Theology as Thinking in Prayer¹ by James Keating

Theology's free conversation does not belong under the tyranny of the pragmatic or politically expedient. Those thinkers who take a more contemplative stance soon discover ground much more relevant to the questions of faith and the societies within which it is expressed. Against the tendency to conform to cultural and political standards, theology ought to be a sign of contradiction. The mystic way and theological discourse can, and do, intersect because at the origin of theology is Christ's own mind, a mind that thinks out of communion with the Divine. Can we glimpse a theological approach to thinking by looking at Christ and how he thought in prayer? The purpose of theology is not to simply cultivate a grammar of objective information about God attained through historical, cultural, and philosophical sources; its primary goal is to discern truth from within an encounter with the Divine.

"Reason would never be concerned with Divine Truth at all if it were not somehow aware ... of a kind of implicit attitude of prayer."

- Hans Urs von Balthasar²

Does theology really contain this implicit attitude of prayer? The Truth of the Father, the *Logos*, in fact, stirs this reverence of the mind and quest of the heart. This is because the Word of the Father abides in wonder. Like the Eternal Word, the theologian is meant to reason out of wonder – imbued adoration. If this is not taken seriously today, it is only because the theological mind defines itself in terms that are too narrow. Looked

upon in terms of what theology "does" or is "supposed to do," rather than what it "receives" and "beholds," theology is too readily measured by its social impact in the Church and the world. Theological faculties preoccupy themselves with discussions on the acquisition of scholarly or pastoral skills, or contributions that theology might make to someone's cultural agenda. Not self-critical enough to question the expectations placed on it, these conventions are a prison by which economic and political powers attempt to lock theology in on itself.

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Thinking rooted in prayer is a listening theology, a theology that receives the Word of the Father. The Living Word makes theology first and foremost about "beholding" and "receiving," rather than simply critiquing and "producing." Rooted by living faith in Christ, a contemplative theology's analysis remains necessary, but subordinate, to more prayerful realms of thought and discourse. The mystic way and theological discourse can, and do, intersect because at the origin of theology is Christ's own mind, a mind that thinks out of communion with the Divine. Can we glimpse a theological approach to thinking by looking at Christ and how he thought in prayer?

What Might It Mean that Christ Thinks in Prayer?

To approach the mind and heart of Christ is to approach what is revealed by Him and Him alone. This revelation, which is the content of Scripture and ecclesial tradition, places Jesus in a relationship of deep obedience to His Father out of love (the Spirit) for Him. One could say that Jesus' prayer is the perfect freedom to receive love from the Father, a freedom

born of being inhabited by the Divine.3

Jesus says that He loves the Father and does just as the Father has commanded Him (Jn 14: 31); He also notes that He has told His apostles "everything that I have heard from my Father." (Jn 15:15) Christ is the opposite of self-reliance; His very identity is a "relation." His heart, mind and power flow from this relation to the Father in love. He even instructs the apostles that His ministry comes from His prayerful communion with the Father. (Mk 9:29) Since Christ is the unique Son of the Father, His own consciousness, His thinking patterns, bear the mark of such union and are defined by such. In His self-revelation to the Church, He articulates His consciousness as one wholly defined by a rapt listening out of love for the Father.

The "Christic" mind, then, is one of pure receptivity, a mind oriented by communion. The Word, the *Logos*, is the relation to, the harmony with, and the mediation of the Father. His reason and reasoning powers flow from this essential communion. "Because Reason is for knowledge and knowledge is inherently relational, reason itself must be understood as inherently relational. … The pursuit of knowledge must be understood as a pursuit of communion."

Christ's reason was a *communion* because His human reason was open to the glory of the Father. He suffered to make space in His human intelligence for the fullness of all that the Father desired to give Him. So far did He avail his human reason to the Father that He could declare His teaching not be His own.

The interior life of Jesus is marked by a shocking dependency and poverty. He does not speak for Himself, but is always spoken by Another (the Father). For Christ, then, a modern description of theology might capture what kind of thinking inhabited His own mind, a pattern of rationality that is constantly held open by faith ... human reason paying attention to God."

