

MARCIN WALCZAK

THE CHARISMATIC DIMENSION OF THE VOCATION OF A THEOLOGIAN

Abstract. It is doubtless that theology first of all puts questions about God and man. However, for ages theologians have been also asking questions about the meaning of their own work. One may speak about a peculiar meta-theology that tries to show the role and significance of theology in the life of the Church. The most frequently given answers to the questions about the meaning and character of theology oscillate around the concept of rationality. In such a view theology is a normal human process of making revealed truths understandable for people of a given epoch. However, it seems that such a vision of theology is tantamount to extremely simplifying it and to making it superficial. The question about the significance of theology may only be answered in the light of faith. This light allows seeing theology as a God's gift, a charisma that helps the Church read the signs of the times and prophetically interpret the Biblical Revelation for a given epoch and culture. A theologian participates in a special charisma, so he should be perceived first of all as one who performs a special service of the word in the Church, and only then as a scholar. Such a charismatic position of theology allows reminding with full strength that the first and fundamental theologian is the Holy Spirit.

Key words: theology, methodology of theology, Holy Spirit, charisma, vocation.

What is particularly important for the development of theology, as in the case of any other scientific discipline, is certain meta-reflection. Every science must ask itself about its essence, assumptions, method and subject. The exceptional status of theology impels us all the more to ask the question about what theology is or should be again and again. The theologian comes up against various difficulties in his work, which results from the specificity of the field he deals with. Theology seems to be running up against barriers and difficulties from all sides. Its scientificity is constantly negated by representatives of different fields, especially exact sciences, who sometimes seem to treat theology as a mythology that groundlessly aspires to partake in scientific discourse. On the other hand, from the viewpoint of the Church, the theologian is often seen as a rationalist, who keeps transforming faith –

provided he himself even has it – into a set of spiritless formulae of the doctrine. Thus, a theologian stands between the world of science and the Church, between the university and the chapel, between the demands of rationality and outbursts of his own heart, asking himself about the significance of his work. Questions about the position of theology at universities, about the methods of its cultivation, or the strategy of its development eventually give way to one question: What is theology? Why would anyone be involved in it? The only possible answer is the answer of faith. Theology is God's gift to the Church, by means of which God Himself wishes to have His say. Conversely, a theologian participating in this gift is endowed with a unique vocation – he himself has been given undeserved and magnanimous gift, which we call a charism.¹ From the existential side, a theologian is then, first and foremost, a charismatic called by God, and secondarily, a scholar. One of the Catholic theologians who pays special attention to this issue is Raniero Cantalamessa. In his opinion, up until 12th century, the Church understood theology as, above all, a charism. It was only by the development of scholasticism that the understanding of theology as a science began to take over and made it lose its connection to the living God. "Up until then the notion 'theology' indicated 'a certain manner of learning about God and speaking of Him.' The manner full of glory, praise, full acceptance of God into one's life. Theology was perceived, above all, as wisdom, as grace and charism."² Before presenting it as a science and placing it at the university, theology must be received with thanksgiving as a charism of the Holy Spirit.³

1. THE CHARISM OF A THEOLOGIAN

Seeking the answer to the question of the essence of theologians' activity, we naturally turn to the voice of the documents of the Church. Theology is

¹ By charismata we should mean special, magnanimous gifts of the Holy Spirit, which ultimately are the Father's gifts in Christ. Consequently, each charism has the Trinitarian dimension, and not only pneumatic. We need to bear in mind that St Paul, who makes use of the term 'charism' for the first time, thinks of it as the gift of salvation in Christ, the Christian vocation, the eternal life, and only secondarily some particular gifts. We must stress that among the latter, Paul first enumerates those associated with rational reflection and the hermeneutics of the Revelation. Cf. Józef Kudasiewicz, *Odkrywanie Ducha Świętego* (Kielce: Jedność, 1998) 338-52.

