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# The Criteria of “Authentically” Catholic Theology: Reading *Theology Today* a Decade Later

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**Abstract:** In light of the fecundity and diversity of Catholic theology since Vatican II, a 2012 report of the International Theological Commission (ITC) identified perspectives, principles, and criteria—distinctive family traits—of Catholic theology, what Pope Benedict XVI called its “genetic code”: primacy of the Word of God; the faith of the Church as its source, context, and norm; the science of faith; drawing constantly on the canonical witness of Scripture; fidelity to the Apostolic Tradition; attention to the *sensus fidelium*; responsible adherence to the ecclesiastical magisterium; practiced in collaboration with the whole company of theologians; in dialogue with the world; giving a scientifically and rationally argued presentation of the Christian faith; integration of plurality in the *intellectus fidei*; and sapiential. This article marks the 10th anniversary of the ITC report by offering a critical commentary on the criteria, examining the possibilities, limitations, and tensions inherent in each, and the ongoing relevance of these criteria for contemporary Catholic theology. It argues that although the aim of the ITC report is not to promote uniformity but to avoid fragmentation, and its framework is an ecclesiology of communion, when the interpretative possibilities of theology are discussed, the report tends to retreat from these possibilities and adopt a restrictive emphasis on conformity. The article then examines what Pope Francis (2013–) says about the characteristics of Catholic theology and the role of theologians in his major documents and his addresses to faculties of theology. It argues that Francis makes a distinctive contribution to consideration of what is “authentically” Catholic theology, and may offer a less restrictive understanding of such theology for the diverse academic, cultural, and ecclesial contexts in which Catholic theologians find themselves.

**Keywords:** Catholic theology; dialogue; dissent; magisterium; theological diversity; Pope Francis; primacy of Scripture; *sensus fidelium*; theological freedom; International Theological Commission



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## 1. Introduction

In the context of the diversity and tensions in contemporary Catholic theology, this article offers a critical commentary on the criteria of Catholic theology outlined in the 2012 report of the International Theological Commission (ITC) *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles, and Criteria* (International Theological Commission 2012).<sup>1</sup> It does not analyze the report through the lens of a single theme, as the ITC itself does not propose an overarching theme, but offers a critical commentary on the criteria as they are presented in the report. Lieven Boeve, writing a “critical-empathetic” analysis of the report the year after its publication, noted that it was a “much-overlooked” document (Boeve 2013). It has remained overlooked; thus, its tenth anniversary invites a re-reading of the report, written during the pontificate of Benedict XVI (2005–2013), in light of Francis’ pontificate (2013–). The article will then examine what Francis says about the nature of theology, and the role of theologians, in his major documents and his addresses to faculties of theology.

## 2. *Theology Today*: Purpose, Structure, and Methodology

The context of this report is the theology produced since the Second Vatican Council, a theology marked both by new voices and themes, and by deeper reflection on older themes. The commission holds that although the emergence of this plurality has enriched Catholic

theology, it has also led to “a certain fragmentation” (§1); thus, “to some extent” (§2), in the midst of the necessary and legitimate multitude of forms that theology takes, the question must be raised regarding the criteria by which these “diverse and manifold theologies may nevertheless be recognized as authentically Catholic” (§3). Twelve criteria are identified as “distinctive family traits of Catholic theology” (§3). Benedict XVI described these as the “genetic code of Catholic theology”, defining its identity and guaranteeing its unity (Benedict XVI 2012). The twelve criteria are identified within a tri-partite chapter structure, whose titular verbs themselves indicate a theological methodology of listening, abiding, and giving an account of the truth.

### 2.1. *Listening to the Word of God*

The first chapter consists of three sections, each of which concludes with the identification of a criterion by which theology can be recognized as Catholic. Theology, it says, is “founded on the fundamental act of listening in faith to the revealed word of God, Christ himself”, and such listening is “the definitive principle of Catholic theology” (§4). Theology is the “scientific reflection” on this dynamic of revelation and response. The most cited church document in the ITC report is Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, notable for moving theological reflection from a dominantly propositional to a more dialogical understanding of revelation, with enabling the flourishing of Catholic biblical scholarship, and for the impact of its emphasis on Scripture as the “soul of theology” on post-conciliar theology. The report argues that it is “the sheer fullness and richness” of revelation that necessitates a plurality of theologies, as revelation is “received in diverse ways by human beings”. That diversity finds unity in service of the one truth of God, but such unity “does not require uniformity” (§5). Thus, *Theology Today* begins with a generous recognition of a necessary plurality and diversity within theology—a recognition reiterated a number of times in the report—but it could be asked whether the fecundity of theology in these post-conciliar years has shaped the criteria outlined in this report in any significant way.

### 2.2. *Abiding in the Communion of the Church*

The title of the second chapter indicates that the perceived operative framework for the report is an ecclesiology of communion, and the chapter outlines six criteria related to the ecclesial location of theology. The chapter begins by noting the considerable reflection in Catholic theology on the *loci* of theology and the importance of being able to recognize their relative weight and their relationship to each other (§20), although this important issue of weighting is not developed. The *loci* or “fundamental reference points for the theological task” explored in this chapter are Scripture, the Apostolic Tradition, the *sensus fidelium*, the ecclesiastical magisterium, the company of theologians, and dialogue with the world.

This framework of theological *loci* is founded on the work of Melchior Cano (c. 1509–1560), and a footnote points to the ten *loci* of Cano’s sixteenth-century treatise on theological method, a text not frequently studied since the Second Vatican Council (Cano 2006). A student of Francisco de Vitoria and a contemporary of Martin Luther, Cano was present at the second session of the Council of Trent. Cano’s *De loci theologicis*, published posthumously in 1563, was not just a Counter-Reformation text but also an innovative theological method influenced by the method of Renaissance scholars who began to identify various *loci* for different academic disciplines. Cano adopted a methodology drawn from Renaissance humanism in an apologetical context. He identifies ten theological *loci* that are authoritative sources for theology, seven of which are *loci propria*, where Scripture has primacy (Scripture, Tradition, the Catholic Church, the general councils, the Roman church, the fathers of the Church, the scholastic theologians) and three are *loci alieni* (*ratio naturalis*/human reason, philosophy, and history). These *loci* are the sources of the arguments and reasoning of theology, the *sedes argumentum*. Cano’s treatise laid the groundwork for a scientific approach to theological method and what came to be known as fundamental theology. Cano’s

inclusion of history as a *locus* is striking. He argued that “theologians are thoroughly unerudite in whose writings history is mute . . . For there are many things which history supplies from its treasury, which lacking we should very frequently discover ourselves poor and unlearned both in theology and every other branch of learning” (Townsend 1931, p. 141). Although there are references to history in *Theology Today*—for example, as the place of God’s revelation (§6), and as a discipline that influences theology (§76)—there is no sustained treatment of history as a *locus theologicus* in the manner of Cano. The role of history in this report is very different from the important, albeit outmoded, role of history as a *locus theologicus* envisaged by Cano. As contemporary Catholic theology seeks to respond to the unprecedented crisis facing the church, a contribution from the “treasury” of history is essential in order to adequately understand the causes and contexts of the crisis.

The understanding of *loci theologici* has developed over the centuries, becoming what Peter Hünermann calls “the operative core of theological methodology” (Hünermann 2007, p. 118). Given that the specific background of this report is the “extremely productive” years for Catholic theology after Vatican II, the theological topology outlined would have been enriched if the poor had been identified as a *locus theologicus*, given the importance of this *locus* in liberation theology, Catholic social thought, and other contemporary Catholic theologies. It is clear, however, that Pope Francis has identified the poor and vulnerable as a *locus theologicus*, thus enabling something of the fecundity of theology since Vatican II to shape the contemporary theological topology.

### 2.3. Giving an Account of the Truth of God

The third chapter, although the longest one, outlines just three criteria essential to theology. In its exploration of the rationality of theology, of the unity sought in a plurality of methods and disciplines with theology un-isolated from critique, and of theology’s sapiential dimension, the chapter offers constructive and imaginative guidance to theology, without any of the retreat from interpretative possibilities found in discussion of some of the criteria in the first two chapters. We now turn to an analysis of the twelve criteria identified in the report.