This already admits of an important application for the-

ology today. Theology is not only for the audience of the theologian, but is primarily a reciprocal gift, generously giving to both practitioner and student. In treating theology as thinking in prayer, it could be argued that, just as the Lord submitted human consciousness to the Father, He also possessed theological understanding as a gift for the sake of others. This submission of thought, this obedience, was an act of receptive listening to the Father and, in being so, became a gift to the Church, as well.

From what Christ received within His own human intelligence, does it not follow that the theologian has reason to submit every thought to Christ, who sacramentally and mystically shares His mind with us? Christ wants to share with His "friends"; all love is revelatory of itself. "I have told you everything I have heard from my Father."

As such a "friend," the theologian wants to ask for a share in the communion Christ had with His Father. In other words, the theologian will want to ask, "Lord teach me to pray," which is another way of saying, "Lord, gift me with a share in your life." In this life of participation, the theological mind comes to maturity. The theologian will want to become one whose reasoning flows from communion with the Divine.

What Kind of Thinking is Prayer?

THEOLOGY AS THINKING IN PRAYER

If Christ's thinking rests in receptivity to the Father's eternal self-gift, then the theologian's mind also must be receptive to a relationship with God, who is the origin of all the mind thinks and knows. Jesus' prayer is our pattern, but He prays on a unique plane and we can only pray "like Him" if He shares His own prayer with us. "There is only one in whom we find true faith in the Father, just as there is only one who knows the Father in truth. There is only one human who operates from a reconciled epistemic base ... that is Jesus Christ."¹³

The majority of a theologian's work is accomplished dis-

cursively; theologians argue. They argue points of understanding; they argue apprehensions of faith; they argue how such apprehensions relate to culture, history, and more. Such theological empiricism, objectivity, and distinctions add to our knowledge of God and Church in helpful ways. There is a danger, however, that such a theological method alone can lead to a scholar's isolation, even egoism.

Most theologians would agree that being prayerful is helpful to clear thinking, purifying of egoism, and illuminative of our darkness caused by sin. Gavin D'Costa finds the convergence of theology and prayer in the soul's vulnerability to the source of a new kind of love: "Prayer-guides theological study. ... By virtue of cohabitation with the living and triune God through prayer ... the theologian increases in love, and love is the lamp of knowledge." 14

Love produced by God in the soul casts new light on our theological reflection. The deeper the love and cohabitation of the soul and God, the more an academic becomes a theologian – the more he sees the truth of God's love and the personal and social implications of this love.

What is true of all knowledge in general is especially true of theological reflection: the truth is relational and can only be authentically received and properly offered in a communion of persons. In theological discourse, the divine "Thou" must be benevolently welcomed into the intelligence of the human "I" for discursive reflection on the Divine Mystery to retain inner consistency.

Theological method must be commensurate with the interpersonal mystery of theological reflection: the divine object that does not admit of objectification. The mysterious relationality of the Trinity disclosed in the Divine Economy dictates the specific character of relationality which ought to inform theological method: "If theology's method is dictated by love's dynamism, then this is to say that God's own Trinitarian love should dictate the method by which God is known and loved."¹⁵

The Convergence of Prayer and Theology in Contemplation The theologian, insofar as he is a man or woman of faith, is never a passive student of doctrine. Implicated in the Mystery that they contemplate, theologians are part of a drama enveloping the Church's understanding of itself and the revelation it guards. It is an active faith that moves the theologian to be caught up in the mission of the Church and to gift to it the personal dimensions of his intellectual desires. These dimensions include the unity of theologian's reason with the reason of God - Christ. As Thomas Aguinas notes in his Commentary on Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, "Between knowledge through science and knowledge through faith there is this difference: science shines only on the mind. ... Faith enlightens the mind and also warms the affections, telling us not merely that God is first cause, but also that He is savior, redeemer, loving and made flesh for us."16

