

**THE BAPTISMAL AND ECCLESIAL
VOCATION OF THE THEOLOGIAN:
A PLENARY CONVERSATION**

FACILITATED AND INTRODUCED BY

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RESPONSES FROM

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The Third Plenary at this year's Catholic Theological Society of America meeting was a conversation about the ecclesial and baptismal vocation of the theologian. Attendees were seated at tables of ten, and the bulk of the session was dedicated to table conversation, prompted by five questions:

1. Do you experience being a theologian as a vocation? Can you name experiences or communities that have shaped how you approach this question?
2. What questions or methods in theology today excite you? What areas are you skeptical of? Can you name what experiences contribute to these senses?
3. How have you experienced the theological guild(s), academia as a whole, your universities, and the church as connected? Are there particular experiences in your history that are important to you and your sense of how they do or should relate?
4. What practical tasks are you feeling called to approach out of your theological or baptismal commitments?
5. Who are the people that contributed to your sense of 1–4 above?

Table conversation was lively, and participants afterwards described the gift of being able to get to know other members and their senses of their vocations better.

The session was introduced by Jakob Karl Rinderknecht, of the University of the Incarnate Word, San Antonio, with Cecilia González-Andrieu of Loyola Marymount University and Elyse Raby of Santa Clara University listening to table conversations and providing responses to what they heard. What follows reproduces the introduction and the summations offered.

JAKOB KARL RINDERKNECHT – AN INVITATION TO DIALOGUE

I would like to begin by thanking Dr. Susan Abraham for the invitation to be with you this morning, and by thanking our respondents for their generous willingness to think with me and with you all about these questions. I am indebted to both of them for helping shape what I will say and I am looking forward to what I hope will be a vital and generous conversation.

I will first provide a very brief introduction to what we are going to be doing today, followed by about forty-five minutes of table conversation. If you are at a table that is not very populated at this point, please consider combining with another table. And, if you are moving, I would encourage you to have a conversation with someone you do not know as well.

There are questions on your table, to help get your conversation going today, once we start. During these conversations, Dr. González-Andrieu and Dr. Raby and I will be listening in. After about forty-five minutes, we will summarize what we have heard and begin a larger group conversation.

I should start by noting that this opening can only be from my own perspective. My questions and concerns are my own, and I am guessing that you all come to this conversation with some that rhyme and some that differ. Hopefully it can be a productive conversation in which we both listen and learn.

The topic for today's conversation is "the baptismal and ecclesial vocation of the theologian." As you are all aware, our shared vocational path has changed dramatically within living memory. The majority of us in the room today are living a theological vocation which simply did not exist in our grandparents' eras. Structural remnants of this recent change are all around us: within our lifetimes, the church, the university, and the society have undergone several related sea changes along with plenty of ongoing pushback—and understanding the implications and working out the details has lagged (as has, we should be honest, the actual promise of justice that those sea changes sought to embody).

Our guild has worked (and struggled) to define this new vocation in a truly ecclesial way. We have not always been successful in engaging with the hierarchical church (or with the parish or religious churches) in ways that respect the proper vocation of each. I am not casting blame here. There is plenty of misunderstanding to go around. And we really have tried.¹

We also stand in an era where the clerical assumptions of the past are (slowly) being rewritten. Jurisdiction is no longer as closely tied to the Sacrament of Order as it

¹ The longstanding project of inviting bishops to gather with theologians for food and discussion is one project I have in mind here, along with the many coordinating committees and engagements cosponsored with the College Theology Society, ACHTUS, BCTS, INSeCT and other theological guilds.

once was.² The recent Synod on Synodality has provided a means for a wider variety of voices to be heard (if not always listened to). And it seems that with the election of Leo XIV, the hierarchical church has renewed its commitment to the path of synodality. We shall see, of course. And we know that our own US church is not exactly at the forefront of this movement. There is yet room to foreground the shared baptismal vocation within the church.

Many of us are sidelined from official engagement with the official church due to suspicions arising from our writing or our research, or from our belonging, our identities, and our marriages. Our location in the US academic structure both protects and divides us. We often still act as if the accident (in both the Thomistic and the common sense) of where we teach is a real predictor of the importance of our work, rather than a central factor contributing to what part of the work we are allowed to spend our time on, or what opportunities we are invited to and which we have the resources to participate in. Truly gifted and challenging colleagues are left behind every year when there simply is not a sustainable position for them to work in anymore.

And—beyond all these structural difficulties—*what the questions for theology today are* is itself a question about which we do not necessarily agree. And that’s okay. It has probably always been the case. But when it is loaded on top of all of the uncertainty I have pointed towards, it becomes a thing that we fight over, or over which we simply stop listening to each other.