## 3. Twelve Criteria of “Authentically” Catholic Theology

### 3.1. Primacy of the Word of God

This section opens with a reflection on the Johannine prologue, a reminder that Christianity is a religion of the “the incarnate and living Word” (§7). Acknowledging the unity of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures for theology, these unified scriptures, “together with the Church’s living Tradition . . . constitute[s] the supreme rule of faith” (§8) (Benedict XVI 2010, §18). The text refers to the presence of the Holy Spirit both in the texts themselves through the human words of the prophets and apostles, and as interpretative helper to the readers of the Bible in every age.

This self-evident, but practically complex, criterion of scriptural primacy is an exciting one for theology. Theologians are part of the ongoing dynamic of the history of reading and re-reading of the word of God: Rabbinic exegesis of the Hebrew scriptures, Patristic reception of these texts, the Reformation re-reading of the Patristic texts, a dynamic process of reading and rereading as the world of the text meets the world in which the text is read, and in contexts of solitary scholarship, digital engagement, and of collective liturgical listening. We engage with insights from that broad range of scholarship that constitutes contemporary biblical studies—scholarship that raises questions about the very nature of a “sacred text”—and receive corrections to any facile use of scriptural texts in teaching, preaching, and research.

Christian theology allows for a variety of ways of giving primacy to Scripture. We have the explicit biblical primacy of Karl Barth and the implicit biblical primacy of Karl Rahner, both of whom exemplify, in different ways, doing theology under this primacy. This primacy finds distinctive expression in some of the new theological voices and contexts alluded to at the beginning of the report. The feminist reading of co-existing “texts of

terror” and texts of redemption in Scripture (Trible 1984), and the expertise in reading God’s word that arises from the epistemological privilege of the poor emphasized in liberation theology, are but two examples of biblical primacy in post-Vatican II theologies. However, the ITC does not mention how that primacy can be enriched through interfaith dialogue, for example, Jewish–Christian dialogue, something that is increasingly important for contemporary Catholic theologians.

Finally, this first criterion of Catholic theology presupposes that theologians have an ongoing critical engagement with the Word of God in order to ensure that, whatever the theological discipline, the primacy of that Word is recognized with appropriateness and creativity. The fourth criterion returns to this theme of the relationship between Scripture and Catholic theology.

### 3.2. *The Faith of the Church as Its Source, Context, and Norm*

Faith, the response to God’s Word, is the act of trust (*fides qua creditur*), and the faith which is believed (*fides quae creditur*). It is both personal and ecclesial, an act of submission but not of irrationality, generative of love and hope, and requiring both profession and witness. The report issues a reminder that “false prophets” (2. Pt 2:1), and heretical interpretations of the faith opposed to the Apostolic Tradition, existed from the beginning of the Church. Heresy, “obstinate” denial or doubt, “distorts the Gospel” and “damages ecclesial communion” (§14). Obstinacy “against the teaching of the Church” is described as the substitution of one’s own judgement for obedience to the Word of God. Heresy is also presented as an opportunity, a prompt to the Church “to an ever-deeper search for the truth in communion”. Notwithstanding the importance of vigilance against real distortion of the Gospel, the rigid border between faith and heresy delineated here does not adequately reflect contemporary understandings of faith. When even Pope Francis himself has been accused of “canonical delict of heresy” (Buscemi et al. 2019), it is worth recalling Avery Dulles’ caution that the imputation of heresy “should not be lightly made. It should be reserved . . . to doctrinal deviations so grave that they severely impair one’s saving relationship to God in Christ” (Dulles 1976, p. 244).

The report does not address the relationship between doubt and faith, a relationship that all theologians who engage with the mystery of God and God’s dealings with the world are familiar with. Personal witness and creedal proclamation can coexist with doubts that are not simply articulations of liberal “obstinacy”. *Fides quaerens intellectum* is a seeking fraught with multiple vulnerabilities that cannot be easily dismissed as heretical distortion of the gospel or substitutionism. The more complex issue of intellectual dissent arises in the discussion of the seventh criterion related to responsible adherence to the magisterium.

### 3.3. *The Science of Faith*

Theology is part of the multiform *intellectus fidei*, and “becomes theology in the strict sense when the believer undertakes to present the content of the Christian mystery in a rational and scientific way” (§18). Theology is presented as a science, a disciplinary understanding first developed, using Aristotelian criteria, as theology took its place in the medieval universities. The modern understanding of theology as science or *Wissenschaft*, developed in the context of Protestant theology in nineteenth-century German universities, has also influenced Catholic theology. The report challenges reductive views that reserve the term “science”—“a form of knowledge capable of explaining how and why things are as they are” (§62)—for the “hard” sciences with their assumed monopoly on objectivity and rationality. It is worth recalling here Rowan Williams’ caution, writing on the broader area of Christian theology, on the limitations of understanding theology as a “science”: “There is a rigor and discipline appropriate to theology, but it is the rigor of keeping on the watch for our constant tendency to claim the ‘total perspective’: it is almost a rigor directed *against* the naive scientific model” (Williams 2000, p. 13). In the contemporary university, theology is more likely to be intentional in its identification as a discipline within the humanities,

contributing a reasoned theological humanism that is important in an intellectual climate where there is a tendency towards *a priori* exclusion of religious claims and perspectives.

This third criterion challenges theologians not only to seek an acceptable synthesis of faith and reason, but also to understand the work of theology as “a rational participation in the knowledge that God has, [of Godself] and of all things” (§18). Theology as rational participation in the loving *ratio* of God, an adequate articulation of which has been sought by theologians like Anselm and Aquinas, is, perhaps, the most mysterious and self-corrective criterion for theology.

#### 3.4. Draw Constantly on the Canonical Witness of Scripture

This criterion reminds theologians that when *Dei Verbum* says the study of the sacred page is “the soul of sacred theology”, it means that theology “in its entirety should conform to the Scriptures . . . ” (§21), and primacy must be given to biblical themes (§23). This is the first of two places in the report where the possibility of ecumenical collaboration is mentioned, here referring to “shared listening to the Scriptures” as an impetus towards dialogue.

John Barton, Anglican priest and biblical scholar, describes the challenge involved in discerning the status and authority of the Bible: “One of the difficulties in seeing the Bible as doctrinally authoritative, let alone divinely, inspired, arises from its textual uncertainty” (Barton 2019, p. 479). He argues that critical study necessitates “freeing the Bible from the control of religious authorities” to enable “a free counterpoint between Scripture and doctrinal truth” (Barton 2019, p. 486). What is proposed in *Theology Today* is a kind of informed conformity, whereby “all appropriate philological, historical and literary methods” are utilized in the process of interpretation (§22), with no indication that these methods may not necessarily affirm the magisterial interpretation of a particular text. Biblical interpretation, however, “is an iterative and dialogical process” rather than a linear one leading to “some singularity of understanding”, as inferred in §22.<sup>2</sup> Interpretation has become a more complex process in light of the diversity of theologies. There are other challenges, too, for example, how does one conform to Scripture in bioethics? Doing Catholic theology that is “nourished and ruled by Scripture” necessitates being informed by ecumenical intradisciplinary theological dialogue, especially that free contrapuntal movement between Scripture and doctrinal truth.

#### 3.5. Fidelity to the Apostolic Tradition

The report offers a dynamic understanding of Tradition as “an ongoing process in which the unity of faith finds expression in the variety of languages and the diversity of cultures. It ceases to be Tradition if it fossilizes”. The Holy Spirit helps in the process of growing “in insight into the realities and words that are being passed on” (§26). A broad sweep of periods and perspectives on tradition is covered: the “unique place” of the Fathers of East and West, the regional and ecumenical councils’ struggles with Christological and Trinitarian heresies, the magisterium of the pope and the bishops, and the question of papal infallibility. What is particularly striking is the vibrant portrayal of the Patristic living of the Tradition, emphasizing a unity lived out of a range of pluralities, “from the plurality of liturgical families and of spiritual and exegetical-theological traditions” (§27).