To be a Catholic theologian in the fullest sense is to know the cohabitation that generates disciplined thought on God; such cohabitation shines more than light to the mind. Prayer actually brings our minds to God, who then changes them according to truth, who transforms them by communicating the truth in love. Certainly such a facet of prayer's nature is "useful" to theologians who want to articulate doctrine and explore it fruitfully.¹⁷

We have known that certain theologians leave their students in prayer after a lecture has concluded. Jean Leclercq testifies to this regarding his professor Anselm Stolz, as does Bernard Haring of his professor, Karl Adam. But in what sense can we say that thinking theologically is itself communion with God? If we use the scriptural evidence on what prayer is for Christ, we see that its nature is one of receptivity to, and communion with, the Trinity. As D'Costa noted, prayer is "cohabitation" with God that generates disciplined thinking for the theologian. It is the moment or moments of generation that most interest the theologian who sees cohabitation with God as nec-

essary for theology.¹⁹ There is a mystery around the generation of a thought; its etiology is perhaps multifaceted, arising as a result of study, contemplation, and an interior openness to seeing life in its relationships.

Receptivity to the divine is established ecclesiastically, but it functions personally in a searching manner within the creativity of each theologian. Here creativity does not mean dissent or independence from the Church, but a commitment to live within doctrine and articulate its relevance for the Church today. Receptivity as functionally personal indicates the discreet activity of any theologian who is thinking out of a mind soaked in eucharistic participation and doctrinal orientation. It is this mind that is affected by God's love summoning the theologian to adoration and worship right within the truth it receives discursively. Here we see another way of expressing this idea:

Trinitarian theology seeks to obtain a contemplative understanding of the faith. ... It is not a matter of an exercise of mathematical sophistication ("three = one"), nor of a reflection detached from Christian experience. Rather, Trinitarian theology is an exercise of contemplative wisdom and a work of purification of understanding based upon receiving the revelation of God in faith. ... [Trinitarian theology] is inseparable from the purification of the heart by communal and personal prayer.²⁰

In the reception of theological truth, the theologian's mind is ignited in wonder. Discursive thought is permeated by another layer of thinking, one that is connected in intimacy with God, thus bearing fruit by apprehending new connections between and within theological doctrines, seeing new ways of beholding what is true about God. Since prayer also is a form of "thinking," one suffused with affect and longing, a theologian discovers truth as a gift and not as a result

of "mastering the content," as it were. Theology can be construed as thinking with God out of love for God in Christ; it is an engagement of presences. This engagement of presences may yield a word beyond one's own. To be fully engaged in a received truth is the deepest of prayer, as one moves from a disposition of satisfaction for what is given in study to adoration and gratitude toward the One who gives. Here we can meditate upon how the scholar's mind becomes eucharistic, cruciform, a mind that makes room for a word beyond itself (metanoia). Reason has access to the human spirit, the deepest opening to divine encounter within a person. To be deprived of access to the Spirit leaves reason malnourished and self-enclosed, literally adrift from truth's very source.22 The theologian is called to give loving attention to the truth, which is ultimately the person of Christ. Who the theologian loves is the foundation of his or her vocation, and not simply the skills he brings to textual criticism, or his acumen in reading the historical matrix of a logion. Prayer, because it is communion with Truth, makes theology more rational, not less so, even though contemporary theologians might be tempted to ask, "How can the irrational (prayer) reason"?23 When a theologian receives truth from his encounter with God within his spirit and within an ecclesial context of a mind that worships, he satisfies a goal of theology, which is to engage God within the powers of humanity.²⁴ The purpose of theology is not to simply cultivate a grammar of objective information about God attained through historical, cultural, and philosophical sources; its primary goal is to discern truth from within an encounter with the Divine.