I would like for us to have a conversation about our overlapping vocations. In doing so, I would like to make a couple of requests. There are many ways to approach such a conversation, and for most of us, the shift to theory, to the third person, is habitual. But for today, because what I believe that we need is to develop a shared sense of the data about which we are thinking together, and this is a question in which we are all personally implicated, I would like to ask you to share with each other from the first-person perspective about the “joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the [theologians] of this age”.³

In doing so, I am inviting you into a kind of dialogue that carries a number of descriptors in various theological circles, but is described within ecumenical theory as “the first-person method.”⁴ I learned this method from Fr. Kilian McDonnell, from his history of conversation between Catholics and Pentecostals. It foregrounds experience over theory, and asks participants to not jump immediately to understanding of difference, but to describe what they value and carry from their experience.

Let me start by saying something about why speaking about ourselves and our experiences might be theologically valuable to us as a group—especially when many of us were trained to approach theological questions in the “sapiential” mode of the

² Francis, *Praedicate Evangelium* (March 19, 2022), Art I §10, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/20220319-costituzione-ap-praedicate-evangelium.html.

³ *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965), §1, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

⁴ “First-Person Method,” Collegeville Institute, accessed August 2, 2025, <https://collegevilleinstitute.org/about-us/our-story/first-person-method/>.

medieval scholastic model, in which the important questions are supposedly disinterested, third-person, arguments often without admitted context.⁵

But there is actually an older theological model that prioritized the personal work of self-knowledge as a necessary precursor to understanding others and God clearly. The Desert Fathers and Mothers, building on the philosopher's call to "know thyself," spoke about the self as the lens through which all relationships (with self, other, God and world) are shaped. The difficult work of self-knowledge was required to avoid being deceived by the various "thoughts" that can warp our perception and prevent us from understanding ourselves, others, and God.⁶ The reason that they claimed that sitting in the cell would "teach you everything" was precisely because it fostered the confrontation with the self that allowed the monk or nun to come to know the self that actually is, not the self that they wished to be or pretended to be to the world.⁷

This radical self-honesty that they called humility allowed for the pursuit of a truthful engagement in the world that was "whole hearted" and more able to eschew sin and build authentic relationships.⁸ There are real ties here to what we heard and discussed in the first plenary, and in the second. Now, this is not a unique insight. As I said, the desert mothers and fathers built on Greek philosophical practices, and the basic idea gets carried along through history into scholastic thought and the *devotio moderna*, through Jesuit spirituality and into the contemporary world in all kinds of ways, broadening as it goes—especially as we have come to appreciate the importance of differences in culture, and other ways of belonging as central to how people understand the world. The contemporary Lonerganian summation of this, of course, is the insight that "genuine objectivity is the fruit of an authentic subjectivity," a quote that I have heard many of you in this room use.⁹ And I thank you for it. It captures the heart of the monastic insight.

Now, beyond individual self-understanding, if our Society is to work together meaningfully, we need to renew our communal self-understanding, an authentic common subjectivity that does not sideline or ignore or not know about other parts of our society. Sometimes, in our conversations with each other, we sometimes do not take the time to speak about the subjectivities that sit behind and inside and alongside

⁵ See also Otto H. Pesch, "Existential and Sapiential Theology—The Theological Confrontation between Luther and Thomas Aquinas," in *Catholic Scholars Dialogue with Luther*, ed. Jared Wicks (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1970), 61-82. Of course, many contemporary forms of theological engagement also foreground the location of the theologian as a key aspect of theology. I am grateful to our many colleagues in the CTSA, for helping us a a society to consider this important aspect.

⁶ See John Cassian, "Conference V," in John Cassian, *The Conferences*, ed. and trans. Boniface Ramsey (New York: Newman Press, 1997), 183–204.

⁷ The most repeated among the apophthegmata of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, "sit in the cell and the cell will teach you everything," is found with several variations throughout the sayings. See Benedicta Ward, trans., *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers, The Alphabetical Collection* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975).

⁸ See, among many others, as a helpful introduction with primary attention to the psychological aspects of the desert tradition, Anselm Grün, *Heaven Begins Within You: Wisdom from the Desert Fathers* (New York: Crossroads, 1999). The monastics saw their project as cultivating the wholeness, or "purity of heart" referenced in the Beatitude found in Matthew 5:8.

⁹ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1972), 272.

our conversations. We sometimes try to pretend that these things do not matter, or are already understood, or are less important, less theological. Foregrounding first person dialogue may help us to, over time, renew our "first-person plural" self-understanding, as we come to know the actual joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties which we bear.

As you have your table conversations, I would encourage you to attend to where they are going, and should they get too far into the "third person" to guide them back to the realm of conversations about this shared experience. Less "Catholic theology must center sacramental thinking, because . . ." and more "the sacraments have always been an important font of my theological thinking because. . ."