² Raniero Cantalamessa, *Przygotujcie drogi Pańskie. Do światowej ewangelizacji ekumenicznej w przygotowaniu na rok dwutysięczny* (Kraków: DEHON, 1999), 49.

³ Therefore, Cantalamessa speaks about the necessity for the connection of theology with adoration. Cf. Cantalamessa, *Przygotujcie drogi*, 49-52.

after all a strictly ecclesial phenomena, thus we should ask the Church herself about it. A document that directly deals with a theologian's vocation is the Instruction *Donum veritatis* signed by the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on 24 May 1990. Only after the introduction and the preliminary part concerning the truth and its salvific value do we find the description of a theologian's vocation. "Among the vocations awakened in this way by the Spirit in the Church is that of the theologian. His role is to pursue in a particular way an ever deeper understanding of the Word of God found in the inspired Scriptures and handed on by the living Tradition of the Church."⁴ In the light of the Instruction, a theologian is not therefore a Christian who has chosen to study theology at will, but a person called by God to cultivate theology. Theology is a real vocation for a theologian, and not only a trade or scientific discipline. The special role of the Holy Spirit, who is the source of cultivating theology, is also emphasised here. The document points to the issue of the link between theology and the Magisterium, which is reflected upon in a major part of the Instruction⁵, as well as by the commentators of the document.⁶ The fact that *Donum veritatis* mentions the special charism of a theologian is often overlooked. Toward the end of the document there is the following sentence: "As for theologians, by virtue of their own proper charisms, they have the responsibility of participating in the building up of Christ's Body in unity and truth."⁷ This refers to the special charism of a theologian (a charism of being a theologian?), yet the clue is not elaborated on. Notwithstanding that, the claim is extremely important: a theologian has his own charism by means of which he has his place in the Church. Being occupied with theology would therefore be the grace of the Holy Spirit which serves the Church.⁸ According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* charismata should be received with gratitude, but also discerned as for their trustworthiness.⁹ It also pertains to the charism of a theologian. In light of *Donum veritatis*, being a theologian is then an issue of a special gift, and not a service in the Church undertaken at random.

⁴ *Donum veritatis*, no. 6, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19900524_theologian-vocation_en.html [November 12, 2016].

⁵ Parts III and IV are fully dedicated to it.

⁶ The document stood in for a lot of criticism because of the issue of the relation between theology and the Magisterium, especially on the part of German theologians. Joseph Ratzinger's response took the form of a book: *Wesen und Auftrag der Theologie* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1993).

⁷ *Donum veritatis*, no. 40.

⁸ This is how CCC 799 defines a charism.

⁹ Cf. CCC 800-801.

Nonetheless, the problem of the charism of a theologian was not picked up in the document by the International Theological Commission from 2012, titled *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria*. The term “charism” with reference to theologian’s work is not found there. However, it says that “theologians have received a particular calling to service in the body of Christ.”¹⁰ The lack of the term then does not disqualify the view.

The claim that being a theologian is a charism may be seen as a Copernican revolution in the understanding of theology. What also changes is the way of thinking about the subject and object of theology, which we shall deal with below. Theology itself seems to be the work of God’s Spirit, in which a theologian partakes. We do not come across such a perspective in the classical definitions of theology. For instance, Wolfgang Beinert, author and editor of a renowned series of textbooks on dogmatic theology, defines theology as follows: “In the theological theory of knowledge of today, we understand theology as a scientific, i.e. systematic and methodic, discovery and unfolding of the reality of the Divine Revelation, which we got to know by faith, and its reflection in the social life of the Church.”¹¹ The German theologian points to the scientific aspect, otherwise essential, but he neglects to mention the Spirit of God as the inspirer of all theology. Needless to say that the issue looks alike in other textual definitions.¹² If theology is indeed a charism, that is its accurate definition. The fact that a theologian is a scholar may never obscure the conviction that he is a charismatic called by God. The awareness of being endowed with a special gift is the first symptom of being a theologian. It is the discovery of this gift that is the beginning of the path of a theologian and not the reception of a degree or chairmanship of a department.