The “special status” of dogmas in the “ongoing Apostolic tradition” is acknowledged. In the first of just two places in *Theology Today* where the theologians of the ITC speak with an active voice, they note their awareness of the “difficulties” attending the interpretation of dogma. These interpretative difficulties render it necessary to understand the historical context of the formulation of a doctrine, and “to discern how a dogma’s meaning and content are related to its formulation”. However, there is no further reflection on such interpretative difficulties, and the conclusion is that dogmas are “sure points of reference for the Church’s faith and are used as such in theological reflection and argumentation” (§29).

The inseparability of Scripture, Tradition, and the magisterium for Catholic theology is outlined, the latter tasked with authoritative interpretation of the “single sacred deposit

of the Word of God" found in Scripture and Tradition (§30). Referencing the work of Yves Congar (Congar and Henri De Lubac are the only twentieth-century Catholic theologians referenced in the report), the distinction between Tradition and traditions is identified as one of the major tasks of theology since Vatican II. The ecumenical possibilities are highlighted by the striking inclusion of a quotation from the report of the fourth conference of the World Council of Churches' Commission on Faith and Order (Montreal, 1963) that outlines the numerous questions that arise in this task (World Council of Churches 1963, nos. 48, 52). This is followed by another affirmation of plurality in the imperative given to theology to both demonstrate that the Apostolic Tradition is not an abstract thing but "exists concretely in the different traditions that have formed within the Church", and to examine why some traditions are not found universally but only in "particular orders, local churches or historical periods" (§31).

Fidelity to the Apostolic Tradition, the report concludes, requires an "active and discerning reception of the various witnesses and expressions" of that ongoing Tradition (§32). Positively, this offers a dynamic interpretative role for theology; however, there is a pattern of retreat in this report when any interpretative possibility for theology is explored. Here, the interpretative and discerning role of theology is only deemed appropriate if directed towards "*traditions* [which] must always be open to critique" (§31), and it is upon this critique of the local and the particular that the ongoing reformation and renewal of the Church depends. It could be argued, however, that the discernment of the distinction between what is the Tradition of the Gospel and the traditioning process involves a critique broader than that acknowledged here.

### 3.6. Attention to the *Sensus Fidelium*

The discussion of this criterion begins by citing I Thessalonians—hinting towards its scriptural basis—where Paul expresses gratitude for that community's receptivity to his preaching as God's Word and reminds them of the power of that Word within themselves as a community. The theme of the *sensus fidelium* was developed primarily at Vatican II, and since that council there has been considerable reflection by theologians on the implications of the conviction that each believer is graced by baptism with a sense of faith, *sensus fidei*, and on the implications of the conciliar affirmation, in *Lumen Gentium*, that "the entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief". This communal sense of the faith—the *sensus fidei fidelium*—is not erroneous if "universal agreement in matters of faith and morals" is shown, as Augustine says, "from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful" (Second Vatican Council 1964, §12). This "universal agreement" is often referred to as the *consensus fidelium*, although this specific term is not used in this ITC report.

Outlining the movement from the *sensus fidei* of the people of God to that of the bishops—with their own *charisma veritatis certum*—the text offers a clear statement about the fundamental ordering for Catholic theology, with the specific task of authentically interpreting the word of God given to the pope and bishops. It asserts in §34 that "the nature and location of the *sensus fidei* or *sensus fidelium* must be properly understood" (*recte perspecta*). The use of this term, "properly understood", albeit a common clarificatory phrase, is a reminder of the connection between the ITC and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), as the ITC's purpose is to assist the CDF in its mission of promoting and safeguarding Catholic doctrine on faith and morals.<sup>3</sup> This proper understanding is a delicate balance of sometimes conflicting understandings: the *sensus fidelium* is non-utilitarian, not simply "the majority opinion in a given time or culture"; but neither is it "only a secondary affirmation of what is first taught by the magisterium". Positively, it is defined as "the sense of the faith that is deeply rooted in the people of God [led in the way of faith by their pastors] who receive, understand and live the Word of God in the Church" (§34). However, there is no reference to the meaningful structures of consultation needed when there is a lack of congruity between magisterial thinking and the broader

sense of the faithful as, for example, with the case of the wide non-reception of *Humanae Vitae*'s teaching on birth control.

What, then, is the particular role of the theologian in relation to the *sensus fidelium*? It is not just something to be attended to intellectually, but is also a *locus theologicus*, thus making it imperative that the theologian is a participant in ecclesial life (§35). The theologian is dependent on the *sensus fidelium*, for “the faith that they explore and explain lives in the people of God”; his/her “particular service . . . is precisely to explicate the Church’s faith” in its totality, including the *sensus fidelium* (§35). The theologian helps “clarify and articulate the content of the *sensus fidelium*”. This investigation of the complex issues related to faith and morals—including assessment of new ecclesial trends and movements—“must be precise”. Theologians’ critical assessments must be conducted, the report says, with “humility, respect and charity”.

This criterion is summarized as attention to the *sensus fidelium*: Theology “should strive to discover and articulate accurately what the Catholic faithful actually believe” (§36). The verb “strive” indicates an awareness of the challenge involved in this imperative and of the imperfect provisionality of the discipline. The articulation of “what the Catholic faithful actually believe” at this time necessitates a more expansive consultation (a word not used anywhere in the ITC report). It could be argued that the concept of the *sensus fidelium* should be expanded to include all Christian believers as a statement of faith in the workings of the Holy Spirit in all the baptized, and as an acknowledgement of ongoing ecumenical reflection on the concept. Patrick J. Hartin argues that some of the developments in Vatican II, for example in relation to biblical studies, were in fact a reappropriation of beliefs “that had been preserved by the *sensus fidelium* of other Christian denominations” (Hartin 1991, p. 83).

Ormond Rush distinguishes between three sources of consultation of the faithful: (i) primary (those “attempting to live a committed and sacramental life in the Church”, and constituted by laity, bishops, and theologians) (Rush 2011, pp. 244–47), (ii) secondary (those who are “inactive”, “lapsed”, or “disaffected”, maybe identifying in some way as Catholic) (Rush 2011, pp. 244, 247–49),<sup>4</sup> and (iii) ancillary (baptized believers in other Christian churches) (Rush 2011, pp. 249–51). The boundaries between primary and secondary sources are more porous now because of the impact of the abuse crisis, with committed Catholics also speaking about their disaffection. The ITC calls on theology to “speak the truth in love so that the faithful may mature in faith and not be ‘tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine’ (Eph 4: 14–15)” (§36). No unsettling doctrinal winds—from the storm caused by *Humanae Vitae* to the ongoing challenges to teachings on sexuality or priesthood—have caused the faithful to be “tossed to and fro” as much as the current crisis. There is a unitive *sensus fidelium*—which crosses the conservative–liberal divide—in relation to a failed leadership culture, reflecting a shared ethical indignation and shaken faith. The determination of what Catholics “actually believe” cannot bypass this crisis, and theology must be intentionally attentive to this reality.

It is important to note here that the ITC published a document in 2014, “*Sensus Fidei* in the Life of the Church”, that is a more fulsome treatment of this criterion and its related concepts. The 2014 document is a nuanced and reflective treatment of the *sensus fidei fidelis* and the *sensus fidei fidelium*, includes an ecumenical perspective, and offers positive and dialogical perspectives on the relationship between the magisterium, theologians, and the wider community of the faithful. Although a comparison of the 2012 and 2014 documents is outside the scope of this article, it is worth noting that the pattern of retreat from the interpretative possibilities of theology in the 2012 document is not as evident in the later document. Gerard Mannion’s helpful comparative analysis of the 2012 and 2014 documents concludes that although the later document does “retain ambivalences and maintain contradictions”, it has a less subordinationist understanding of the *sensus fidelium*, is more open about controversial issues, and is less ambivalent in its assertions about the capacity of the faithful “to recognize and endorse authentic Christian doctrine and practice, and to reject what is false” (Mannion 2016, p. 87).<sup>5</sup> This criterion’s balance

is held uneasily between two clear positions: firstly, the stated fundamental ordering for Catholic theology in relation to the practice of the magisterium by the episcopal hierarchy, and secondly, the equally clear position that all the faithful are anointed by the Holy Spirit and participants in the prophetic ministry of Jesus, all learners and teachers, including the canonically authoritative teachers. The responsibility of the theologian in holding this balance can be a difficult one, but attention to the *sensus fidelium* is ultimately an endeavor born of faith in the presence and promise of the Spirit of God in the *universitas fidelium*.

