

Priestly Theologians¹
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labia enim sacerdotis custodient scientiam (Malachi 2:7a)

The central question of this essay, and of the seminar at which a preliminary version of it was first presented and discussed, is: How will diocesan priestly identity be secured and deepened by a man's commitment to prayerfully study theology?

In what follows, 'priest' means always and only 'secular (diocesan) priest', and even more restrictively, 'secular (diocesan) priest in parish ministry.' That, I suppose, is the vast majority of the priests there are, but it's still important to note the restriction, since other and different things would have to be said were the discussion to be extended to include priests who are also religious, or diocesan priests whose primary work is something other than parish ministry.

'Theology' I take to mean the human discursive practice of thinking and talking about the triune LORD,² which in Latin is *sermo de Deo*, and in Greek *logia* about *theos*; that's the standard meaning of the term in the Latin-using West, and, largely, in the Greek-using East as well.³ On that understanding of theology, its deposit, what the practice leaves as its trace in the world, is words, written or spoken. Prayerful study of theology, then, mentioned in our question, is prayerful study of the words of others about the triune LORD. The study of theology, in this sense, is distinct from the study of the LORD; the first and formal object of theology, the thing toward which the theologian's gaze is turned, is discourse about the LORD, not the LORD himself. Those in prayer before the reserved sacrament may reasonably be said to be studying the LORD; they're not studying theology. That latter exercise requires texts, whether spoken or written or printed or electronically stored and displayed. It's the study of those – texts, *scripta* about the LORD – that I have in mind in what follows.

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² In my usage, 'god' means any putative member of the class of the gods; 'God' means the only actual member of that class; and LORD is the proper name of that member. See, e.g., Psalm 95 for this usage.

³ E.g., Augustine, *De civitate dei*, 8.1, who defines *theologia* as *de divinitate ratio sive sermo*, and who, in so defining it, makes no sharp distinction, and perhaps no distinction of any kind, between it and *philosophia*, which, since it is the love of wisdom, etymologically speaking, and since the LORD is also wisdom, and since love entails knowledge, is love-knowledge of the LORD just as much as theology is; see, among many instances of this line of reasoning, his lyrical appreciation of what the Platonists know about the LORD in *De vera religione*, and in *De civitate Dei*, 8, passim). Compare, for example, Thomas Aquinas, with beautiful precision: "*illud est subiectum scientiae, de quo est sermo in scientia, Sed in hac scientia [scilicet theologia] fit sermo de Deo: dicitur enim theologia, quasi sermo de Deo. Ergo Deus est subiectum huius scientiae,*" *Summa Theologiae*, 1.1.7, *sed contra*. See the helpful discussion of the senses of 'theology' in Bruce Marshall, "*Quod Scit Una Uetula: Aquinas on the Nature of Theology,*" in Joseph Wawrykow & Rik Van Nieuwenhove, ed., *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), pp. 1-35.

I'm asking, then, about how the prayerful study of what others have said and written about the LORD might contribute to – buttress, support, deepen, ornament, burnish – the priesthood of a man engaged in parish ministry. It's a difficult question, and before I address it directly, I should make two disclaimers.

The first is that I'm not a priest, in this unlike most of the participants in this symposium. That's a disadvantage in the sense that I've no direct first-personal acquaintance with what it is that priests do, and therefore no sense of what it's like to do it. This isn't a disabling disadvantage, but it does mean that anything I write or say about it is at least at one remove from priestly practice. Rather than consisting in or being informed by reflection on what it's like to be a priest, it's the result of being ministered to and (I hope) ministering to priests, which is to say participating as a Catholic layman in what they do; and of reading and thinking about a tiny fraction of the materials contained in the Christian archive⁴ about this matter. Perhaps this isn't only a lack. It might permit me to bring a view from outside, as it were, in something like the same way that a priest does when thinking and writing and counseling about marriage.

The second disclaimer is that I've had almost no direct experience in the education or formation of diocesan priests. I've never taught in a (Catholic) seminary; I teach now in a Protestant Divinity School, where I have much to do with students training for one or another kind of Protestant ministry, but in which the Catholic students I teach are mostly lay, and when not are doctoral students, and thus treated and thought about by me simply as such, as people preparing for a professional academic career. This is a much more bracing limitation than the first; it means that anything I write about priestly formation is based on almost-complete ignorance about what's actually done in Catholic seminaries. I apologize in advance for that ignorance, and for the mis-steps that will inevitably result.

