

Book Launch ACC&C 18 May, 2022

Theology and the People of God, Paulist Press, 2021, ed. Anthony Maher.

Introduction

It is a great honour and pleasure for me to be asked to launch *Theology and the People of God*, Paulist Press, 2021, ed. and contributor, Anthony Maher. It is, may I say, somewhat unusual to be in this position; back on my old stamping ground so soon after having vacated the premises to launch a book by my esteemed successor Professor Anthony Maher. Can I say how delighted I am in your appointment, Anthony. I give you my word that I will disappear as quickly as I have popped up on the occasion of your commissioning as the new Executive Director of the ACC&C. Among the many gifts you bring to this Centre you bring a fine scholarly mind and intuition for the things that matter. This is evident in the book before us this evening. And how appropriate that in a university setting for your commissioning we have an opportunity to showcase your academic and scholarly gifts.

Theology and the People of God, a book of over 400 pages representing the theological, educational and ecclesial wisdom of 19 scholars associated with the Catholic Institute of Sydney. The book is dedicated to the well-known and fine Catholic theologian, scholar and priest from CIS, Rev Professor Gerard Kelly. Gerard has been involved for many years with the ecumenical life of the ACC&C through the Centre for Ecumenical Studies and Ecumenical Roundtable conversations over recent years. Anthony congratulations on herding 18 other theologians to produce this volume. They say herding cats is nigh impossible, but I respectfully think it pales into insignificance when compared with getting 18 theologians on board, and on time, to end up with such a fine volume. It also says something very important about your leadership, managerial skills and creativity that you have singlehandedly succeeded so well to bring this major project to completion.

Location

This book has three overlapping contexts.

First *ecclesial*. Here is a book from the perspective of the Catholic Church. It is self-consciously standing on the platform of Pope Francis and his vision for the Catholic Church 7 decades on from Vatican 2. That vision is nicely captured in Pope Francis' book, *Let Us Dream: the path to a better future*. It is a vision of hope in difficult and challenging times. This platform is not unproblematic by any means. There are some distinct and contested trajectories from Vatican 2. The initial reforming energy of Vatican 2 has become increasingly differentiated over the past half century. For example, a new conservatism, which is a feature of Christianity in the West has its particular Roman Catholic form. The more reformist, progressive trajectory (and I use the tag 'progressive' advisedly because it too has become weaponised in the ecclesial culture wars) is signalled in this volume of essays. However, reading this

book as an Anglican and not a Roman Catholic, I find the essays resonate not simply with the Catholic Church but the Church Catholic. It breathes a genuine ecumenical air.

Second, *Theological*. Anthony word's make this theological focus clear: 'This book is a work of the local Church, seeking to contribute to the formation of clergy and laity in post-Vatican 2 theology. the book aims to deepen the faith of the reader through an exploration of some of the most challenging questions raised by history, science and philosophy'. Maher seeks a way forward for overcoming the divide between faith, theology and life; to recover the critical relationship between the mystical and the political; to pursue a theological rapprochement across the agencies of the church and especially a new harmony between theology and the 'entire people of God'. This, in Maher's view, 'is long overdue'. So, reader beware; this is a dangerous book. Maher again states that the insights regarding Christian existence, the sacrament of the neighbour and an understanding of salvation as a historical reality (insights and light from South America), 'must not be hid under a magisterial rock'. A dangerous book indeed; an iron fist in velvet glove as they say! And it could not be otherwise since the underlying current driver of this work is Anthony's engagement with the theology and philosophy of Ignatio Ellacuria, one of the Jesuits murdered by the El Salvadorian military in 1989.

The trajectory of the book is captured succinctly by Anthony in his opening essay: 'The only future for theology is to become the theology of the future'. This entails, in the words of Johan Baptists Metz, a 'mysticism of open eyes'. Open eyes to the realities of the world and its needs. Theology at the service of justice and liberation, human flourishing; in short, a re-founded theology for a re-founded ecclesiology. I am reminded of a comment by a colleague who once quipped that the problem with a lot of theologians is that they scratch in times past where the church no longer itches. Not so this volume. It scratches in the right places of today!

Third, *Educational*. This is a book to encourage the people of God to undertake the important work of theology for themselves; to be schooled sufficiently in the tradition and the issues of the day to find a new language and voice to work for the coming kingdom of God. It is a book written for 'students, teachers and pastors in the context of schools, seminaries, tertiary institutions and parishes ...' In this sense the book offers an outline of what a contemporary theological curriculum might include. It maps the terrain of the theological and ecclesial territory of the world in which we live. The essays 'explore many of the need-to-know issues of contemporary faith, theology and life'. The purpose is to recover the spiritual realm of the modern world in a 'spirit of dialogue and collaboration' with the whole people of God 'seeking their contribution to the retrieval of Catholic memory and future hope-filled imaginings of ecclesial possibilities.'

