



Research and theological teaching*

DIDASKALIA **

ABSTRACT



heology, as a scientific discipline, produces knowledge before a specific and real world. So research is one of prioritizing activities to promote the dialogue with other disciplines and to propose concrete solutions to social problems. In such a dialogue theologians must bear the particular foundation, pertinence and rigor of their discourse. This article attempts to show how research feeds theology teaching at Javeriana University Theology Department.

Key words: Theology, research, science, teaching, theology department.

Resumen

La teología, como una disciplina científica, produce conocimiento ante un mundo específico y real. La investigación es una de las actividades prioritarias para promover el diálogo con otras disciplinas y para proponer soluciones concretas a los problemas sociales. En este diálogo los teólogos deben mantener el fundamento particular, la pertinencia y el rigor de su propio discurso. Este artículo intenta mostrar cómo la

* Translated from Spanish into the English by Luis Augusto Restrepo (Nueva Granada University) and Edgar Antonio López (Javeriana University)

** DIDASKALIA is a Theology Department research group at Javeriana University created in 1999 to study problems related to theology and teaching. Its members are Fr. Víctor Martínez, Fr. Eduardo Díaz, José Alfredo Noratto, Libardo Hoyos, José María Ortiz and Gabriel Suárez. Office: Carrera 5 No. 39-00. E-mail: vicmar@javeriana.edu.co

investigación alimenta la enseñanza de la teología en el Departamento de Teología de la Universidad Javeriana.

Palabras clave: Teología, investigación, ciencia, enseñanza, departamento de teología.

A HISTORICAL APPROACH

In the process of the development of theology throughout history, we can bear witness to two poles that complement each other, but whose equilibrium varies according to different moments: on the one hand, the community's experience of faith; and, on the other, the most reflexive and systemic understanding from people who are capable of grasping and expressing in a more adequate manner what the community is living through. These people are many times promoters of that same experience of the community's as well as its guides.

Such is the role that we can observe in prophets, promoting and guiding the life of the people of God and imprinting in their preaching the experience of grace and sin, the saving deed that God carries through in the midst of the community. The same can be said of the apostles and of those who lead the first Christian communities, who with their life and preaching promote, gather and guide their wishes at the same time that they express the experience of faith taking place among them in the writings of the New Testament in an organized and systemic way.

In the history of the Church there appears a form of dialectics between the people's experience and the pastors' teachings, which feed each other mutually. Pastors (not only bishops and priests), at the same time that they feed and guide the people's life, reflect and systematize this experience of faith, and thus become the foundation and the method for the development of theological reflection.

As theological knowledge is being systematized, there arises a new figure, the "professional" theologian, whose main concern is the reflection and systematization of christian faith. In a progressive manner the said systematization becomes the link in the chain of elaboration from other theologians who have carried out previous systematizations; and it becomes more and more articulated to that common intention of understanding, discer-

ning and interpreting the experience of faith of the Christian community in each historical moment.

Thanks to the process started out in the II Vatican Council, enriched with the experiences that have been gone through from the beginning of the XX Century (biblical and liturgical renovation, movements of laypeople, historical critique and contributions from the human and social sciences) the elaboration of theology is questioned as of theology itself.

487

Thus, the theological concern is aimed to take place as of reality itself, with the implementation of the “see – judge – act” method, which will afterwards develop mainly into the theological reflection of the Latin American church, whose documents enrich in a specific manner this theological effort, placing specific emphasis on the facts of life, social reality and the experience of the christian community itself, which is seen from a preferred option by poor people, as poor and believer people.

More so, it goes even deeper into the function of the “professional” theologian, as the one who carries out the theological reflection as of some previous theological reflection; and the image of the “functional” theologian develops, as the one who provides elements so that the community itself effects their reflection on their own experience, and then helps systematize this reflection arising from the community.

This proposes to us the reality of a theologian who is not apart from nor is ignorant of the community, and whose theological reflection arises not only from his personal readings and study but also from a deeper contact with the reality of the Christian community and with the way the history of salvation takes place in today’s society. And thus, this theologian serves, through his knowledge, this community members so that they become conscious of their own experience of faith as part of their social reality, and so it can express it in an adequate manner, providing the community with the service of systematizing such reflection placing it in a wider perspective of biblical reflection, experience of faith of the church throughout the centuries, and within a social context that encompasses the development of the history of salvation in all the epochs and the diverse human environs.