An exquisite protestant thinker from the 20th century, Paul Tillich, left some valuable remarks on the charism of a theologian in his sermons. In a volume entitled *Religiöse Reden* we come across three sermons dedicated to the role of a theologian and significance of theology. “What makes a man

¹⁰ International Theological Commission, *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria*, no. 94, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_doc_20111129_teologia-oggi_en.html [November 12, 2016].

¹¹ Wolfgang Beinert, *Teologiczna teoria poznania* (Kraków: M, 1998), 270.

¹² Cf. Józef Majewski, *Wprowadzenie do teologii dogmatycznej* (Warszawa: Więż, 2005), 39-58. The author cites the most important attempts at defining theology in contemporary thought, and eventually he himself makes such an attempt. None of these speaks about theology as a charism, or a gift of God originating in the Holy Spirit. The elements most frequently enumerated are: scientificity, systematicity and methodicity.

a theologian?” Tillich asks.¹³ His answer is: “Theology, which is the word of truth and knowledge, is, according to the testimony of the entire Christian Church, first and foremost, a gift of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁴ Tillich’s insight notably matches the one expressed in *Donum veritatis*. The theologian unravels this issue in more detail. His whole sermon dedicated to this problem is a commentary on the Pauline text from 1 Cor 1:1-11. In this famous pericope Paul discusses the charismata of the Holy Spirit. Among them he includes not only the popular, spectacular gifts, but also those associated with the field of knowledge and transfer of faith.

The gifts of wisdom and expression of knowledge, enumerated in verse 8, comprise, in Tillich’s opinion, the service of the theologian as well. Theology is then “a special gift in the midst of other special gifts.”¹⁵ This is the perspective of defining theology that is finally satisfactory. The aspect of scientificity, or methodic reflection, is pushed into background. Obviously, Tillich does not downplay this aspect – as it would be hardly possible to accuse his theology of the lack of systematicity – yet he manages to shift the emphasis. A question arises, however, as to a certain danger. How to discern who really is a theologian who works inspired by the Holy Spirit? No one can show a proof of being truly called by God to be a theologian. Many may invoke such a pneumatological inspiration to substantiate their views that are in fact mere private beliefs. In this way, people may even impose a teaching which warps the meaning of the Christian message. Tillich makes a reservation that there are two tests of being a true theologian, of being inspired by the Spirit. The first one is the attitude to Jesus.¹⁶ According to St Paul’s words: “No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit” [1 Cor 12:3]. Hence, it is doubtless that “whoever accepts Jesus as Christ, irrefutably proves thereby that he has been given the Holy Spirit.”¹⁷ The second gauge of an authentic charismatic theologian is his position in the community of the Church. “There is no theology outside the community of those who claim:

¹³ Paul Tillich, *Religiöse Reden* (Berlin-New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1987), 114.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ The International Theological Commission in their document present a broader perspective – the criterion for theology is not only the attitude to Jesus alone, but ultimately to the whole history of salvation. “A criterion of Catholic theology is recognition of the primacy of the Word of God. God speaks ‘in many and various ways’ – in creation, through prophets and sages, through the holy Scriptures, and definitively through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh [cf. Heb 1:1-2].” *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria*, no. 9.

¹⁷ Tillich, *Religiöse Reden*, 114.