Given these clarifications and disclaimers, what about the question before us?

I suspect that a goodly proportion, perhaps a substantial majority, of priests do not, subsequent to their seminary education, read much theology, think of themselves as theologians, or find what they remember of the theology they did in seminary of much use for or relevance to what they have to do, day by day and week by week, as priests. Among the principal reasons for this is that theology is now a technical discipline guarded quasi-sacerdotally by its acolytes. Its precincts and access-roads are closely controlled; there are checkpoints and border guards; and the shibboleths deployed to control movement from the gentiles' court (Theology 101) toward the holy of holies (intimacy with the thought of Augustine, Thomas, Bonaventure, Scotus, Occam, Rahner, Lonergan, Balthasar, and other members of the pantheon; capacity to read and understand, and perhaps also to write, essays published in peer-reviewed theological

⁴ By 'Christian archive' I mean the entire literary deposit of the Christian tradition. The criteria for drawing boundaries around this deposit – for determining the conditions necessary and sufficient for some text to belong to it – are unclear, but that doesn't matter for the purposes of this essay. Whether those boundaries are drawn narrowly or generously, the amount of material about the nature of the priesthood and the charisms proper to it is vast, and I've read little of it.

journals; citation and quotation by other professionals; and so on) are many and difficult. Theology, that's to say, has become, and thus necessarily appears to most priests, or would-be priests, who begin its study, indistinguishable from any other academic discipline in all its formal aspects. It has its technical lingo, its accepted authorities, its canons of excellence, its hierarchical order, and its professional guilds. In all these things it's not distinguishable from any other academic field; what practitioners of every such field aspire to is double mastery – of their field's topic or object; and of others working that same field.⁵ And in order to achieve or move toward that double mastery, the field must be closely guarded in the ways I've described. There's no easy access, and no access at all with aims other than the masteries that are proper to academic work.

Teaching theology as if the point of learning it were academic double mastery isn't going to endear theology to most priests-in-training, and it shouldn't. Those who do come to love it for the mastery it offers them will be academics who happen also to be priests. They won't integrate it into their priestly vocations, and when it does make an appearance there – perhaps in a homily, or in an adult education class, or in an address to brother priests – it will be as a strange visitor, one among the subtle hallucinations of the intellect.⁶ I've heard too many homilies in which such visitors are present as honored guests: the exegete or historian or systematician is welcomed and displayed as though her conclusions or speculations are of interest whether or not they serve to foster closer knowledge or deeper love of the Word. But priests-in-training or working priests who have such interests are, I expect, a small minority. Most, when faced with theology as an academic discipline, respond to it very much as they respond to Latin and Greek and Hebrew: a chore to be gotten through and forgotten almost as soon as done.

One step toward removing priestly alienation from theology would be to stop teaching it in seminaries as if it were an academic discipline, and to do so instead as if reading theology were an ascetical practice – a part, that is, of what belongs to priestly discipline, just as do prayer and reading the Office. If theology were taught in this way, it would be presented as a means toward cognitive intimacy with the LORD, and as if its texts – some among them, anyway – were essential to the nourishing of priestly ministry.

What might it mean to teach theology as if reading it were a means toward cognitive intimacy with the LORD? Such teaching would include at least the following moments.

First, the display of orthodoxy's grammar – its lexicon and syntax; or, if you prefer, its conceptual structure and preferred vocabulary – as if this grammar were itself a gift from the LORD about whom it speaks, and as if, therefore, Christians have certitude about its adequacy to its task. A historical approach to the display of dogma cannot do this; neither can an approach that prescind from the truth and beauty of what it displays.

⁵ This is a broadly Weberian understanding of what it is to do intellectual work. See, for the classic account, Max Weber, "Wissenschaft als Beruf," in Weber *Wissenschaft als Beruf, 1917/19. Politik als Beruf, 1919*, ed. Wolfgang J. Mommsen & Wolfgang Schluchter (Tübingen: Mohr, 1984), 71-111. First published 1917.