Attention to the breadth and complexity of the *sensus fidelium* is a defining characteristic, a priority *locus theologicus*, of the pontificate of Francis. He emphasizes listening to the faithful, with particular emphasis on listening to the poor and vulnerable, and the structuring of this listening into concrete processes and structures of synodality is a distinctive feature of his ecclesiology. The 2018 ITC document, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, offers an excellent overview of the concept of synodality, its basis in the doctrine of the *sensus fidelium*, and its possibilities at the local, regional, and universal levels. The two-year synodal process, “a synod on synodality”, opened on 9 October 2021, and although it is too soon to adjudicate on the long-term implications of Francis’ theological and practical attentiveness to the *sensus fidelium*, there is no doubt but that this *locus theologicus* will be acutely important for Catholic theologians as the process develops.<sup>6</sup>

### 3.7. Responsible Adherence to the Ecclesiastical Magisterium

This criterion, interestingly placed *after* the criterion of attention to the *sensus fidelium*, is a reminder about the integral role the magisterium plays in Catholic theology, *responsible* adherence to which is necessary for theology to be a *scientia fidei* and an ecclesial task. The qualification of “responsible” is significant, as it signals something more nuanced than unquestioning fidelity, and the report offers a careful treatment of the relationship between the magisterium and theology. A “correct theological methodology”, it argues, is dependent on a “proper understanding” of the nature and levels of the magisterium. The distinction of competencies between bishops and theologians is noted, as are the relevant temptations, that of bishops to reductionism and theologians to substitutionism (nos. 37, 40). The framework for this distinction of competencies is an ecclesiology of communion, and both bishops and theologians are directed to a relationship of “mutually respectful collaboration” (§38). The magisterium needs theological competence and “capacity for critical evaluation”. Theology needs the “authentic transmission of the deposit of faith” that the magisterium provides, “particularly at decisive times of discernment” (§39), although which theology of discernment is operative here is unclear. The translation of the Latin *authenticus* as “authentic”, rather than “authoritative”, contributes to a potential juxtaposition rather than distinction of competencies.

The presence in the Church of “a certain ‘magisterium’ of theologians” is acknowledged, with reference to Thomas Aquinas’ distinction of magisteria between the juridical authority of the bishops (*magisterium cathedrae pastoralis*) and the authority of the *magistri* (*magisterium cathedrae magistralis*) whose authority is not *ex officio* but based on scholarly competence (§39). This distinction emerged with the rise of the universities, and a complex history evidences both collaboration and conflict between the two (Congar 1982, pp. 314–31). Thomas would not have envisaged the contemporary understanding of magisterium, but his distinction offers a helpful way of delineating different kinds of authorities, which is useful in interpreting the tensions related to the concept of “authentic” interpretation. The ITC makes it clear that the “magisterium of theologians” cannot parallel, oppose, or serve as an alternative to the ecclesial magisterium (§39), although theologians, of course, do not operate as a collective magisterium in the manner of the bishops. The magisterium plays a role in the authentic interpretation of the faith “that theology simply cannot take to itself” (§40). Avery Dulles summarized the distinction thus: “one may say that the functional specialty of the ecclesiastical magisterium is judgment; that of the theologian is understanding (Dulles 1980, p. 163)”.<sup>7</sup>



The discussion of responsible adherence to the magisterium notes the gradation in weight of magisterial teaching. Because of this, theologians can play a constructive, critical, and evaluative role in mirrored gradated obedience. It is made clear that “dissent has no place in Catholic theology”, but investigation and questioning by theology is not only justified but “*necessary* if theology is to fulfil its task” (§41).<sup>8</sup> The report does not elaborate on the distinction between critical evaluation and dissent, nor on the continuum that exists between the questions raised in the investigative process of exploratory research and public, intentional dissent. Furthermore, the statement about the insufficiency of “mere formal and exterior obedience” by theologians, with the implication regarding internal assent, seems an unsettling negation of the acknowledgement of the necessity of questioning.

Bradford Hinze’s analysis of a decade of actions taken by the CDF, doctrinal committees of national episcopal conferences, and individual bishops “to investigate and discipline theologians and to restrict open discussion of certain theological issues” was published the same year as the ITC report (Hinze 2012). These included the CDF’s investigations into Peter Phan’s *Being Religious Interreligiously: Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue* and into Waław Hryniewicz for his criticisms of the CDF’s 2007 statement “Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church”, and investigations by the doctrinal committee of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops into Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler’s *The Sexual Person: Toward a Renewed Catholic Anthropology* in 2010 and Elizabeth Johnson’s *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontier’s in Theology of God* the following year. Hinze’s analysis shows that the neuralgic points of Catholic theology that brought scrutiny on the work of individual theologians included homosexuality, religious pluralism, and women’s ordination. His conclusions about the treatment of theologians are disturbing, including the lack of respect and charity (required of theologians in their own critical assessments) and the absence of meaningful dialogue. It offers an interesting companion piece to the ITC’s perspective on the relationship between theologians and the magisterium.

The ITC report refers to dialogue twenty-nine times. Revelation is presented in a dialogical model, and theology itself is founded on the necessary dialogue between faith and reason. Theologians are mandated to a range of dialogues: ecumenical, intradisciplinary and interdisciplinary, and intercultural. However, in the realm of internal disagreement there is little reference to dialogue. However, the ITC suggests that tension between theologians and the magisterium “need not be interpreted as hostility or real opposition but can be seen as a real force and an incentive to a common carrying out of [their] respective tasks by way of dialogue” (§42). It is not my intention to minimize the seriousness of substantial or perceived differences between theologians and the magisterium on matters doctrinal or ethical, but recent history has shown that the same vigilance and scrutiny was not directed, during the same decade examined by Hinze, to substantial malpractice within the Church.

The final topic raised in relation to this criterion is that of the freedom of theology and theologians, freedom derived from “scientific responsibility”. Here the report cites the ITC’s own document, *Theses on the Relationship between the Ecclesiastical Magisterium and Theology* (International Theological Commission 1975, Thesis 8, §2), where the commission argues that the freedom of theologians is limited by two factors expressed in *Dignitatis Humanae* (§7): its binding to truth, and the moral principle of personal and social responsibility. Theologians are obligated to responsible adherence to the ecclesial magisterium, but magisterial vigilance of the work of theologians could also find its limits in the same section of *Dignitatis Humanae*: “freedom is to be respected as far as possible and is not to be curtailed except when and insofar as necessary” (Second Vatican Council 1965a).

When the question of theological curtailment arises, it follows, as Rahner argues, that “the burden of proof does not generally rest with the freedom of theology, but with the curtailment of this freedom” (Rahner 1991, p. 190). There is much to be commended in the report’s discussion of this criterion of Catholic theology but, once again, there is a retreat from interpretative possibility when the qualification of *responsible* adherence to the

magisterium remains largely unexplored. We will return to this question of theological freedom in the discussion of the approach to theology under Pope Francis.

### 3.8. *The Company of Theologians*

The eighth criterion identifies Catholic theology as a collaborative practice “with the whole company of Catholic theologians in the communion of the Church” (§50). Being a theologian is referred to as a personal and collegial ministry, “exercised in and for the Church as a whole, and it is lived out in solidarity with those who have the same calling”. Theologians are portrayed as collaborators in research, offering each other support and inspiration, and acting as mentors for graduate students and aspiring theologians. In the second place in the report where the ITC theologians speak with an active voice, they say they are “rightly conscious and proud of the profound links of solidarity that unite them with one another in service to the body of Christ and to the world” (§45). However, the benefit of this solidarity is presented only as oriented towards the promotion and “observance” of the report’s criteria, one of three places in the short discussion of this criterion where adherence to the criteria is emphasized.