‘Jesus is Christ,’ outside the Church.”¹⁸ In the document of the International Theological Commission we may find a similar statement: “As is the case of all Christian vocations, the ministry of theologians, as well as being personal, is also both communal and collegial.”¹⁹ Being a theologian is always carried out in the bosom of the Church. A charism is after all the gift for the whole community, and not solely for the person endowed. The same concerns the charism of a theologian. It is worth stressing, because the problem of communication between the world of theologians and the world of the rest of the faithful, which comes down to a great – so to speak – popularisation of the powerlessness of theology, has been one of the biggest problems that theologians must face. We must not surrender and accept theology is to have impact merely on a closed-down clique of the learned. A theology, which in its form does not catch on, does not perform its task as a charism; it does not edify the Church. Moreover, what is key is the fact that theology expresses the faith of the Church and not of a single person. For these reasons, we must not speak of a truly Christian theology cultivated without the bond with the Church.²⁰ Who ultimately is theologian, in Tillich’s opinion, accepts the special charism of the Spirit and realises it, posing final questions about reality and giving humble answers.²¹ This spiritual view on the essence of theology is worth seeing and undertaking. The question of who a theologian is in the spiritual perspective, may help us understand many a problem connected with contemporary theology. This is not a contrived issue, but the key to a new understanding of “being theologian” and of theology.²² The second aspect of the matter needs to be dealt with as well, namely the problem of

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria*, no. 45.

²⁰ It is another matter, according to Tillich, that we may never be sure who in fact belongs to the Church and who is outside it in a spiritual sense. This view matches the long-lasting tradition, originating in St Augustine’s thought. Theologian may as well be excluded from the visible community, and belong to the Church spiritually, or conversely, he may belong to the community nominally, but have his heart outside it. Cf. Tillich, *Religiöse Reden*, 114; St Augustine, *The City of God* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2009).

²¹ Tillich, *Religiöse Reden*, 116-19.

²² The words Tillich uses to describe the deep experience of the vocation of a theologian are piercing: “Among us are many who think that they will never be good theologians; that they may achieve much more and do much better in any other profession. Despite that they cannot bring themselves to imagine that their being could be anything else than being a theologian. Even if they had to give up theology professionally, they would stop posing theological questions. It would follow them everywhere, wherever they went; they would be shackled to it, not by virtue of their professions, but of the very reality of life.” Ibid., 115.

the subject of theology. If it is the gift of the Holy Spirit, can it be attributed to man any longer? Who in reality cultivates theology?

2. THE SUBJECT OF THEOLOGY

If being a theologian is a charism and it is the final perspective of this service, there is no doubt that we have to point to the Holy Spirit as the main subject of theology. The situation is then different than in the case of other sciences. The initiative here is not man's (seeking the truth), but God's (who wishes to be the Truth revealed). It is the Holy Spirit who sets off theological activity; He is the source of a theologian's inspiration; He is the ultimate author of theology. It seems quite clear, especially that all in all only God can be the theologian *par excellence*. Only God knows God, so only God may speak of God. As the author of the appropriate entry in *Encyklopedia Katolicka (The Catholic Encyclopaedia)* notes, "the subject of theology in the primary sense is God, who knows Himself in an absolute way."²³ Cantalamessa, on the other hand, writes, referring to the origins of the history of theology: "It was thought that only the Holy Spirit, who penetrated the Divine depth, might teach us to talk about God."²⁴ Theology's claim to the divine origin should not surprise anyone who realises the specificity of this discipline of knowledge. If theology denied that it is God who has His say through it, it would become the mere philosophy of God or of religion. Meanwhile, as Tomasz Węclawski wrote, "theology is such a human conversation with God in which God Himself takes part."²⁵ As in the case of other charismata, so here the subject of the activity is God (the Holy Spirit).

Given the circumstances, we should pose a question about the role of a human theologian in theology. Since the initiative is on the part of the Holy Spirit, is theologian but a helpless instrument in His hands? One might accuse the perspective presented that it implies ignoring intellectual efforts of theologians, their formation, preparation, proficiency, personality, etc. Just the opposite, man is also the true subject of theology. His activity is in fact his own activity, and his theology is his own theology, though it ultimately proceeds from the Divine Inspiration. We may then speak of

²³ Marek Marczewski, *Teologia*, vol. 19 of "Encyklopedia katolicka" (Lublin: KUL, 2014), col. 661.