⁶ I take this phrase from the fifth chapter of Newman's *Grammar of Assent*.

Those approaches have their place and importance, and some knowledge of their deliverances should, I suppose – a reluctant admission, this – be expected of priests; but it is a subsidiary or ornamental place. If, and to the extent that, those approaches become more than that, they temper and strengthen the iron bars of the Weberian cage, with the disadvantages noted. Rather than that, the teacher ought display orthodoxy's grammar as what it is: the indispensable condition for thinking and speaking well about the LORD given by him to his spouse, the Church, in order to make it possible for her, to the extent possible, to speak about the LORD *ad intra* to her own members, (in catechesis, mystagogy, and so on); and *ad extra* to the unbaptized (proclamation, apologetics, and so on). The teacher who so presents theology to her students does so with intellectual passion, as if what's being displayed (taught) is the most important knowledge there is. She does so, also, with the goal of imparting to her students knowledge of what orthodoxy's grammar is – the particulars of its lexicon and syntax – and skill in deploying that grammar in their own thought, speech, and writing. Teachers of theology who have these goals in mind want to help their students become theologians – that is, become those who, within the limits of their capacities, have the *habitus* of speaking, writing, and thinking well about the LORD, much as they have the *habitus* of speaking whatever language is native to them. A theological *habitus* in this sense can come to constitute students' second nature, cognitively and intellectually speaking: they can become theological speakers and thinkers in something like the same way that they once became speakers of their first language.

A second moment in the teaching of theology as if it mattered for cognitive intimacy with the LORD, and as if it were a gift from that same LORD, is the establishment and display of the difference between the lexicon and grammar of orthodoxy, on the one hand, and matter for theological speculation, on the other. This, too, is difficult, but it's essential if those being taught theology are to become not only thinkers who live and move and have their being within the broad and delightful constraints of orthodoxy, and thereby able to speak its language with verve and love; but also capable of energetic speculative thought about orthodoxy's content. For theologians, it's never enough (though it's always essential) to be able to say what Scripture delivers and the Church teaches; they must also be able to see and say what that orthodoxy does not deliver. There are many substantive and interesting questions⁷ on which orthodoxy offers no defined position, but for thought about which it suggests pathways and offers material. The teacher of theology ought constantly, in her teaching, press this distinction, and press, as well, its importance for theology. That's because theologians, priestly and other, need to be able, for the good of both the Church and the world, to speculate theologically and to see what it means to do so. The Church's understanding and explicit teaching of doctrine develops; to say so is itself a deliverance of doctrine. A *speculum* is

⁷ E.g. (a miscellany) – I take it that orthodoxy prescribes no answer to any of these questions, though it certainly suggests tracks along which thought about them ought go – and, therefore, tracks along which thought about them ought not go: What is Islam? What constitutes sexual intimacy between human persons? Is universalism possible? Did Mary die before being assumed bodily into heaven? What did it seem like to Jesus to be Jesus while incarnate here below in the devastation? What modes of intimacy with the ascended flesh of Christ and the assumed flesh of Mary is it proper to predicate of those resurrected for eternal life? Is there doctrine about contingent matters of fact, and if there is, what's proper to such matters of fact? This miscellany indicates some among my interests at the moment, nothing more.

a mirror; and to speculate is to polish thought's mirror so that it can better image (reflect) what is before it. When theologians speculate, that's what they do: they offer more-or-less elaborated and argued-for suggestions about what's implicit in orthodoxy though not (yet) part of orthodoxy's explicit content, and some among their suggestions may, over time, come to form part of the explicit content of the *depositum fidei*. Pedagogical marking of the distinction between orthodoxy and speculation is, therefore, essential to the teaching of theology as if it mattered.