Foundationally, this communion between God and man originated in creation and has its apex in the incarnation. Theology thinks about the real cosmic, sacramental, and personal activities of God with us. Theology always is about a return to the sources, primarily the main source of all thought, the *Logos* enfleshed.²⁵ In this thinking, theologians know both

ratio (intellect active, in motion, at work) and nous (receptivity). In fact, one cannot engage ratio unless something has been given to the intellect, something received, beheld, contemplated. All thinking is reciprocity, a receiving and a working. When one thinks of theological work, one mostly thinks of motion, creativity, activity, but these only occur because the theologian has first received and not constructed truth (nous).26 The deeper the prayer, within the theologian, the more facility he will have with recognizing the truth of his thoughts, even the inspirations given from God, just as a mother can recognize her child's cry from within a cacophony of other sounds.27 If theology is thinking in prayer, it is a process of being able to receive truth in such a way that any new inspirational "voices" are recognized as having their source in God or not. Hence, facility with the ways of discernment ought to be a key formational goal in any doctoral training program.

At its core, theological knowledge is an intimacy between God and the one who thinks about God. God is sharing truths about his own identity and these truths, received through creation and or revelation, find their rest and then their response in the affectively imbued intellect of the theologian.²⁸

Pope Benedict XVI and others have invited us to consider the effects when we too narrowly define theology as only a rational, objective endeavor.

Faith is in the intellect, in such a way that it causes affection. For example: to know that Christ died "for us" does not remain knowledge, but becomes necessarily affection, love (*Proemium* in I *Sent.*, q. 3). Love ... sees what remains inaccessible to reason. Love goes beyond reason, sees more, and enters more profoundly into the mystery of God. ... All this is not anti-intellectual: it implies the way of reason but transcends it in the love of the crucified Christ.²⁹

Within a more generous definition of reason, the habit of study inheres within a mind concentrated in the heart. As the Program for Priestly Formation directs, "the seminary study of theology ... must flow from prayer and lead to prayer."30 This "flow" is the real method of theology because the pursuit of truth and surrendering to a relationship with the Word are closely related. "The theologian must seek to be open to the object of his study. That does not seem to me to be a very restrictive requirement. But I am saving that only some can really understand theology, only those who, in however slight a way, have begun to respond in love to God's love for them in Jesus Christ."31 The object of the theologian's study has already come to seek him, however. "We do not possess the truth, the Truth possesses us."32 The fruitful movement in all theology is not that there is a theologian searching for God in texts, but that God has reached the theologian through the texts.

Naming the Intimacy

The suffering of theology is not what is prosaically cautioned in academic deans' offices, "now this course is difficult, it has prerequisites, prepare to study hard and long, etc." Part of the suffering of theology is, of course, enduring the painstaking process of precision and clarity of thought, the patience known in reading and reading again a dense primary source, in both native and foreign languages. The suffering referred to here, however, is not commonly acknowledged in academic theology. This suffering is found in listening for the Spirit healing wounded reason. (CCC 2037) Such a suffering allows the truth of the texts to enter the conscience, the heart, and order it toward communion with God and, therefore, conversion of life. The suffering known in theology is when one welcomes the Spirit to name the intimacy one has with God by way of the texts studied, the lectures delivered, and the words expressed in essays and books.

This suffering is a painful reception of fullness in one's thinking, a pregnant carrying of the weight of truth conceived in prayer and now conceptualized in discursive thought to be delivered to students or a publication. Balthasar noted that our thinking must be nourished by divine love, fearing not that we have already received prayer's "fullness."33 What prayer gives is not a burden, but a direction, an orientation of thought secured by sustained communion with the Trinity. To stay in this communion is to stay in the stream that heals reason of bias and frees it to listen to the Bridegroom. The prayer-academic distinction is maintained, of course; praying is not teaching, but teaching, research and writing ought to flow out of communion with God. In fact, for a person's thinking to be theological it has to be born in the communion between thinking and praying, so as to guard it from being only a "philosophy done by believers," or only history attending to religious symbols and events. Theological thinking is healed thinking because only it is brought into explicit and sustained contemplation of the Mysteries of Christ, mysteries that are not exhausted in historical events, but encounters that abide in and through the faith of the Church, its sacramental life, and the personal prayer of the theologian. This is the "suffering" that theologians are called to assume; to bear their minds toward the paschal mystery of Christ, to participate within this mystery, and establish their theological comprehension upon Christ doing "His thinking within us." ³⁴ This "thinking within us" is not a mystical exceptionalism, but simply the result of intentionally relating the mind to prayer as this mind receives and suffers the conceptualization of revelation. The theologian, then, suffers the coming of Christ through noetic structures that are vulnerable to the truth and beauty of Christ, such vulnerability is, in fact, an eagerness within the theologian to have intimacy with the Trinity and to live within that intimacy as his or her vocation.

