

2. Theology and Spirituality: Mortal Enemies or Welcome Allies?

The theologies of the four women Doctors of the Church are models of the integration of head and heart. Such "wisdom" theology was the norm in the Church until the late Middle Ages, when a tension arose that pulled religious experience and theoretical theological expression apart. We chart the growth of this rift as theology embraced specialization and scientific approaches, often at the expense of emotion and spiritual encounters with God. We examine the important ways in which "spirituality" (religious experience) and "theology" (ordered reflection on that experience) need and enrich each other. The theologies of the four women Doctors of the Church can help us recover a more holistic, integrated theology for our time that encompasses everyday life as well as theoretical categories.

L History of the Rift Between Spirituality and Theology: For most of Christian history, the distinction commonly made today between theology and spirituality would have been unintelligible. Until the late Middle Ages, the primary goal of theology was not to "understand" God, but to imitate God in Christ. One did theology ultimately to become holy, which meant cultivating virtue, and loving the neighbor. The very act of doing theology was seen as a spiritual practice.

In the twelfth century, the seeds of this split can be seen in the work of Abelard and Bernard of Clairvaux: Abelard was a theologian with a penetrating mind who left no question unexplored. Bernard was a paradigm of affective piety, writing of his passionate and burning love for God and condemning Abelard at every turn.

In the thirteenth century, as universities such as the University of Paris flourished, monastic, reflective theology, gave way to a more structured approach that we know as scholasticism. Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* is a paradigmatic example.

The Protestant Reformation created new fissures. Suspicion of mystical, affective devotions as ways to "earn" salvation offered a needed correction to an understanding of grace as a "thing" to be bought and sold. But the loss of appreciation for intense, interior experience furthered the split between reason and emotion.

Fascination with scientific method increased in the modern period. Truth became tied to "facts" that could be empirically verified. The Church began to express Revelation as propositional truths - what has been called a Denzinger style of theology (named after the German compiler of Church decrees) - which contributed

to a sense of doctrine as technical and lifeless.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, biblical criticism, scientific historical studies, and the methods of the new social science disciplines contributed to the tension between seeming opposites such as: Experience and abstraction; Passion and scholarship; Contemplation and speculation; Interior prayer and action in the world; Love and reason. These seeming opposites are false, and much work is being done to re-unify them, yet it is still relatively rare to encounter a scientist who knows about, and is open to, theology or vice versa.

II. Theology and Spirituality: Friends or Foes? A more integrated approach to theology and spirituality challenges the current penchant to pitch theology and spirituality against each other. It is all too easy to caricature one in order to dismiss the other. Today, many theologians are working to address the healing of this split between spirituality and theology. German Jesuit, Karl Rahner, whose theology was deeply shaped by the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola, argues for an intrinsic relationship between spirituality and theology.

The theologies of the four women Doctors of the Church provide exemplary models to help heal this 600-year-old split between theological theory and religious experience. An adequate response to "dead" theology is not to add spirituality and stir, but for theology to remember its basic, core connectedness to graced experiences of self-transcendence.

III. Spirituality and Theology's Gifts to Each Other: Spirituality's gifts to theology:

- Keeps theology in touch with the daily lives of Christians.
- Prevents theology from turning in on itself by inordinate preoccupation with academic methods and trends
- Keeps prayer in the theological picture
- Calls attention to the performative or self-implicating aspects of theology
- Describing religious experience stretches language to its limits.

Theology's gifts to spirituality:

- Enriches spirituality by deepening spirituality's self-understanding
- Helps spirituality avoid confusion and misleading expression
- Functions as gatekeeper against subjectivism and solipsism
- Preserves the "strangeness" and "uncomfortableness" of following Christ

IV. Theology and Spirituality as Partners: Spirituality and theology belong together at their very root in the divine-human encounter. We need both poetry and propositions. Indeed, every theology has within it an implicit or explicit link to a spirituality. Spirituality is the font, horizon, and atmosphere in which theology is done, affecting its methods and its results. Spirituality is the life-giving force that makes theology possible and is its perfection.

The four women Doctors of the Church understood that religious experience was the source and ground of theology. This insight was partly the result of their being denied access to university education. They had to rely on other sources for their theology. But at a deeper level, their attention and faithfulness to their experience of God led them to create a more unified, holistic theology - a kind of theology for which many Christians hunger today.

"Dogmatic and mystical theology, or theology and "spirituality," are not to be set apart in mutually exclusive categories, as if mysticism were for saintly women and theological study were for practical but, alas, unsaintly men. This fallacious division perhaps explains much that is actually lacking both in theology and spirituality. But the two belong together. Unless they are united there is no fervor, no life and no spiritual value in theology, no substance, no meaning and no sure orientation in the contemplative life." Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (1972), pp. 197-198

Reflection Questions

1. With which term are you most comfortable, theology or spirituality? Does the inclusion of spirituality in the theological equation make theology more inviting to you? Does the inclusion of theology in spirituality make it more respectable for you?
2. Do you ever describe yourself as "spiritual but not religious"? What does this mean for you in concrete terms? Does it mean avoiding or rejecting theology?
3. Identify one thing local faith communities could do to close the gap between spirituality and theology for people in the pew.