A striking image of theologians is offered, that of those who “often work at the frontiers of the Church’s experience and reflection” (§47). However, the possibilities of this creative liminality retreat somewhat as theologians’ “careful adherence” to the fundamental criteria of Catholic theology is again emphasized, and a footnote reference points to *Donum Veritatis*’ caution that the urge to be daring felt by a theologian needs to be accompanied by “that patience which permits maturation to occur” ([Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1990](#), §11). The liminal location of the theologian is a theme that Francis raises in his comments on the role of theologians.

Theologians should “recognize the intrinsic provisionality of their endeavours and offer their work to the Church as a whole for scrutiny and evaluation” (§47). The practice of peer review is acknowledged as an invaluable method of “mutual questioning and correction”. In the university context, this is a required hallmark of scholarly work, but the ITC argues this is not sufficient in all cases and that the episcopal right to review theological work can be expressed in censure of “theological work that they deem to be erroneous or harmful” (§48).

The importance of research collaboration within theology, and with other disciplines, is affirmed. There is reference to ecumenical dialogue and research as a “uniquely privileged” field of collaboration, in which theologians have an ambassadorial role in grappling with historically contentious issues and furthering the work of Christian unity. However, the emphasis here is not on the mutually enriching, “potentially productive” learning that can emerge from this dialogue and research, but on the need for Catholic theologians undertaking this ambassadorial task to ensure “particular adherence” to the criteria outlined in this report (§49). There is no reference to keeping company with theologians of other faiths, and the absence of reference to working with Jewish scholars is striking given the primacy of Scripture as a criterion, the significance of *Nostra Aetate*, Vatican II’s declaration of the relation of the Church with non-Christian religions,<sup>9</sup> and the changed landscape in Jewish–Christian relations after the Holocaust.

Doing theology in the company of theologians should be marked by “professional, prayerful and charitable collaboration . . . attentive both to the needs and comments of the faithful and to the guidance of the Church’s pastors” (§50). It is essential to be open to peer review from within the company of theologians and, notwithstanding the differentiation of power, to be open to magisterial “peer review” from those tasked with authoritative interpretation of the tradition. Building solidarity among theologians can be a challenge in the face of some of the factional hostility in Catholic theology that renders “mutual questioning and correction” difficult. Perceived fidelity to the magisterium is sometimes used as an invidious identification of which theologians are authentic Catholic theologians, without acknowledging that theologians who critique aspects of magisterial teaching are acutely aware of the provisionality of that critique, both deferring to the tradition and

wrestling with it. This criterion is a challenge to Catholic theologians to recognize a shared common vocation, and to extend bonds of solidarity in the midst of theological differences.

### 3.9. *In Dialogue with the World*

Constant dialogue with the world is the tenth criterion of Catholic theology, a criterion shaped by Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, which described the perennial duty of the Church "of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel (Second Vatican Council 1965b, §4)". The report notes that theology has a particular competence and responsibility in this regard. This competence in discernment is born of constant dialogue—with the culture and currents of the time, and with other sciences—with the implication that this dialogue includes a willingness to learn from the encounter (§53). The dialogical competency of theologians also includes a contribution to interreligious dialogue (§57), but there is no specific mention here of the learning for Catholic theology *from* such dialogue.

The historicity of the church is acknowledged, particularly its "overly cautious" approach to change, a caution eroded by "the *sensus fidei* of the people of God, the clear sight of prophetic individual believers, and the patient dialogue of theologians with their surrounding cultures" (§55). This must be one of the clearest acknowledgements in any church document of the contribution of patient and courageous people who enabled the Church to discern the significance of major social and cultural developments: from the shunned courage of Franz Jägerstätter, whose act of conscientious objection paved the way for the recognition of the legitimacy of conscientious objection at Vatican II, to the patient work of censured theologians whose work bore fruit at that council. The call to be readers of the signs of the times is a reminder that the implications of the gospel cannot be outlined *a priori* but need to be discerned through the practice of constant dialogue. This criterion, founded on a profound pneumatology, mandates theology to a broad-based dialogue, and there is no retreat in the report's discussion of this criterion from the possibilities outlined.

### 3.10. *Gives a Scientifically and Rationally Argued Presentation of the Christian Faith*

Another criterion is that Catholic theology "should strive to give a scientifically and rationally argued presentation of the truths of Christian faith" (§73). This striving is founded on a positive anthropology shaped by the biblical concept of *imago Dei* and a natural law understanding on the common capacity for reasoning towards objective and universal truth. The report explores the relationship between faith and reason. Reason enables the believer to seek and grasp "the profound connections" involved in the revelation–faith dynamic (§63). Faith pushes the boundaries of reason. The truths sought and grasped by each ultimately do not contradict each other, rooted as they are in the pluriform unity of truth.

The report reflects on aspects of the history of theology as they pertain to its "scientific rationality", beginning with the novel relationship between Christian faith and philosophy. The deliberative location of Christianity by the early Church Fathers was "alongside 'natural theology', which claimed to offer rational enlightenment about the 'nature' of the gods" (§65). Christianity's claim to a *Logos* made flesh, of course, pushed philosophy of religion into a new conceptualization of God. The contribution of the Eastern theologians was the critical use of categories from Greek philosophy in the service of faith seeking understanding, while still holding fast to the apophatic "saying away" that is protective of mystery. The gradual differentiation of theology as a scientific discipline in itself—with its own object, sources, and methods—but in dialogue with contemporary philosophies, is outlined. The impact of the increasing separation of other disciplines from theology in the late Middle Ages and a neglect of Scripture led to a certain fragmentation of theology and a distancing from the lived faith of ordinary people. Catholic theology responded to Reformation criticisms about its overvaluing of human reason by maintaining the affirmation of a reason "wounded but not destroyed by sin". This left open the possibility of ongoing dialogue with philosophy and other sciences.

The reaction of Catholic theology to the critique born of the Enlightenment is described as defensive. In a very honest assessment, the report says theology was “left damaged in various respects by its own strategy in this encounter”, although the best of such theology sought “constructive dialogue” with these philosophical criticisms, and that dialogue bore fruit in renewed biblical studies and reshaped theologies of revelation (§70). The contemporary challenge of postmodern perspectivism to the very idea of truth itself is shared by both philosophy and theology. Theology, it argues, can contribute to the revitalization of metaphysics, while remaining open to dialogue “about the question of God and truth with all contemporary philosophies” (§71). Although it must be acknowledged that dialogue with some philosophies—for, example, Marxist and feminist—was not always welcomed, this criterion is a reminder of the imperative for Catholic theology of dialogue with philosophy in all its forms.

### 3.11. *Integration of Plurality in the Intellectus Fidei*

This criterion points to Catholic theology’s attempt “to integrate a plurality of enquiries and methods into the unified project of the *intellectus fidei*” (§85). The process of reasoning about God and God’s ways in the world involves a complex integration of plurality, that is, the relationship between theology and theologies, and between theologies and other sciences. Theologians consider a diversity of matters—God, the human person, sacred texts, history, suffering, etc.—in a variety of methodologies and contexts, but all theologies are held accountable to the single, absolute mystery of God. Indeed, it is the consciousness of this mystery that should unite diverse theologies. The contemporary approach that speaks of “theologies”, rather than theology, has arisen due to specialization within the discipline, diversification of styles, and multiplicity of contexts. This necessary plurality of theologies “results primarily from the abundance of divine truth itself”, an abundance that we can only ever grasp part of, “never definitively, but always, as it were, with new eyes” (§77).

Such plurality is not just legitimized but is strongly affirmed by the ITC, and only deemed problematic where there are no shared criteria, or where legitimate pluralism is distorted by “relativism, heterodoxy or heresy” (§78). In the midst of plurality, there is “a common memory” out of which all these theologies operate. A “common memory” is a lovely way of speaking about the theological tradition, that is, the indispensable events, texts, and thinkers remembered as critical reference points for theology in all contexts and continents. The report acknowledges, too, that “certain aspects of the theological tradition can and must sometimes be abandoned” (§79).

As well as the ancient and fundamental partnership of theology with philosophy, the importance for theology of further partnerships with the natural and medical sciences, economics, psychology, and sociology is discussed. The report suggests that philosophy “has a mediating role” in that critical engagement between theology and other sciences (§82).