Within this conversation, we are talking about experiences, which can differ without one being "wrong." Our goal is understanding. When experiences differ, they do not necessarily contradict each other. The fact that it is raining in San Antonio does not mean that the same is true in Portland, or even in another part of San Antonio. All of those experiences together are part of what we are doing. We cannot properly theorize together about what we are and should be doing until we have a better understanding of what it is that is happening in the lives of theologians, lay and ordained, differently gendered, formed in a variety of cultures, active in the parish and not, central and peripheral to the public life of the church.

We should remain attentive to how questions of gender, race and culture, lay and clerical state, and our various working positions affect the subjectivity that we bring to these questions. But, let me flag one more difference that we less often—in my experience in CTSA—attend to. Generational patterns matter for not only our understanding of what is happening, but also our sense of how the pieces of culture, theology, and church fit together. And especially for what the experience of being in the theological academy is like. The last seventy years have been times of regular, continuing change, and the experience of our colleagues who entered the academy in the seventies is different from the nineties, let alone today. It seems that the length of time between generations in this sense is shrinking, with major changes coming in response to changes in church, including papal and synodal changes, in the world, including the shifts in the shape of the academy, and in society as a whole. Already twenty years ago, when I lived in intentional religious community, generational difference was one of the most difficult aspects to manage in community life, and I think that this is getting more, not less, difficult. Especially as there are several key before-and-after moments in our common US academic life in recent memory. Just to name a few among many: we might consider how 9/11, the 2008 crash, the 2016 election, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, and the 2024 election have each divided our world into a "before" and an "after." And how each affected people's experience differently depending on where in their career they were when it happened.

We have not always been as welcoming as a society to new members, or to newer ways of asking and answering questions. I have, over the last couple of years, heard a number of colleagues, say that much of what the CTSA is doing now "is not theology." On the other hand, I have heard from some of you that in your departments, colleagues may be skeptical of theology itself as a project and want us to focus more completely on religious studies or other related methodologies. Who we are and where our vocation/s calls us are themselves questions today.

As a final complexity, we are a society that approaches many questions by many different methodological routes. We will not always be equally polished in our

applications as we figure it out, and some of them will last better than others. And this application will take us work and time to do well. So, we may need to bear with each other for a bit when something in particular does not work. We cultivate our discipline together, as a shared “practice”—which means sometimes not being perfect. As my favorite Karl Rahner quip about theology goes: “is the attempt to jump over a ditch only interesting once the jumper has cleared the trench and we can be certain that he will not fall into it?”¹⁰

I have certainly presented papers here that I later understood to be flawed. I am sure most of us have. And it does not mean that we cannot or should not critique each other’s arguments. But “that isn’t theology” shuts down the conversation rather than opening a path to better understanding. So, in first person dialog, we might instead ask, “Why is this important to you? And, what theological work do you see it doing?”

My last encouragement is to be attentive to your emotions during this conversation. Emotions are data about experience—and worth considering not only so that we are not entirely driven by them in ways that might make a conversation more difficult, but also because they are warning signs about things to attend to, engage with, and not miss.

I cannot claim to know what will come out of this conversation, but I hope that it will help us to fund later more theoretical conversations about what we are doing together and what we want that to look like in the future.

On your table you will find some questions to get you started.¹¹ Please do attend to rooting your conversations in experience and listen for what your table mates are saying. In the large group conversation at the end, I will ask you to primarily report what you heard other people saying, rather than sharing your own insights.

Thank you.

CECILIA GONZÁLEZ-ANDRIEU – RESPONSE

To listen attentively does not only include hearing but also observing the dynamics at work in a group. Accordingly, my first observations have to do with group dynamics, which are often subtle, but which clearly affect the outcome of conversations.

During this exercise a significant number of people self-selected into racially/ethnically homogenous groups. This revealed two things. First, that cross-cultural conversations are difficult and most of us value the relative ease of being with members of our own community. And second, those present at this session of our CTSA convention were majority White. The tables of colleagues of color were two or three at the most. We must attend to the urgency of ethnic and racial issues in an atmosphere where most of the gains of the last decades have been erased.

I also observed that there was a tendency to defer to senior people to intervene first and more extensively in their remarks. I do not think this was purposeful on the part of senior colleagues wanting to dominate the conversations, but rather the hesitancy of early career colleagues to take a lead in speaking. There was also acknowledgement by some White/male/clergy colleagues that their experience of privilege might make them

¹⁰ Karl Rahner, *An Ecumenical Priesthood, the Spirit of God and the Structure of the Church*, trans. Jakob Karl Rinderknecht (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2022), 3.

¹¹ Reproduced in the introduction at the beginning of this plenary.

less sensitive to the scarcity and precarity of our field right now. We must attend to the power dynamics and differences in privilege associated with the academy.