As noted above, the theologian thinks in prayer because his vocation is to discern truth from within an encounter with the Divine.

If it is love that ignites the scholarly mind to contemplate the Word made Flesh, then is it not reasonable for such love to contribute to critical analysis? Is critique intrinsically opposed to love? Of course it is not. If so, no parent could form his child, and no scholar could be sustained over decades of discursive thinking; for love orders all, including incisive distinctions and critique, without which reason would produce no clarity. When truth introduces the scholar to Presence, then truth affectively adheres to the memory. To adore God and to know God discursively are not mutually exclusive, but a mutual interpenetration of a life well lived, a life that bears fruit and sheds light. "Just as we cannot learn to swim without water, so we cannot learn theology without the spiritual praxis in which it lives." 35

As Balthasar said, prayer is indispensible to the inner act of reason. "We must," Ratzinger noted, "overcome the selfimposed limitation on reason to the empirically verifiable." Part of the receptive power of the intellect (intellectus) is prayer, the suffering of the beautiful truth of divine intimacy. "We must understand that reason is naturally open to God and in need of God. If we close it off to the transcendent, we do violence to its nature. ... because the substance of truth is love."36 Here is why we can symbolically summarize what this paper has been arguing. Two giant intellects - both Blessed John Paul II and Blessed Cardinal John Henry Newman – thought, wrote, and produced theology before the Blessed Sacrament in private chapels. Love indeed clarifies truth, and never empties it of its substance. To think in prayer is to think fully, substantively, and faithfully in accord with the very nature of reason. To think in prayer is to allow love to guide the intellect, so that the intellect itself is not deficient.

¹ I would like to thank Dr. Anthony Lilles, Dr. Thomas Neal, and Dr. Margaret Turek for their assistance in preparing this text.

² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer* (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1986), 80. I want to draw attention to two other sources that helped me think about this topic more clearly and would benefit any conversation on the nature of prayer,'s relationship to theological thinking: Paul Murray,OP, Aquinas At Prayer (London, Bloomsbury, 2013) especially Chapter One; and Jean Pierre Torrell, OP, *St. Thomas Aquinas: Vol 2. Spiritual Master* (Washington, D.C.: 2003), again especially Chapter One.

³ "[M]aking space for otherness is the hallmark of freedom." Aidan Nichols, *A Key to Balthasar* (Mich.: Baker, 2011), 55.

⁴ Giles Emery, OP, The Trinity (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 2011), 113.

⁵ See Mary Healy, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 180, where she notes that Christ reveals His own ministry as flowing from prayer, and that the apostles cannot settle for extrinsic methods to announce the kingdom; they, too, must be related to the love of the Father like, and in, and through, Christ.

⁶ "Prayer is pure receptivity to God's grace, love in action, communion with the Spirit who dwells within us, leading us, through Jesus, in the Church, to our heavenly Father. In the power of his Spirit, Jesus is always present in our hearts, quietly waiting for us to be still with Him, to hear His voice, to abide in His love, and to receive 'power from on high,' enabling us to be salt and light for our world." Pope Benedict XVI, World Youth Day, July 20, 2008.

⁷ See Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), Introduction to Christianity (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1969, 1990), 135-36.

⁸ Paul J. Griffiths and R. Hutter, eds, *Reason and the Reasons of Faith* (New York City: TT Clark, 2005), 19.

⁹ John 7:17.

¹⁰ Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, *The Way of the Disciple* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2003), 44.

11 Ibid, 17.

¹² Jn. 15:15.