The emergence of the distinct field of religious studies, and the nineteenth-century controversies between religious studies and theology, are discussed. An “essential difference” is noted between theology’s subject as the truth of God investigated from within faith, and religious studies’ subject as religious phenomena investigated with methodological prescindence from the truth claims of faith (§83). The reciprocity of learning between the different forms of investigation in the academic study of religion is acknowledged.

What has emerged in recent years in universities is a combined approach to the academic study of religion, that is, “Theology and Religious Studies”. Anglican theologian David Ford reflects on its emergence in Britain, where religious studies struggled in the context of “theological (often church-led) domination, and later theology sometimes had to fight for its existence in the face of secularist domination” (Ford 2011, p. 153). He argues that this unitive approach marks not merely a compromise, but “a new, unprecedented way of shaping the field” (Ford 2011, p. 153), and “at its best allows for the pursuit, through a range of academic disciplines, of questions of meaning, truth, practice, and beauty raised by the religions, within the religions, and between the religions” (Ford 2011, p. 151). This

broader approach to the academic study of religion has much to offer Catholic theology, whether operative in a university that is avowedly Catholic, or in other ecumenical or secular contexts where there is research and teaching in Catholic theology.

The ITC envisages the presence of theology and theologians “at the heart of university life” as enabling interdisciplinary dialogue and promoting a broad view of the intellectual life. The reality of theology’s role in the university’s “symphony of the sciences” (§84) may not be as harmonious as the report envisages, but nor is it as pessimistic as the Catholic philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre’s position that theology has, for the most part, been expelled from the contemporary research university, consolidating the marginalization of theology—and its perceived irrelevance to the secular disciplines—begun in universities in the nineteenth century (MacIntyre 2009, pp. 135, 175). Today, theology claims a proper place in the academy, in a variety of disciplinary arrangements, both by being true to itself and by pursuing the excellence in research and teaching that is required of all academic disciplines.

### 3.12. *Sapiential*

The final criterion refers to theology’s seeking for wisdom and striving for holiness. Theology in the university, it argues, potentially serves as a reminder of the “sapiential vocation of human intelligence” (§86). A reflection on wisdom theology in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures (§§87–89) prepares the way for a statement on the unifying vision of wisdom across theology and philosophy, a vision with both “a moral and a spiritual dimension” (§90). Beyond metaphysics is a wisdom made flesh, which is reflected upon in two forms: theological wisdom, which is the work of reason enlightened by faith, and mystical wisdom, which “leads to contemplation and personal union with God in peace and silence” (§91). Although distinct, both forms are found “in the person of the theologian and in the community of the Church” (§92). Understanding theology as wisdom bridges “the gap between believers and theology”, and it is also very significant that the report specifically refers to Catholic theology’s imperative to build bridges with all the wisdom traditions of humanity (§99). What is unique about theology, of course, is the singularity of its object, the living God. Understanding theology as wisdom is protective of the irreducible Mystery of God, and that Mystery should, ultimately, reduce us to silence.

## 4. A Text in the Service of Theologians?

The report concludes by presenting itself as a service to Catholic theologians, and to those with whom they dialogue, by offering criteria by which Catholic theology may be identified. Does the report serve theologians well in the diverse academic, cultural, and ecclesial contexts in which they find themselves? Certainly, this report merits more consideration than it has generally received, for it offers a rich tapestry of reflection on Catholic theology, not simply a list of criteria that are to be adhered to. Each criterion is presented in a reflective and relatively nuanced manner. The report locates itself firmly in the theological framework of the Second Vatican Council, an important commitment in the context of the ongoing debates about the reception and implications of that council. It challenges Catholic theologians to serious reflection on how their own work engages with these post-conciliar *loci theologici* and bears the marks and characteristics of Catholic theology, its “genetic code”. If the genetic code is that used by a body to convert the instructions contained in our DNA into the essential materials of life, these criteria potentially convert the hereditary material—the memory of Jesus himself and the common memory born of that—into “diverse and manifold theologies” that may be recognized as “authentically Catholic”. Although clearly identifying the *loci theologici*, there is no sustained treatment of their relative weight or their relationship to each other. It is this lacuna that is a particular disservice to theologians as they negotiate the more contentious areas of Catholic doctrine and ethics.

The *raison d’être* of the report was the emergence of plurality in theology after Vatican II—the “new voices and themes” and “deeper reflection on older themes”—that led to “a certain fragmentation”. The report affirms theological pluralism, opening with a generous

recognition of necessary plurality and diversity with theology, and reiterating this point a number of times. Boeve contends that his “most important observation” about the report concerns its too facile presentation of theological diversity, resulting in an “understanding of both diversity and unity [that] remains too formal and too abstract” (Boeve 2013, p. 854). This observation is correct. This abstractness results from the fact that there is no evidence that the post-Vatican II theological fecundity, which occasioned the report in the first instance, was resourced, in any significant way, in the articulation of the identified criteria. This absence impoverishes its contribution to understanding the nature and purpose of diversity in Catholic theology.

In places, the report offers constructive and imaginative guidance to theology, e.g., in relation to a rigorous pursuit of a scientific and rational account of Christian faith, the strong mandate on dialogue, and the importance of theology’s openness to critique and hospitality to scientific dialogue. However, in dealing with other issues, e.g., the necessity of investigation and questioning by theology if it is to fulfill its task (§41), the report seems to retreat from and limit the interpretative possibilities it has itself raised. It does not, as noted earlier, elaborate on the distinction between critical evaluation and dissent, nor on the continuum that exists between the questions raised in the investigative process of exploratory research and public, intentional dissent. Furthermore, the statement about the insufficiency of “mere formal and exterior obedience” by theologians, with the implication regarding internal assent, is an unsettling negation of the acknowledgement of the necessity of questioning. If Catholic theology is to function in the university context in the way the report envisages—as an enabler of interdisciplinary dialogue and promoter of a broad view of the intellectual life—the methods of investigation into and disciplining of some theologians who work in universities can undermine the credibility of the discipline in the academy.

Although the stated aim of the ITC report is not to promote uniformity in Catholic theology but rather to avoid fragmentation, and its framework is an ecclesiology of communion, when the interpretative possibilities of theology are discussed, the report tends to retreat from these possibilities and emphasize conformity, thus offering a more restrictive portrait of Catholic theology that does not *adequately* serve theologians in the diverse academic, cultural, and ecclesial contexts in which they find themselves. We turn now, a decade from the publication of *Theology Today*, to examine what Pope Francis says about the characteristics of Catholic theology and the role of theologians.

## 5. Pope Francis on Catholic Theology

What direction has Catholic theology taken under the leadership of Pope Francis? What attention has he given, implicitly or explicitly, to these criteria? There is a large and varied body of literature about Francis himself, ranging from the hostile to the hagiographical. There is extensive theological commentary on his major documents and significant interdisciplinary engagement with some of these, especially his encyclical *Laudato Si’*. However, Francis himself is not easily categorized, and his thought sits uneasily within the polarities of contemporary culture wars, which have their own expressions within Catholicism. Here, we will focus specifically on what Francis says about the nature of theology and the role of theologians in his major documents and his addresses to faculties of theology.

In the major documents of the first year of his pontificate, the encyclical *Lumen Fidei* and the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, we get a sense of how Francis will approach the discipline of theology and the role of theologians. The themes that emerge are the following: diversity within theology, dialogue within and beyond theology, theology’s service of the faith of Christians, its relationship with evangelization, and the distinctive role of the theologian. Francis’ first mention of theology refers to its need for the humility to be “touched” by God (Francis 2013a, §36), and to acknowledge its limitations in the face of this mystery, an echo of the third criterion’s reference to theology as rational participation in the loving *ratio* of God, and the self-corrective implications of this participation.

In response to “those who long for a monolithic body of doctrine guarded by all and leaving no room for nuance”, he argues that a variety of currents in philosophy, theology, and pastoral practice is necessary in order for the “inexhaustible riches of the Gospel” to be communicated and developed. This variety of approaches and perspectives, together with the insights from dialogue with other sciences, allows theologians to fulfil their task of helping “the judgment of the Church to mature” (Francis 2013b, §40). Here, Francis cites *Dei Verbum* (§12): “It is the task of exegetes to work . . . toward a better understanding and explanation of the meaning of Sacred Scripture, so that through preparatory study the judgment of the Church may mature”. Francis extends a task given specifically to exegetes at Vatican II to all theologians. Although the 2012 ITC report refers to this passage of *Dei Verbum* in relation to biblical scholarship, Francis’ explicit extension of theological responsibility towards the maturation of the judgement of the church is significant.

