

Theology in the University :

Downside 1963

Downside symposia are high-powered affairs. The papers (later to be published as a book) are closely related to a single theme. They are listened to by the rest of the speakers and a few more invited experts: after other Catholic conferences there is a welcome absence of lunatic fringe. We took the seventeen talks at the rate of three a day, each followed by close discussion; the BBC were busy with their tapes (a Home Service programme goes out on August 18th). Yet this, we began to see, was what a retreat might be like: listening and thinking and talking about a serious topic, and each mid-day celebrating mass together in the room where we had worked.

This year we were discussing the problem of Catholic entry into university theological faculties for study and teaching. Up to now in England theology has been done outside the context of university cultural life, and without the help of the special contribution which lay-people alone can give. Clearly it would be a great gain if we could work in the open universities, instead of behind seminary doors, and if our teaching could be directed as much to the formation of theologically literate laymen as to that of clerics. Above all so much would be gained if we could work in collaboration with Anglicans and Free Churchmen; those of them present made it clear that we would be welcome, that we had something to offer as well as to receive. America has Catholic universities, even Europe separates theology faculties by denomination; for the first time in the ecumenical age England, we realised, could give the world a lead.

I am not going to describe our activities at length. But it is interesting to recall that the most memorable paper from among many good ones was not overtly theological. Professor L. C. Knights of Bristol University, as he spoke of how literature gives its meaning to our creative response, as he awakened that response in us by delicate analysis of a Blake poem, a Wordsworth sonnet, some lines in *Lear* was, one saw, not merely suggesting the pattern by which theologians relate to faith the meaning of scripture – though this he certainly did – but, more deeply, was himself creating a living theology before our eyes.

This pattern, perhaps, was the conference's own. For where we had begun by talking about theology, in the end we were doing it, and as it should be done. The remaining impression was of English theology come of age, its enclosed situation abandoned; ready now to choose the arduous freedom of the university. If this can be achieved English theologians may well begin to contribute something specifically their own to the Catholic renewal still for us marked 'foreign'.

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