²⁴ Cantalamessa, *Przygotujcie drogi*, 49.

²⁵ Tomasz Węclawski, *Sieć* (Kraków: Znak, 1997), 27.

a specifically understood synergy of subjects in theology. If it is the case, theology has two subjects, whose cooperation is constitutive. Theology as the very speech of God is simply the Revelation, yet theology as a mere human reflection is simply the philosophy of religion or the study of Christianity. Theology in the strict sense is found whenever in human talk about God it is God who talks to man. Theology in a mysterious way is both truly human and truly Divine.

In order to understand how the synergy of theological subjects is possible, it is worth recalling an analogical problem of the inspiration of the Biblical books. As we know, it used to be claimed that since it is God who was actually the author of Scripture, man should be considered only a scribe, who put down the words given to him by the Holy Spirit. By the law of the pendulum, such a bizarre view gave birth to a reaction consisting in derision of the idea of Biblical inspiration and solid research on the authorship and conditioning of the texts thought to be inspired. The present doctrine of the Church, however, preaches that both God and man are the authors of Scripture. It was the Spirit who inspired Biblical authors, which, nevertheless, does not undermine the fact they were true authors (*veri auctores*).²⁶ God is the author of Scripture, and so is man: the language, culture, education and character of an author have all had their bearing on the creation of Biblical books and pericopes.²⁷ Therefore, the truth about God's authorship does not undermine the truth of human authorship. Both are different, but so closely related that it would not be inappropriate to describe their mutual relation, making use of the formula of the Council of Chalcedon – they are *inconfuse, immutabiliter, indivise, inseparabiliter*.

The problem of the subject of theology is analogical. We certainly are not trying to equate the inspiration of Biblical authors with the inspiration of theologians, but only the mechanism of the two. The Holy Spirit is the true subject of theology and He is its final subject, just as He is the ultimate subject of Scripture. However, He always speaks through the work of a given theologian, in the same way as He spoke in Scripture by the work of an inspired author. A given theologian, who is well-prepared, creatively unfolds his thought, putting all his effort and personality into the theology he cultivates, may become the voice of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, the charismatic dimension of theology, which we have spoken about, does not

²⁶ Cf. DV, no. 11; *Verbum Domini*, no. 19.

²⁷ Cf. DV, no. 12.

present a challenge, causing a theologian to give up his personal work and wait idly for the inspiration from above, which is to do all on its own. It is thanks to the diligent work of a theologian that the Holy Spirit may speak. Just as the Holy Spirit speaks in the Bible only through a given experience of the authors and their humanity, so too in theology in no other way does the Spirit have His say than by a theologian's texts and his own thought. The primacy of the Holy Spirit does not after all indicate that we should belittle intellectual work of a theologian. It is by his diligent intellectual work that a theologian will prove to have the vocation and charism of a theologian. The history of theology confirms this outlook. The Spirit speaks to the Church by the theology of especially those masters who incorporated their own vast knowledge, original ideas, intelligence, their own human experience, involvement and prayer into their work. We might say that the Spirit feels good in what is human. Thus, the thought of such theologians as Augustine, the Cappadocian Fathers, Thomas, Bonaventure, Newman, Rahner and Balthasar has had a major influence on the Church. Each of those was open to the Spirit; each one was aware of being endowed with a special gift of being a theologian, and at the same time each involved his entire being in the theology he cultivated. The theology of every one of the greatest master was marked by their personality. This why (and not in spite of this) the Spirit speaks through it to the Church. Whenever we forget about the synergy of the subjects of theology, theology turns to irrationality and is cut off from the particularity of life (inhuman theology), or, conversely, it closes itself down to supernaturalism and becomes as tedious as the methodologically correct one (undivine theology).²⁸ Remembering about the double subject of theology means looking after the divine-human, i.e. Christian, theology.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The charismatic dimension of theology is the foundation for understanding itself. First of all, bearing in mind that the Holy Spirit as the subject of theology enables us to refute rationalistic reductionisms in thinking about

