

## **12. Grassroots Theology: The Universal Call to Holiness**

Each person who studies the theologies of the four women Doctors of the Church will take away her or his unique insights and inspiration. Singled out here are two suggestions for the growth and reform of the Church to be garnered from the theological voices of these women. First is a broader and deeper understanding of theology. Second is an invitation, especially for laity, to participate in the ongoing theological conversation as grassroots theologians.

"The salvation of many souls requires that you not inhabit your cell anymore. You must leave even your own city for the salvation of souls. I will always be with you, and I will lead you forth and I will bring you back. You will carry the honor of My name and My spiritual warning to the small and the great, as much to lay people as to clerics and religious. And I will give you a mouth and a wisdom that no one will be able to resist." Raymond of Capua, *The Life of Catherine of Siena*, p. 385

**I. A Broader View of Theology:** Theology refers to careful, ordered, and reflective speech about God - *fides quaerens intellectum* - faith seeking understanding. It includes many specialized fields, genres and forms. Scholars today no longer see scholastic theology as the only, or best, form of theology. For instance, we now speak of: Biblical theology; The more meditative monastic theology; Pastoral/practical theology, found in sermons, catechisms, etc. Mystical/ascetical theology; Vernacular theology; Imaginative theology; I add to this list the term, "grassroots theology" done by all the baptized and to be distinguished from professional theology done by formally trained individuals.

The long overdue official inclusion of women in the theological canon leads us to push back the boundaries of what we traditionally think of as theology. This expanded view includes their turn to the vernacular; their use of liturgical language; poetic, affective expression; unusual imagery and metaphors; and mystical experience - all welcome additions to traditional theological content and expression. These four women Doctors of the Church make a notable contribution to a more inclusive and accessible theology.

In this course, we have identified the theologies of the four women Doctors of the Church as wisdom theologies that attend to the heart as well as the head, linking knowledge and love. In their service to the poor, their theologies also endorse justice and mercy as constitutive. Genuine theology does not privilege contemplation and theory over action. Knowledge, love and service to God and neighbor are one.

These texts by women do not ignore reason and logic, but reach beyond it. We are not used to reading theology that includes flights of imagination, free association, and even at times contradiction. They motivate and console as well as inform. They chide and cajole, using every tool at their disposal to entice readers to greater knowledge and love of God.

This work contributes to the renewal of theology. These women open doors to the possibility of a livelier and engaged theology. Their vision includes the whole person and the entire world. By familiarizing ourselves with this material, we are able to use the Tradition to challenge and expand the Tradition. These women help us encounter theological truth in fresh, capacious, and life-giving ways.

**II. Invitation to Become Grassroots Theologians:** In explicit and implicit ways, these four women Doctors of the Church extend an invitation to us to think theologically and become theologians ourselves. Baptism is the entry point for all Christians to become "grassroots theologians" that is, to engage faith in an ordered, reflective way. We are all theological beings because we have experiences of awe at the world around us, and seek meaning in life.

On one level, these "unlettered" women are aware of the "Doctors of the Church" and employ rhetoric to contrast their work with these illustrious theologians. On the other hand, they identify with the likes of Thomas Aquinas, Augustine, and Jerome - building on the Tradition in their own ways. The women are also unafraid to criticize scholars motivated by pride and self-love. They preach that one does not need to attend university to be able to probe the truth of revelation.

Hildegard, Catherine, Teresa and Therese would be the first to challenge us to read their works carefully, reflect deeply, and make our own decisions about what they say. They would want us to be intelligent about interpreting and bringing forward elements of their theologies. These women know that each of us has a unique, one-of-a-kind way to be a theologian. Their commitment to their own voices, coupled with the gospel saying that there are many mansions in God's house encourage multiple forms of grassroots theology that will make the Christian Tradition rich beyond imagining.