Generational differences and their consequences were also apparent, as sharing of the "*memoria histórica*" of our vocation and profession needs to be nurtured and preserved. I heard the richness of listening to the stories of women religious and how decisions of some of their superiors nurtured the first wave of women theologians who came largely from the ranks of religious congregations. The study of theology was understood by these women as a deepening of the baptismal call. As vocations to religious life continue to dwindle, how might we purposefully encourage preferential options for supporting the education of women scholars?

The relationship with the institutional church also came up often, with questions regarding CTSA's relationship to bishops, individually and as a conference, and how we might strengthen those relationships, especially because most theologians are now lay people.

In terms of identities and vocations. Some colleagues expressed how, even if they were ordained, their identity as "teacher-scholar" was fundamental and primary. However, younger colleagues working at secular institutions brought up the resistance to theology as a discipline in their universities given theology's commitment to constructive work (not just deconstruction) and to retrieving and using sources from the tradition (not just discarding them). To confront this treatment of our field as not sufficiently rigorous or objective, it is most helpful to gather as theologians and support each other as scholars at conferences and also as people of faith beyond academic settings.

Additionally, there was a sense that continuing to be tethered to our communities, their devotions and ways of expressing faith keeps our theological work grounded and nourishes it. It is especially fruitful to accompany communities from the peripheries, where the view of what is happening is much clearer than it is from the center. Although some had initially been hesitant to leave their direct service pastoral work for advanced studies, it eventually became clear that this was a both/and with the ecclesial experience enriching the academic questions and vice versa. A word of caution was sounded at the fallacy of prioritizing difficult scholarly discourse in our publishing because this makes the important issues we are discussing inaccessible to the communities we should be serving.

Who and how we serve students was also a question, as some noted that there is a crop of recent students who identify as staunch traditionalists and arrive with a mindset of certainty that makes intellectual growth difficult. This rise in traditionalism and the current political climate are also in direct conflict with the work and specialties many of us, especially theologians of color and women, are doing.

Colleagues from places where Christianity is a minority expressed the salutary effects of interreligious dialogue and the way this stretched their scholarship. There was also an observation that due to the growing evidence that religious commitments and questions are at play in a multiplicity of disciplines, colleagues in those disciplines outside of theology might ask for our help initially and such collaborations can be fruitful. However, there is also the danger that theology faculty positions might be lost, as other disciplines claim expertise in religious questions.

As some spoke about urgent issues such as immigration, climate change and animal rights, colleagues foregrounded the urgency of starting with the questions our

communities are asking. Our students need to be met where they are, even if that is a very unstable place. There was also an appreciation for the sometimes exhausting complexity of our role in that we might have to question, prod and critique in multiple ways: our communities of faith and their unexamined preconceptions, the positions and priorities of the institutional church, and also the position and priorities of our own educational institutions.

In the end, it was clear that at least a majority of those participating in this session saw being theologians as a vocation and not merely a job. There was a commitment to having a “plan B” as resources dwindle, which would make our talents and training available beyond academia, in teaching at other levels, with other communities and helping with community organizing. Even if our field seems precarious right now, our commitment to this work is robustly anchored in a desire to serve.

ELYSE RABY – RESPONSE

1. What stood out to me from Jakob’s opening remarks is simply how vulnerable we all are, or feel. Even setting aside the current political context which makes many among us vulnerable to political and physical violence and discrimination. *All* of us likely feel the precarity of the future of higher education, the humanities, and the place of religion and theology in curricula.

2. I think a response to vulnerability, one that perhaps underlies our conversations about who we are and what theology is, is a desire to feel *valued*. We all want to know that we as scholars, and that our scholarship, is *valued* by the communities for which we write *and by the academy*. That sense of being valued can be expressed in many forms—having articles accepted to top journals, having your book reviewed, having paper proposals accepted. It also means seeing work that is *like* yours being welcomed and celebrated in these venues. We want to know that our work might be valuable even if we are still doctoral students, or early in our career, or not on a tenure line. We want to know that our work might be valuable even as we age, and even after our names have been read at the CTSA memorial service.

3. As I listened in to table conversations, I heard three themes. First, the affirmation of our work as a vocation and a gift. I heard one person say “I love, love, love this.” I heard others describe the initial joy in realizing that theology has a place for them—whether that original spark of joy was five years ago or fifty years ago. Second, we experience a multiplicity of vocations at the same time. Most of us function as scholars and as teachers at the same time. These are distinct vocations with distinct demands. Third, we experience a multiplicity of vocations over a lifetime. I heard stories of teaching careers that began in seminaries or other ministerial contexts but now are focused on undergraduates; I heard stories of focusing on teaching early in one’s career and rediscovering being a *learner* again later; I heard that subject areas, interests, and methodologies change over time as we do our work. As a final note, I heard that a lot of us do this work of teaching and scholarship in a culture that does not value a common search for truth and in educational institutions that don’t always value theology/religious studies.