightful theological thought.

These women exemplify what it means to be a Doctor of the Church because they are superb teachers. They want their readers to understand and be moved by their words. They write to help others follow the way of holiness and engage their own thinking as theologians.

Interpreting women's theology requires slow, careful reading of their texts in light of our experience. This work is enriched by knowledge of the historical context, and insights from scholars.

In the process, we try to avoid making assumptions from our own experience, and guard against projecting our agendas onto the past. We arouse our curiosity, seeking to penetrate their thought and understand as best we can who they were; how they spoke about God and why. Only then do we return to the present and ask

the "So what?" question, probing the material for clues about how their theology can enrich our own.

II. Caveats: As we bring aspects of this theology forward in an open, critical way, we identify certain elements that made sense in the past, but no longer seem compelling to a twenty-first century world. Indeed, some aspects can even be harmful. For example, the theory of atonement, an idea from the twelfth century, imagines an angry God seeking restitution for sin. Some theologies of the cross seem to glorify suffering that resulted in bodily harm and even death.

A final issue that has plagued Christian theology since the second century is cosmic dualism - a set of ideas Christianity inherited from Neo-Platonist philosophy. In this view matter, bodies, sexuality, and "the world" are judged to be obstacles to the spiritual life, rather than the very means by which humans become holy. It is important to understand that dualism was part of the Christian worldview for millennia, and to be amazed that these women escaped it in notable ways. But it is a worldview that we do not want to bring forward.

III. Theocentric Focus: The Trinity: In contrast to our contemporary, individualistic, anthropocentric focus, the theology of these women Doctors of the Church is notably theocentric. This means that their understanding of the human person emerges from humanity's relationship to God and to each other. The most important thing about being human is to be made in the image and likeness of God, and like Christ, destined to be joined to the Trinity.

Unlike our culture, these women lived in contexts that nurtured a broad-based desire for intense, immediate encounter with God. God was real, present and compelling - visible in church, politics, art, and music. This idea of immediacy can be a stumbling block for the modern world which often experiences God as tangential to human life. Their accounts of the Trinity are particularly compelling, worthy of serious consideration. Christ was the Beloved as well as the Redeemer. The Holy Spirit was a tangible power in daily life.

Christology: In addition to the importance of the Trinity, this theology portrays Christ not only as lover, but as one who is rejected and vulnerable. To the truth that humanity needs Christ, these women added the penetrating insight that Christ needed human consolation. Loving attention to the cross aroused their deepest compassion. They were able to see him as a real person who suffered, bled, and felt rejection.

Pneumatology: While Christology is clearly the centerpiece of these theologies, the theologies of the four women Doctors of the Church remind us that it is only through the power of the Holy Spirit that the freeing, healing work of Christ's life and death can be carried on throughout history. The importance assigned to love of neighbor also implicitly points to the Spirit. This theology of the Spirit is expressed in unusual and creative ways: God's green thumb; The harmony of the celestial spheres; A waiter at table. These women appeal to the Spirit as source of their encounter with God, their call to ministry, and the ground of their theological work.

IV. Christian Anthropology: The theologies of these women Doctors of the Church have much to teach us about who we are and why we exist. Aspects of our culture that highlight narcissism, greed, radical individualism, and indifference to suffering call for a Christian response. The theologies we have studied are an excellent starting point. They lament that we are ignorant of our true identity and sell ourselves short when it comes to the invitation to be participants in Trinitarian love.

Humanity is not in competition with God. God's love includes the full flourishing of every human being in all her complexity. Hildegard, Catherine, Teresa, and Therese teach us that the human person fully alive is nothing less than the fulfillment of God's desires for the world.

Humanity has accomplished significant advances in scientific, technological, artistic, and medical fields; however, the dark side of these accomplishments is that they have bred a strong sense of anthropocentrism - the perception that humanity is the measure of all things - in our society. Awe and wonder at the mysteries of life are deeply human qualities that temper egoism and arrogance. Theologies that connect human progress and fulfillment with the divine guard against self-absorption and hubris. In Christian terms, to be fully human is to be like God.

This theology is appealing because it makes room for the emotions and the body as well as the intellect. These women related to the body through graphic visions, intense asceticism, and ecstasies. This connection between the body and women paved the way for them to identify with Christ's humanity in literal, graphic ways. They included the body in the spiritual journey and plumbed the possibilities of the flesh that shaped their theologies as profound expressions of incarnation.

In their own time, these four women Doctors of the Church were not seen as legitimate members of the official theological community. Fortunately, they

persevered in their call to write, preach and teach, often at great personal cost. Hundreds of years later, we see them in a new light, and appreciate their contributions to the Christian tradition, as women theologians.

Reflection Questions

1. Name one theological idea in the work of the four women Doctors of the Church that made a significant impression on you. Why is it important? What effects might it have on your faith, your daily life? Who else might be empowered by this work?
2. Do you reflect on your faith and God in terms of gender? Do you understand God to be beyond male and female or the fullness/totality of male/female? Who are your models of holiness?