He specifically affirms the intercultural and interdisciplinary scholarly work of theologians as a service within the salvific mission of the Church, but cautions them “not to be content with desk-bound theology” (Francis 2013b, §133). This is not an anti-intellectual statement undermining rigorous academic theology, but is indicative of the fact that ultimately, for Francis—as expressed in the third of his four “Bergoglian” principles—“realities are more important than ideas”, for the latter must be “at the service of communication, understanding, and praxis” (Francis 2013b, §232). A 2015 letter to the Faculty of Theology of the Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina repeats this caution about desk-bound theology, and reminds theologians that their place is at the frontier addressing the conflicts on the streets of Latin America, smelling of the street and, by their work, tending the “wounds of mankind” (Francis 2015a). This reference to the frontier as the place of the theologian echoes the ITC report (§47) and is part of Francis’ broader emphasis on liminality as a priority in Christian ministry. The allusion to the wounds of humanity points towards theology’s mandate to be attentive and responsive to human suffering.

*Laudato Si’* (Francis 2015b) critiques theological reflection on the human situation that appears “tiresome and abstract” if not grounded “in fresh analysis of our present situation” (§17). Indeed, this encyclical itself is an exemplar of the kind of theological reflection grounded in fresh analysis that it recommends, and its significance appears all the more noteworthy in light of the 2021 report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

*Amoris Laetitia* (Francis 2016), in addressing family life and marriage, emphasizes the primacy of conscience in moral discernment. It is a document with particular significance for pastoral and moral theology. There is, however, only one direct reference to theology, specifically moral theology, in a section focused on the logic of pastoral mercy: “. . . although it is true that concern must be shown for the integrity of the Church’s moral teaching, special care must always be shown to emphasize and encourage the highest and most central values of the Gospel, particularly the primacy of charity as a response to the completely gratuitous offer of God’s love” (§311). This balance of concerns—for the integrity of church teaching and the paramountcy of love and mercy—is an uneasy balance to keep when dealing with some of the more neuralgic issues in Catholic theology, but it is a balance emphasized throughout Francis’ papacy. In a 2021 message to mark the 150th anniversary of the proclamation of Alphonsus Liguori as a Doctor of the Church, Francis noted Alphonsus’ constructive engagement with the social challenges of his time, the way in which he allowed his theory to be “interrogated by life itself”, and his initiation of a style of moral theology “capable of holding together the need for the Gospel and human frailty” (Francis 2021). It is one of the distinctive features of Francis’ own thought, that is, a concern for the integrity of the Church’s moral teaching, that is always founded on and directed towards a theological anthropology marked by love and mercy.

Francis makes no change to church teaching in *Amoris Laetitia*, but he mandates a realistic and compassionate disposition towards the complexity, fragility, and historicity of the human condition. *Amoris Laetitia* is not just a radical affirmation of what Ronaldo Zacharias calls the “pastorality of moral theology” (Zacharias 2021), but also a radical affir-

mation of a *locus theologicus* for theology, more generally. The challenge for the theologian is to bring the insights born of this realistic and compassionate assessment of the human condition to bear on theological anthropology and theological ethics, and seek to contribute to the maturation of the judgment of the church on the complex issues of sexuality and of marriage.

A 2019 address to a conference in the Pontifical Theological Faculty of Southern Italy, in Naples, offers a rounded picture of Francis' understanding of theology and its priorities (Francis 2019). Although the context of the conference is doing theology in the Mediterranean area in the light of Francis' 2018 Apostolic Constitution on Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties, *Veritatis Gaudium*, his address is relevant for the practice of theology in diverse geographical and academic contexts. The model he proposes is a "welcoming theology", dialogical in its methodology, marked by dialogue with and "conscious listening" to a broad range of religious and secular actors and movements, with specific mention of engagement with Judaism and Islam, and oriented towards the peaceful construction of inclusive and sustainable societies. This dialogical way of proceeding has a departure point where the low-ascending approach of solidaristic listening to human reality in history meets the top-descending approach that begins with "Jesus lifted up on the cross". Francis says that this way of proceeding calls theologians to be "spiritual ethnographers" who can engage in a hermeneutical integration.

Recalling his own experience of studying "a defensive, apologetic theology", Francis endorses this dialogical method for students of theology, arguing that they need to be grounded not just in the Bible, but also in the Talmud and the Koran. He specifically encourages the study of Arabic and Hebrew in theological faculties. The ITC report envisaged the presence of theology and theologians "at the heart of university life", but the impression was that the envisaged university was Catholic or a Catholic department in a university. Notably, for those who bring expertise in Catholic theology into secular universities, Francis here refers not just to students in Catholic faculties of theology, but also those who study theology in "secular universities or from other religious inspirations".

Francis clearly affirms and extends the commitment to dialogue outlined in the ITC report. He challenges theologians to work together in an interdisciplinary way in order to avoid the self-referential, competitive, and individualistic trends in academia. He stresses the importance of theologians being men and women of compassion who are touched by the suffering and wounds of the world, who eschew any privilege that detaches them from the risk-filled lives of the majority of humanity. His most direct mandate to theologians in this address is, "Reconsider tradition! And keep asking questions!".

What is very striking in this 2019 address is Francis' turn to the topic of theological freedom. He declares this necessary and says, "without the possibility of experimenting with new paths" there is no pneumatological newness. He returns to the issue of nuance and variety previously addressed in *Evangelii Gaudium* (§40). He makes a distinction between scholars who must "move ahead with freedom" and the magisterium who make the final decision on such newness, but then reemphasizes the importance of theological freedom. He does not approach the issue of theological freedom from the point of view of the intellectual freedom of theologians, but focuses on the necessity of freedom for theology, its relationship with the role of the Holy Spirit in renewal, and on the nature of that freedom based on the distinction of roles between theologians and the magisterium. Francis proposes to theologians that disputed questions must remain among themselves, and not be used in preaching to "harm the faith of God's people", although, as noted earlier, the harm done by the revelations of clerical sexual abuse, and its cover-up, overshadows any harm done by theological dissent in Catholic theology. Although Francis' caution about the appropriate fora for engaging disputed theological questions is important, what is often overlooked is the fact that, for many theologians, the disputed questions arise precisely in the context of listening to and dialoguing with God's people.

Francis' words on the importance and imperative of theological freedom also reflect the changing role of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) in relation to the



disciplining of theologians during his pontificate. Cardinal Luis Ladaria Ferrer, Prefect of the CDF, commented in an interview in February 2021 that the CDF is no longer the Inquisition, although its past “weighs heavily, since we have not always acknowledged the profound changes that have taken place in the Church and in the Roman curia in recent times”. He describes its mission of promoting and protecting the doctrine of the faith as consistent with a “concern for correct doctrine” that has persisted since the New Testament (Di Bussolo 2021). A comprehensive analysis of the current CDF is not possible here, and the full number and nature of live investigations into theologians is not available. The recent case of the Irish Redemptorist priest and popular writer Tony Flannery has received much public attention. In 2020, the CDF asked Fr. Flannery to submit a signed statement assenting to church teaching on the reservation of the priesthood to men alone, homosexuality, same-sex marriage, and “gender theory”, stating that he should not return to public ministry before doing this.<sup>10</sup> There are also, of course, the invisible cases where theologians are bound by confidentiality not to disclose their difficulties with the CDF or an episcopal doctrinal committee. However, it would seem, at least, that there has been less public policing of theologians, and a number of previously disciplined theologians have been rehabilitated during Francis’ pontificate.