¹³ Alan Torrance, "Auditus Fidei ..." in Reason and the Reasons of Faith, ed. Paul J. Griffiths & R. Hutter (New York City: TT Clark, 2005), 51. Alan Torrance's insight might also be applicable to the Virgin Mary, who is an icon of the Church. She who pondered all these things in her heart and magnified the Lord could only do so because of the singular way in which she shared in Christ's redemptive mystery. When she conceived Him in her heart, He already knew her with a love the world does not know and in this love had begun His work of re-creating humanity. Because she perfectly received this mystery, her thinking was completely vulnerable to the work of salvation extended through the life of the Church.

Gavin D'Costa, *Theology in the Public Square* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Blackwell, 2005), 126.

15 Ibid, 130, 132.

 16 As quoted in Aidan Nichols, OP, *The Conversation of Faith and Reason* (Chicago: Hillenbrand, 2011), 12.

¹⁷ Herbert McCabe, OP, God, Christ and Us (New York City: Continuum, 2005), 6-7.

¹⁸ Jean Leclercq, *Memoirs: From Grace to Grace* (Boston: St Bede's, 2000), 32. "Teaching of his kind was truly contemplative, and I was not the only one to leave the classroom in a state of prayer. Every Sunday, I would do my *Lectio Divina* quietly on the notes that I had taken during those lectures." Also, Bernard Haring reported that many were left in prayerful tears after lectures by Karl Adam on the nature of God, including Adam himself. See Robert Kreig, *Karl Adam* (South Bend, Indiana: UNDP, 1992), 155.
¹⁹ Here we enter a vocational question as well. One can think competently about matters of God's existence or the sociological and historical aspects of belief without cohabitating with God and still be "successful" as a religious studies professor. To raise the possibility that one's thinking itself would be a prayer in the profession of theology, then, is truly a vocational question. As a theologian, one is called from within intimacy with the Divine to think this way. Such intimacy, as the place of theological generation, is certainly not demanded by the academy. Whether the academy welcomes such a method is another question.

²⁰ Gilles Emery, OP, *The Trinity* (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 2011), xiii. ²¹ Thomas Aguinas, ST II-II, q.83, a.1.

²² See the discussion on reason and spirit in Dennis Billy and James Keating, *Conscience and Prayer: The Spirit of Catholic Moral Theology* (Minneapolis: Liturgical Press, 2001), 25ff.

²³ See Andrew Louth, Discerning the Mystery (Oxford, United Kingdom: Clarendon 1989), 19.

²⁴ Ibid, 28.

²⁵ Ibid, 67.

²⁶ See Kurt Pritzl, OP, "Contemplative Wisdom: The Goal of a Dominican Education" http://www.dominicanstudies.org/sites/dominicanstudies.org/files/cds_journal-pritzl.pdf (2007).

²⁷ Olivier Clement, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism* (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City, 1993), 172.

²⁸ Paul J. Griffiths, *Intellectual Appetite: A Theological Grammar* (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 2009), 129ff.

²⁹ Benedict XVI, General Audience, March 17, 2010; see also Faith Maps, 123.

³⁰ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Program of Priestly Formation*, 5th ed. (Washington, D.C.: USCCB, 2006), 163.

³¹ Andrew Louth, *Theology and Spirituality* (Oxford, United Kingdom: SLG Press, 1978), 12.

³² Pope Benedict XVI, "Christmas Message to the Roman Curia," December 20, 2012.

³³ Hans urs Von Balthasar, *Prayer*, 257.

³⁴ Church, the Church being the locus of knowledge regarding God. See, Joseph Ratzinger, *The Nature and Mission of Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1995), 55. Also, Jean Pierre de Caussade, *Treatise on Prayer from the Heart* (St. Louis, Mo.: Institute for Jesuit Sources, 1998), 145, n 38, where he notes that one ought to allow *Christ to think in him*.

³⁵ Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987), 322.

³⁶ Stratford Caldecott, Beauty for Truth's Sake (Mich: Brazos, 2009), 142-43.