²⁸ One of Polish theologians notes: "The fact that theology at one point forgot that the Holy Spirit is the first subject of theology ... is responsible for the situation when a number of theological subjects have their own life and do not lead directly to discovering God's innermost life." Krzysztof Guzowski, "Eucharystia a Duch Święty. Zarys ujęcia personalistycznego," *Studia Gnesnensia* 27(2013): 84.

what theology is. Theology, as rationalisation of the Revelation, is born not only of human need for rationalisation of reality. It is not true that theology is something marginal for the Church. God, who has eternally spoken His *Logos*, would like Him to have His say also in human *theo*-logy. The One who was unafraid of becoming man does not flinch at being uttered and spoken by people. The emphasis of the role of the Holy Spirit as the fundamental subject of theology, reminds us that it itself is not an ordinary prop of other fields of the activities of the Church, but that it in itself has a great significance and mission. Through theology and theologians, God Himself speaks to the Church. A theologian is then at the service of the Word, and at the same time at the service of the Spirit. The eternal *Logos*, working always in the power of the Divine Inspiration, is to have His say in his work. This viewpoint makes us realise what a serious problem it is that the world of academic theology does not adhere to the Christian life of the Church. We must not ignore this problem. Since theology is a charism, it must serve the entire Church.

It might be of use to ponder what the word 'theologian' really means from this standpoint. It would be easier to say that he is a scholar who deals with the field of theology. However, for over half of the history of Christianity there was no academic theology, but theology as such, together with people who cultivated it, did exist. Wherein then lies the identity of a theologian ultimately? Only a person endowed with a special gift of the charism of a theologian may practise good theology. Intellectual preparation itself, connected with faith, does not make a good theologian in the strict sense. There is a true, distinct gift of being a theologian, which, like any other charism, is not given to all, though it eventually serves all. Therefore, theology ought to be cultivated by people called to do this by God. In the face of the current shape of theology, it may sound like a pipe dream, but there is no other way. For theology to develop, we do not need the biggest possible number of faculties, chairs, professor and students. What is indispensable is but a handful of people, cooperating with the Holy Spirit and with one another, who have not become theologians due to economic or ecclesial motivation, nor even to equip their apostolic activity with intellectual grounding, or just because theology is their passion, but, above all, because they have discovered in their hearts the gift of being a theologian and cannot resist it.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- St Augustine. *The City of God*, vol. 1-2, translated by Władysław Kubicki. Warszawa: Hachette, 2010.
- Beinert, Wolfgang. *Teologiczna teoria poznania*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo M, 1998.
- Cantalamessa, Raniero. *Przygotujcie drogi Pańskie. Do światowej ewangelizacji ekumenicznej w przygotowaniu na rok dwutysięczny*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Księży Sercanów, 1999.
- Guzowski, Krzysztof. "Eucharystia a Duch Święty. Zarys ujęcia personalistycznego." *Studia Gnesnensia* 27(2013), 81-90.
- Kudasiewicz, Józef. *Odkrywanie Ducha Świętego*. Kielce: Jedność, 1998.
- Majewski, Józef. *Wprowadzenie do teologii dogmatycznej*. Warszawa: Biblioteka „Więzi”, 2005.
- International Theological Commission, *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Księży Sercanów, 2012.
- Tillich, Paul. *Religiöse Reden*. Berlin-New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1987. Translated by Jan A. Łata, Wrocław–Oleśnica: Signum, 1996.
- Węclawski, Tomasz. *Sieć*. Kraków: Znak, 1997.

The preparation of the English version of *Roczniki Teologiczne* (Annals of Theology) nos. 1 and 2 and its publication in electronic databases was financed under contract no. 723/P-DUN/2016 from the resources of the Minister of Science and Higher Education for the popularization of science.