AN APPROACH TO THEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

1. Theology and research

488

Even in the intellectual and academic field it is not rare to come across people who question themselves on the role played by theology in the loom of the scientific world and on which its epistemological statute is. To approach “things of God” is catalogued by many as mere speculation or rhetoric lacking any foundation or specific hold within the intellectual order.

Such questionings both to theology itself as well as to the theologian’s and theology teachers’ work have increased as well as the importance of theology in the scientific and university world. Different points of view about the place of theology, its specific contributions and its action aimed at the transformation of reality have lead to the visualization of games of interests and to the taking of extreme positions, which have made it not only difficult for the theologian and the teacher of theology to act, but also for the relations that can be established with other disciplines.

Such environment of questionings on the one hand, and of searching for the answers on the other, has acquired even greater strength when it is related to the research field. Research, therefore, has been acquiring in later years some specific importance in the university world and, without any doubt, it occupies today in an effective and affective manner an outstanding place in the space of higher education.

Thus, from the point of view of our job as theologians and teachers of theology, research provokes challenges and dares when carrying out our mission in the field of integral education, of guidance of the pedagogical processes and its following up. Research is one of prioritizing activities to promote the development of the various theological disciplines.

How to approach the “mystery” as of research? Are we educating ourselves in this activity of research? Which is our specific contribution as theologians in the academic university scientific fabric?

2. Can, then, theology do research?

An approach to the theologian’s duty leads to stop at one of the most important aspects of his mission: the job of doing research. That is, the theological outcomes that we know are the result of a formal structural process

and, therefore, systemic and rigorous that leads the theologian to share with other colleagues such as society on the whole, what has been obtained while on the threaded road.

This method of the scientific analysis of the theological task has gained new relevance particularly in modernity which, urged to demonstrate the applicability of the scientific statute, divides the sciences into pure sciences and human sciences which, in their turn, with the passing of time, will go on assuming a diversity of denominations according to subdivisions, nomenclatures, and positions from where the scientific status is faced.

It is thus evident that the doubts cast on the scientific legitimacy of theology, brought about by the criteria of validity, universality and experimentation, from college professionalism, the Industrial Revolution and the radical secularism of the XIX Century, end up being overcome; therefore, the academic status of theology regarding criteria of systematization, reflection and constant search is confirmed. In other words, theology, in general, like any other discipline, possesses a true and valid epistemological groundwork.

It is in this manner, then, that the validity and scientific nature of theology are given by the epistemological statute, which as a discipline is expressed in the rigorous attitude of those who transmit the theological knowledge. This theological knowledge ought to answer, in the first place, to its validity and internal elaboration as some organized, ordered and rigorous knowledge; and, in the second place, to its position regarding all the other fields of knowledge and disciplines.

This way, theology carries out its duty in a judicious, ordered, rigorous and systemic manner. What the systemic theological knowledge must search for is the acknowledgement from its academic peers since it is the theological community the one to validate the work carried out by bearing witness to its disciplinary foundation, the pertinence of the subject being studied, as well as the systemic and rigorous presentation of the whole process of theological reflection.

Now, this task of scientific rigor in no way contradicts theology as a provider of sense as of its sapient discourse. More than arguing, proving and demonstrating, theology's aim lies in the environs of "knowing," far beyond instrumental knowledge, with the purpose of providing its contribution in the complex design of being and making humanity.

3. Science and Faith united in the task of doing research

In a general sense, and taking into consideration its mission, the university is called upon to provide meaningful service in the technological and scientific development regarding historical reality. Therefore, it must include the study of the grave problems besieging humankind today, such as dignity of human life, promotion of justice, quality of personal and community life, environment protection, reach of peace, and due equity in the distribution of wealth.

Together with this, we are being witnesses, actors and participators, in these first steps of the third millenium, of a crisis of meaning and values, which affects the whole yarn of the social, political, economic and cultural life, and which is striking us in a particular, local and regional manner with global and world-wide incidences that involve humankind as a whole.

Theology at the University ought to respond not only as some disciplined knowledge, but also as a form of logic bearer of meaning since the educational community grows, develops and consolidates by means of the participation of all people and entities. In the case of Javeriana University, this goal acquires new meaning and depth, since the values preached in the Gospel are essential part of the integral education it provides.¹

Before the complexity of problems falling upon present society, the University is asked to contribute in a critical manner yet offering suitable proposals but, How, and from where to do so?