Structure and content

The structure and content of the volume follows the well-known ancient pattern: so we pray, so we believe, so we live (*lex Orandi, Lex Credendi, Lex Vivendi*). Each essayist offers an overview of their chosen theme, an exposition of the main concerns, a consistent focus on praxis and a fulsome bibliography. The curriculum framework is clear. The themes cover a wide range of topics: holiness and the political saint, liturgy, reading the Old and New Testaments, philosophy, church history, Trinity, Christology, Jesus Christ, Mariology, mission, the church, theodicy, sacraments, ethics, interreligious dialogue, feminist theology, pastoral and practical theology. Plenty for years 1, 2, and 3 of a theological curriculum!

Some essays that particularly caught my attention:

David Ranson, *Holiness and the Political Saint: a future trajectory*. Ranson discusses the emerging new model for holiness which brings the mystical and the political into a new unity. It represents a move from monastic to political holiness in which the silence of the mystic is opened to the word of prophecy. This is a radical move that draws the church deeper into the sufferings of Christ for the world. At this point Ranson picks up a theme from Rowan Williams in his marvellous little book, *Silence and Honey Cakes*. Williams states that ‘our life and death are with our neighbour’. What will this look like in the coming decades in the West and in Australia. A tantalising question for us.

Richard Lennan, *The Church*. I knew Richard from earlier days, a fine ecclesialogist and systematician based now in Boston. I found Richard’s essay on the church so refreshing as he discussed the paradox and mystery of the church and the tragedy of disunity and its impact on our common witness as Christians. At this point Richard picks up a theme close to Gerard Kelly’s heart regarding the unity of the church. I know this to be true of Gerard at a personal and professional level. Over 30 years ago Gerard and I co-taught a course in ecumenics at CIS. As Lennan notes in his essay, ‘A divided church manifests the sinful refusal of Christians to open themselves to all that God’s grace makes possible’. So true. It reminded me of the wonderful international conference on receptive ecumenism held at the ACC&C in 2017.

Isabell Naumann, *Mariology: devotion and study*. I appreciated Naumann’s discussion of the way in which, from Vatican 2, the theme of Mariology, perhaps one of the most contested areas of theology in Maher’s mind, has been reintegrated with ecclesiology. Naumann notes the variety of contemporary cultural images of Mary: the vitalist image of Mary in Africa; the spiritual image of Mary in Asia; the socially orientated image of Mary in Latin America; the personalist image of Mary in Western culture. Naumann argues that in the light of the highly pluralist multicultural context of Australia, Mariology ‘can provide a significant point of unity in diversity’. An interesting proposal.

Patrick McInerney's essay on *Interreligious Dialogue* is the best map of the territory I have found to date. Perhaps required reading for Board members of the ACC&C.

At the end of the volume, just when you thought there were no theological explosions on the agenda Cristina Lledo Gomez, *Feminist-Maternal Theology*, appears. In her sights are patriarchy, the association of a kind of mariology with mothering images of the church, issues to do with abuse and the need for a new voice and place for women. Pope Francis is not left unscathed with his appeal to the image of mother Church. Gomez refers to research on the 'organisation and Mother Archetype' and its conclusion that those men 'who identified with their organisation as a child to a mother' 'manifested consistently similar characteristics such as self-emasculatation, obsessive security concerns, rule-forming behaviour, and an unwillingness to take risks or to assume responsibility for one's actions'. The consequences of this pathology have been and continue to be extremely serious and injurious, to say the least. A classic case of chronic ecclesial self-harm. Gomez argues for a move beyond the mother church image to one in which the children of God take their place as 'adults for the faith'. The essay is a must read.

Conclusion

Anthony Maher, initiator, creator and editor of this volume to honour a colleague, congratulations. Moreover, you have contributed three excellent essays that carve out the framework for the book and then go on to map out what is entailed in a contemporary theology of hope. A hope that is grounded in grace and the historical realities of our time. One of your particular achievements is to recover the theological and ecclesial credentials of a properly pastoral and practical theology.

Congratulations Anthony on assembling such an array of informed, intelligent, and carefully crafted essays in a volume that will become, I trust, a gold standard for educationalists, students and teachers of theology. In doing this you have shown yourself an astute reformer, gifted with sharp and intuitive intelligence, committed to a liberative and healthy praxis and all delivered with an attractive winsome manner. A deceptively radical book; the volume lays the foundations for many years of theology devoted to the future of a world beloved of God.