From the analysis of what Francis says about the nature of theology and the role of theologians, specifically in his major documents and his addresses to faculties of theology, it is possible to identify his distinctive understanding of theology. The following emerge as key characteristics of his approach to “authentically” Catholic theology:

1. Francis affirms the post-Vatican II diversity within theology that the ITC report responds to. He sees such diversity as a necessity in order for the “inexhaustible riches of the Gospel” to be communicated and developed. He does not place the same emphasis on distilling authentic criteria out of this diversity, but nor does he suggest that these criteria would not be operative in diversity.
2. He sees theology as inherently dialogical: intradisciplinary and interdisciplinary dialogue; interreligious dialogue, with particular emphasis on dialogue with Judaism and Islam; and dialogue with other sciences. Such interdisciplinarity, he says, involves the commitment to continually revisit and reconsider tradition.
3. He emphasizes theology’s service of the faith of Christians and, where disputed theological questions arise in this context, his basic advice is, “Do no harm”.
4. Theology, he says, must be welcoming, that is, marked by conscious listening to a broad range of actors and movements, religious and secular.
5. It must be grounded in fresh analysis of the present reality, echoing Latin American liberation theology’s emphasis on *la realidad*.
6. Theology must understand the complexity, fragility, and historicity of the human condition, and have a realistic and compassionate disposition towards this.
7. It must balance concern for the integrity of Church teaching and the paramountcy of God’s love and mercy.
8. Theologians should not be content with “desk-bound” theology, but should locate themselves at the frontiers in order to be attentive and responsive to human suffering.
9. Theologians have a responsibility, through their scholarly work and dialogue with other disciplines, to contribute to the maturation of the judgement of the Church.
10. Theological freedom is necessary, for without it the Spirit of God cannot renew the church. Theologians must move ahead with freedom, “then, in the final instance, it will be for the magisterium to decide, but theology cannot be done without this freedom”.

Like the ITC, Francis affirms diversity within theology, viewing it as beneficial for evangelization, but without sustained reflection on the inevitable tensions and contradictions that this diversity involves. He endorses—and expands—the mandate to dialogue of the ITC report, especially in relation to interreligious dialogue. He affirms the role theology has of service to Christians, and the responsibilities of that role, although his emphasis on theologians “doing no harm” underestimates the reciprocity of learning between theo-

gians and the communities they serve. Francis, following the Latin American liberationist tradition, places greater emphasis on the historicization of salvation, and is more emphatic about the “frontier” location of the theologian and the need for theology to be grounded in reality, responsive to human suffering. In relation to the question of theological freedom, Francis recognizes the necessity of this freedom and seems to encourage theologians to “move ahead with freedom”, leaving the final adjudication of newness and experimentation to the magisterium. He does not stress the insufficiency of “mere formal and exterior obedience” by theologians, thus, it would seem, encouraging theologians to engage in the necessary investigation and questioning that is intrinsic to theology. However, as with the ITC report, nowhere does Francis distinguish between critical evaluation and dissent, nor between the questions raised in the investigative process of exploratory research and public, intentional dissent. Francis’ advice about theology’s balance between concern for the integrity of Church teaching and the paramountcy of God’s love and mercy is a hopeful counsel for those working in the areas of theological anthropology and theological ethics. His papacy offers a less restrictive understanding of Catholic theology for the diverse academic, cultural, and ecclesial contexts in which Catholic theologians find themselves.

As theologians seek to bring the insights born of the realistic and compassionate assessment of the human condition, which Francis mandates, to bear on the contentious issues of Catholic doctrine and ethics, it remains to be seen not just how any resulting “dissent” will be responded to in terms of discipline, but also whether these theological voices will be received as a contribution to the maturation of the judgment of the church on these issues.

To conclude on a note about boldness and honesty in Catholic theology, Francis has used the concept of *parrhesia* a number of times since the beginning of his pontificate. The Greek word *parrhesia*—meaning to speak boldly, frankly, without fear—has political roots in Athenian democracy. The concept takes on a specific Christian character in the New Testament, that is, a capacity to speak boldly about the Gospel in the midst of persecution and in the face of opposition. Of course, this does not mean that the term is completely de-politicized as it is Christianized. The courage to speak boldly, evident, for example, in the “boldness” of Peter and John that surprised the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem (Acts 4: 13), and Paul’s prayer, while in chains, that he may declare the Gospel “boldly” (Eph 6: 20), show the practice of *parrhesia* in the face of the power of religious authorities and imperial Rome.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, *parrhesia* is defined as the courage given by the Holy Spirit “to proclaim the newness of the gospel with boldness in every time and place, even when it meets with opposition” (§259). At the opening of the First General Congregation of the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in October 2014, Francis noted that he heard that several cardinals at a meeting earlier that year “did not have the courage to say certain things out of respect for the Pope, perhaps believing that the Pope might think something else”. He directed the bishops to “speak with *parrhesia* and listen with humility”, and commended them at the conclusion of that October meeting for speeches and interventions marked by such *parrhesia*. At the important February 2019 meeting on the Protection of Minors in the Church, Francis counsels that the process be led by “great *parrhesia*, courage and concreteness”. It is clear from his references to *parrhesia* that Francis sees it as having significance for the church *ad extra* and *ad intra*. It is the courage needed to proclaim the Gospel in all times and places, and in the face of opposition. In his addresses to ecclesial meetings and assemblies, it is clear that Francis sees *parrhesia* as a pneumatological gift that is essential for the practice of authentic synodality. Even “respect for the Pope”, as he himself said to the cardinals, is not a reason to avoid the practice of *parrhesia*. It also represents the kind of bold and frank speech needed to address the crisis in the Catholic Church resulting from the crimes and scandals of child abuse and cover-ups. At the end of his 2019 address to theologians in the Mediterranean, Francis refers to *parrhesia* as an evangelical criterion. To the theologians gathered in Naples, he advocates *parrhesia*, here defined as “the ability to press forward to the limits”, in combination with

*hypomoné*, “patient endurance, the ability to stay within limits in order to move forward”. It is hard to decipher what, precisely, Francis means in advocating this combination of virtues to theologians. Will bold and frank speech by theologians on ecclesial reform, religious pluralism, sexuality, and women’s ordination be welcomed? Will engagement between theologians and the magisterium follow the practice of *parrhesia*? The combination of *parrhesia* and *hypomoné* may, perhaps, be the best articulation of the kind of uncomfortable liminality that the *parrhesiastic* Catholic theologian is called to: seeking to be faithful to what is “authentic” in Catholic theology, speaking boldly and pressing forward to the limits as part of scientific investigation, and patiently remaining in that liminal space, not in intellectual submission, but in faith in the promise of pneumatological newness.

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## Notes

- 1 The ITC describes the document as a “report” (§45). It was drafted by two different subcommissions and discussed during Plenary Sessions of the ITC between 2004 and 2011. The text was approved *in forma specifica* on 29 November 2011 and submitted to Cardinal William Levada, then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, who authorized its publication.
- 2 I am grateful to my colleague Dr. Brad Anderson for his observations on the treatment of Scripture in *Theology Today*.
- 3 The ITC assesses doctrinal questions “of greater importance”. The president of the ITC is the prefect of the CDF. See (*Statuta Commissionis Theologicae* 1969, §1).
- 4 For a new analysis of the work of Ormond Rush, and the broader area of Receptive Ecumenism, see (Ryan 2020).
- 5 Mannion proposes a collaborative study of *sensus fidelium* “that is independent of the need to be approved by the CDF” as a way forward towards a more “participatory understanding of magisterium . . . and of *sensus fidelium*” (Mannion 2016, p. 87).
- 6 For a helpful analysis of *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, see Marmion (2021).
- 7 In a 1995 address to a pre-convention seminar of the CTSA organized by members “concerned to promote authentic Catholic theology”, Dulles offers a more trenchant critique of Catholic theologians who seem “reluctant” to accept a closer relationship with the hierarchical magisterium, does not refer to a “magisterium” of theologians, and is especially critical of Catholic theologians who have studied at secular universities. See Dulles (1995).
- 8 Italics mine.
- 9 *Theology Today* cites *Nostra Aetate*, §2, in §57.
- 10 Excerpts from the CDF’s letter to Fr. Flannery. Available online: <http://www.tonyflannery.com/document-i-received-from-the-cdf-with-demand-for-signatures/> (accessed on 27 October 2021).

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