The search for answers to the serious problems we are living through is to be found in the related work of the sciences. From the specific contribution each one of them can make the loom of the integral relation take shape, but it demands joint participation. This, in turn, overcoming any false scientism and technicality, places a bet on the search for real solutions in the affective and effective realm of its applicability and following up.

Interdisciplinarity takes a privileged position in the educational and research practice of academic communities that bring life into the university since, the togetherness of all the disciplines, theology included, is what contributes the most from this interdisciplinary perspective to the solution of the difficult problems affecting humankind presently.

1. PONTIFICIA UNIVERSIDAD JAVERIANA, *Proyecto Educativo* No. 9. Bogotá, 1992.

The identity of theological knowledge, as well as its methodological rigor, allows theology to participate in the search for pertinent and alternative answers to the social problems stated. This way, theology meets other disciplines in the approximation and reading of reality to contribute in an opportune manner through outcomes proposed from its own perspective.

It is this way that theology places itself before the other sciences, not at their same level regarding methods, teleological tendencies, demonstrative argumentative discourses, scientific parameters or language-games; but as a form of “knowledge” that contributes from its own sources and normative rhythms of metaphorical persuasion, a symbolic hermeneutics that asks questions about the meaning of reality and life.

A SITUATED APPROXIMATION

The experience of the theological duty that had been developed at Javeriana University School of Theology was framed within the figure of the “professional” theologian who, as of his specialized education, carried out a form of reflection feeding from the sources of faith and from the developments taking place in other theological places and schools, mainly of European origin. This theological reflection had some meaningful renovation thanks to the effects of the council and post-council reflections brought about by the II Vatican Council in 1965, made richer also by the theological development in the various Latin American schools in the years after.

A meaningful change occurs when, in 1997, the theological services of the various University faculties are integrated into the School of Theology, since at Javeriana University all students of the different careers take some courses where they are given information about the elements with which theology provides people for their search for the meaning of life, thus helping them to acquire an overall view that will allow them to transcend themselves, to go from a perhaps more purely individual attitude to an opening to the reality of God, and to the reality of the others as persons and as a community placed in a cultural and religious context to which they belong.

This latter focus meant fundamental changes in the very conformation and deeds of the School of Theology:

- From a School conformed basically by clergymen-professors, there was a change to a situation in which most of the school's professors are lay people (25 clergymen and 85 lays), professionals with theological studies but specialized in other branches of knowledge
- From a School aimed at teaching theology only to theologians (most of who were studying to become clergymen or were already clergymen), we became a School where most of the theology classes are given in other faculties to people who are not theologians by profession nor is it in their educational plans to become theologians, since their professional option has already been made for another career.
- From a group of 350 students taking the theology programs in a building separated from the main University campus, to 20,000 students from the different careers and faculties.

This meant some serious reflection on what it means to teach theology to non theologians, and what it means to teach theology in the various careers: to artists, physicians, engineers, economists. What contents, what method, what type of interdisciplinary dialog must be used?.

In 1999 there is a new rector at Javeriana University, whose main focus is on the issue of the University's social responsibility, understood as a public good that ought to exist in function of society to which, at the same time, it must be accountable regarding its performance and to be an instrument for the construction of a new project of Nation, a new project of Culture, and a new project of Communication.

In 2001 the School of theology moves to the main area of the University to share the campus with all the other schools, keeping in mind the challenge stated in the Educational Project of the University, goal that was reinforced in the speech given during the inauguration of the new building for the School by the Higher Chancellor of the University and Superior General of the Society of Jesus on 11 October, 2001: to be a source of dialog and interdisciplinary exchange to make of theology a way of support in the search for the meaning of any academic activity and of the integral education of all the entities conforming the University.

These facts had a fundamental effect on the being itself of the School and on the meaning and form of its educational activities and research in the theological field.

STRATEGIES FOR THEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

1. From the individual researcher to research teams

Until not long ago, research work at the School of Theology was in the hands of some few experts, highly qualified and dedicated almost full time to theological research work. Their contributions to the university's scientific world have placed the University, and therefore the School, in a most important place in the world-wide, Latin American and Colombian theological context, with meaningful influence on the ecclesiastic and social reality of the country.

The historical process the School has gone through attests to it by means of the work described in the School's Journal, which is closely related to the research work carried out throughout the School's existence. Its publications from 1950 to 1975 (*Ecclesiastica Xaveriana*) describe the master's and doctorate works, and in a particular manner the outstanding works done by professors and some students during that time. As of 1975 (*Theologica Xaveriana*), more emphasis is placed on research, thus originating a greater field of action in that area, giving importance to the School's Master's program and placing special interest in the contact with reality in the educational process.