The theology we have considered in this course reinforces the clarion call of Vatican II to take seriously our identity as the People of God and to allow the Holy Spirit's power to bear fruit in our own theological thinking. We have noted the importance of context for these theologies. Each woman produced her theology out of the particular, concrete, historical setting in which she lived. The four women

we have studied did not just accept the tradition as it was handed down to them. They absorbed the tradition and transformed it into an idiom for their time. We must do the same by attending to major trends that characterize our time. We view the world with a long, loving gaze, seeing it as God sees it and acting to heal its wounds and bless its virtues.

We engage the past to understand and learn from it, but also to discover ourselves. In coming to know the work of these women, we become more aware of our dignity and capacity for the divine. Good theology provides meaning and offers suggestions about how to live out this meaning in everyday life. The corpus of theology written by women is rarely included in religion curricula at high schools, universities, or even at seminaries. This is especially unfortunate for women, but also for men, since we shape our identities as human beings and as Christians by seeing ourselves in the mirror of Tradition.

**III. Theology In and For the World:** One of the most important contributions of the theology we have studied is the potential it has to fulfill our hungers for living life at its deepest level. These women offer theological wisdom that keeps superficiality at bay, and nurtures depth of living. It makes us ask questions such as: How does my theology inform my identity, values, and relationships with others? How do I nurture what is most sacred and precious about being a human being in myself, my family, my friends, and colleagues? How does my theology influence how I view and use time? How do I use technology without becoming enslaved by it? How do we marshal resources to serve the poor and combat violence?

"Worldly" theology sees all aspects of life as relevant to the theological task. This includes not only explicit religious activity, but also the mundane activity of daily life. There is no aspect of existence that cannot be viewed through a theological lens.

**IV. Love of Neighbor:** Another theological legacy from this corpus of work is its emphasis on love of neighbor as the "bottom line" of theology. Teresa goes so far as to say that since there is no way to be completely sure we are loving God, we need only ask "Am I loving my neighbor?" If the answer to the latter question is "yes" then the love of God can be assured. In the end, to be a theologian is to love the neighbor.

These Christian women model a theology whose purpose and ground is loving action in the world. These Christian women model a theology whose purpose and

ground is loving action in the world. Near the end of *The Interior Castle* Teresa writes: "This is the reason for prayer, my daughters, the purpose of this spiritual marriage: the birth always of good works, good works... I repeat it is necessary that your foundation consist of more than prayer and contemplation. If you do not strive for virtues and practice them, you will always be dwarves (*Interior Castle* VII.4.6)."

**V. Theology and Justice:** A theology that includes love of neighbor as a constituent element can also affect social change. The four women Doctors of the Church did not shy away from larger social and ecclesial concerns. In the last century, various liberation theologies made commitment to justice a constituent element of theology.

These types of theologies require courage and perseverance to challenge the status quo - visible in the work of the four women we have studied. Hildegard counseled state leaders and prophesied against a corrupt Church. Catherine of Siena worked hard to foster peace among warring Italian families and the papacy. Teresa of Avila built her reform on a theological anthropology that reversed destructive hierarchies in Spanish society. Therese transcended a type of Catholic ghetto that saw itself as superior to others. By being open to grace, she abandoned the God of judgment in favor of a God of mercy and love.

The specifics of a twenty-first century agenda for justice are different. But the model of a theology that supports and requires justice for all is universal. Thus, we learn from these four women how to craft a theology that is committed to equality and dignity for all. Theology stays alive by being in dialogue with the present moment, in its glory and in its suffering and injustice.

### **Review Questions**

1. Give concrete examples of how the theologies of these four women have changed your ideas about women and theology; your Christian identity; your image of God; or your assessment of your role in the world.
2. Do you agree that being a grassroots theologian is a privilege and responsibility of Baptism? Why, or why not? What happens when you say the words: "I am a theologian"? What might prevent you from exercising this role in the Church?
3. What do you see as the most pressing theological and spiritual need of Church and society at this time in history? How can the work of these four women address this need?