The new challenges mentioned earlier demanded the proposal for some new dynamics in the research processes, which could not be entrusted only to individual researchers who, certainly, in an excellent manner had lead the University's theological research and beyond its frontiers; it was necessary to call on and commit all the professorial staff to participate in the research process.

An initial survey was carried out with every single teacher; it was meant to identify which type of research was being done, what issues were suggested as priorities for research purposes, and what elements were available for the research.

Based on the results of this first approximation, four fundamental needs were perceived:

- a. To clarify the concept of theological research in itself, and to point out some strategies that would allow the qualification of the research process; and to go from individual, isolated and uneven researches to a process that

would integrate the needs as a whole with the specific interests of the professors.

b. To favor the conformation of research groups as of the existing interests in the professors and the needs of the work, both in the Career of Theology as well as in the teaching of theology in other schools.

c. To promote the postgraduate studies of the professors favoring a higher process of education in their particular area of specialization, as well as the basic training for theological research (Master's in theology as a common basis).

d. To have more profound dialogs with teachers from other schools in order to clarify what type of contents and methods to use in the teaching of theology in each one of the careers.

As of this becoming conscious of the needs, the development of some work was started out, throughout four phases:

a. The elaboration of a document on "Strategies for Research" (Justification, Diagnosis, General Objective, Policies, Research Areas, and Specific Proposals) that would clarify the concept and guidelines of the School's theological research, thus conjugating teachers' interests with the establishment of institutional lines of research.

b. Support for the formation of Research groups as of the teachers' interests and personal initiative.

c. Strengthening of inter-school seminaries to study how to converge the teaching of theology with the identity of the various professions (epistemology, interests, values, conditionings).

d. Support for the training of professors both in the field of theology and of other disciplines, at a personal level: postgraduate studies, diplomates, attendance to congresses and courses; and, at an institutional level: courses for the professorial staff as a whole.

During these years, these four phases were developed thus generating a new research environ in the School, and generating growing research processes that arise from the professorial base itself with the institutional support from the Department of Theology, even more so today when Master's students are being actively involved in the research groups, with specific support from the group itself.

2. Research and Theological Teaching

The development generated by these four phases regarding the environs and research work generated the need to continue in a more detailed manner the reflection process, so that it will allow us:

- a. To understand better the characteristics of today's reality
- b. To go in deep into the sense itself of theological research in our context, and its relation to theological teaching
- c. To comprehend from this two-side analysis the challenges faced by the research process that we were trying to generate

We would like to briefly present the results of this process in some aspects that we consider can be useful not only at a local level, but that can also act as a bridge for dialog regarding other experiences that are being developed in the same direction.

3. Advancements in Theological Research

- a. It has been possible to consolidate research groups in theology, conformed by Department teachers, both the ones teaching the career in the School of Theology as well as those who give their theology classes in other University schools. These groups have been appearing thanks to the initiative of the professors themselves with the support from the Department and the University, and they have obtained the stability that now allows them to, once the undertaking that originated them is over, go on with new research projects.
- b. It has been possible to obtain a type of research centered not only on "theological issues," but also open to wider problems, which are then studied under a theological perspective, such as the question dealing with the relation economy-theology, to mention but just one example.
- c. An organic training plan has been designed for the School professors in the theological and the pedagogical fields as well as in other areas of knowledge related to the teaching of theology. The said plan is structured in three levels:
 - Individual education, in postgraduate studies (masteries, doctorates) as well as in diplomates and the participation in domestic and international events.

- Group education, be this by means of the study groups mentioned above, or through inter-faculty seminars organized with the participation of teachers from the school of Theology and of those careers where they teach theology.
 - Institutional education through courses for the professorial staff, which aim to generate a solid stock of knowledge and clear viewpoints regarding theology and theological teaching topics (seminars on identity and mission of the University; inter-disciplinary issues; university pedagogy; Ignatian pedagogy).
- d. To generate mechanisms in the School of Theology, mainly through CIRTE (Commission for Research and Theological Reflection) to provide support and guidance in the effort carried out by the professors and the research groups; to discern the scientific validity of the research processes; to help in the processes of administrative performance; and to supervise the ethical aspects related to research.
- e. Master's in Theology students participate at least during a semester in one of the research groups thus strengthening their training in different methods to acquire the experience of learning to research doing research when they get into the group processes.
- f. Having respect for the freedom of research regarding the issues and the contents dealt with has favored the birth of various lines of research.
- g. Teachers of the careers conforming the School of theology have organized themselves in teams according to their areas of knowledge in order to provide a more organic way of teaching and to facilitate better group work.

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

Upon finishing this paper, it seems appropriate to propose, by way of conclusion, four fundamental points:

First, research more than a norm, a law or a mandate, is a culture. Research cannot be imposed, nor can it be sanctioned, since it must be in itself, a characteristic of the University; and since it is part of the University, it then becomes a characteristic of teacher's duty, as in the end, it is the professor who sets in motion academic life. That is why it can be stated that

the academia without one of its most constitutive symbols is not really academia or it is academia merely half way through.

Research must become a culture, an environ, and consequently, it is a mean that ought to be protected and promoted, with the support from the same university structure. It is essential, then, to set up research policies; but besides setting them up, there must be the will to research. It has to be a wish of the whole educational community so that this symbol may develop and find all the support from the Institution.

497

Without the cooperation from the pedagogy, this task becomes impossible. That is why there is the need for a true will. That the person create an option; that there be willingness and healthy tension to build academic communities where the individual good favors the social good; and where the main purpose is to seek answers, not to put up questions and blockades to the inquiries that come up during our every-day life; to be open mind to interdisciplinarity, to the flexibleness, to cooperation, to team work; to respect each other's word; not to enclose ourselves around dogmatic theories that point to univocal roads.

A second conclusion reached is that research is a process. Each person, each individual, each academic entity must carry and define their own process. That is why neither the form nor the rhythm can be unified, as this would be like wanting to unify a whole community with an only model to do research. The point is to respect processes, to favor them, as it was proposed earlier. Process does not mean that each one works according to one's own whim; but, on the contrary, that each unit sets some goals for itself towards which it must be geared, and from this viewpoint it may be able to pinpoint the paths that will serve as guidelines for the task to be pursued. In this sense, a concrete plan must be drawn up that foresees the initial and permanent education of the researchers; the policies, areas and lines of research; the financing systems, and other forms of support for the groups; the promotion of exchanges, networks, common projects and evaluation systems.

The process indicates that each one of the disciplines possesses their own epistemological framework and method that, although may be shared by other disciplines, cannot be the same. This characteristics provides an identity for particular research; it is this characteristic what identifies a certain

style to create science, having respect for yet sharing the path that each science has taken to come closer to and provide support for their own and the other's knowledge.

As a third conclusion, we can indicate that research has levels. No research project is the same and, therefore, no research may be measured with the same parameters or with the same registers. In order not to enter into lengthy discussions that have nothing to do with our issue, two clearly defined levels of research can be stated: formative research and research itself, that is scientific research.

The first corresponds to those who are being educated; to those who are taking their first steps onto the road of research and who, because of this, need a master that shows them the road, that indicates to them the *modus operandi*. Even though this type of research can be related to the undergraduate level of studies, it is not found only at this level since, as it was indicated earlier, research is a process. The point is to try to enter into it and, above everything else, to begin it. Then, each person and each group will take the steps they deem necessary to go on.

Research itself is framed within the context of the University, among the teachers, and within the master's and doctorate levels; that is, postgraduate studies. It is research done with the support of specialists, people who because of their education and expertise lead such research. It must be considered that at this level not only the individual research must be empowered but also, and above all, group or community research should be favored, in such a manner that research be though in long term goals or else it will respond only to situations arising from that particular moment, short term ones, which in no way favors the true research processes nor the development of scientific communities.

As a last conclusion, it can be indicated that without a serious State and University policy, research is destined to disappear. This means that the Nation must start investing in preparation and in a type of research that will answer the inquiries set by society. It is senseless to go on conceiving academia, and specially research, turning our backs to Society's most pressing needs. Society and University must go hand in hand; they must conceive themselves as being together, for this is the true meaning of academia. As long as the country does not make some important and serious long-term investment,

education and research will continue sailing adrift, making ends meet as they can; because, if there is no State policy, the achievements will be too individual and isolated. In this very same sense, the University most favor the generation of processes that will help academics develop research projects that aim to respond to the country's needs and, above all, to provide urgent answers in a world where there are so many needs lacking.

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