These two moments in theological teaching – display of orthodoxy's grammar, with the goal of inculcating skill in inhabiting it; marking of the distinction between orthodoxy and speculation in order to show the importance of speculation for orthodoxy's development – ought be informed throughout by pedagogical use of the central theological texts of the Christian archive. That is, when teaching any theological topic, teachers should do so largely by way of exposition of and commentary upon texts of central importance to the archive, and students should spend a very large proportion of their study time in reading them. What makes a text of central importance to the archive? There's no quick and easy answer to that; all I'll say at the moment is that there are three obvious categories: Scripture; magisterium; and *doctores ecclesiae*. The first of these is clear enough: no theological teaching should prescind from Scripture, and theologians, teachers and students both, should engage that corpus constantly and happily. This has been made difficult by the tendency of academic specialists in Scripture to arrogate to themselves, and themselves only, the right to scriptural exposition. But there's no need for that, and teachers of theology would do well to ignore it, and actively to engage and rebut it when it surfaces. 'Magisterium' should be construed broadly to include the documents of the ecumenical councils and the deliverances of the ordinary and universal magisterium. The list of *doctores ecclesiae* now (since 2012) has thirty-five members, and will certainly expand further; those who've been granted the title are women and men whose teaching is of special significance for the Church's self-understanding. That there is an ecclesial list of this sort is suggestive for theological education generally and especially for the theological education of priests – I'll return to this point.

Theology, on the account given so far, is the textual record of attempts by Christians⁸ to approach the LORD cognitively. Theologians seek familiarity with orthodoxy's grammar together with the speculative extension of that grammar; and they do these things principally by way of, and are consequently concerned speculatively to deepen, the Church's understanding of its LORD.

It's worth noting, and briefly commenting upon, an important difference between the understanding of theology in play in this essay and that evident in most of the other contributions to this symposium and prominent in the Catholic tradition generally. I understand theology as essentially a work of the intellect, differentiated from other such works by what it's about: theology is intellectual discourse about the LORD. In order to do it, even to do it well, the qualifications necessary are just and only the ordinary

⁸ There is of course non-Christian theology, attempts to understand the LORD (even if not by that name) undertaken by the unbaptized. This can be profound and instructive to the Church; but it is not the topic of this essay.

intellectual virtues. The theologian does not need the infused virtue of faith, does not need to be morally virtuous, and certainly does not need to be Christian. Just as you don't need to be a good person in order to write a good sentence, so also you don't need to be a good person to be a good theologian. It's important to make this point and to keep it in mind because doing so permits a particular phenomenon to show itself with clarity. I mean the phenomenon of thinking well about the LORD. Making such thought dependent upon things extrinsic to itself (baptism, moral virtue, belief, and so on) occludes this phenomenon, and is likely to make it difficult or impossible for the Church to attend to and profit from thought about the LORD done by those who lack one or another of these extrinsic properties. It's true that many influential Christian thinkers have proposed a narrower understanding of the word 'theology' than the one I'm working with.⁹ But, so far as I can tell, clarity, precision, and the interests of the Church suggest that this is a mistake, or at least a decision that, when taken, closes off some paths better left unblocked.

So far, I've made some general recommendations about how theology should be taught. These apply, certainly, to the teaching of theology in seminaries, and I believe them to be recommendations that, if taken seriously, would make theology more attractive to and formative of Christians. Were theology taught in this way in seminaries, as though it mattered rather than as an academic discipline, it's probable that more priests would find it desirable to continue to read it after their ordinations than do now.

Teaching theology as if it mattered might do something to overcome the disadvantages of teaching theology as if it were an academic discipline. It might also help in the task of forming priests in such a way that reading theology, especially the theology contained in the tradition's authoritative and classic texts, comes to seem to more of them than is presently the case important for their work as priests. It might do that because it would permit priests to see that what reading theology is for – its proper end – is greater cognitive intimacy with the LORD. Theology can help those who read it to know the name of the beloved better, and to speak it with greater precision and passion. This is good. Every priest should want it, and many, perhaps most, I hope, do. But so also do many Christians who aren't priests. I want such intimacy myself, and I think that reading and writing theology helps me toward it.¹⁰ This means that what's been said so far isn't enough to show what it is about being a priest that makes reading theology as if it mattered a proper part of the priestly vocation. What is it about what priests are and do that makes reading theology important for them? Only if there's something to say about that can it be shown that priests need to continue to read theology in order to become more fully what they are and, as a result, do better what priests do.

Priests have been set apart by their ordination for a particular intimacy with Jesus. It's an intimacy additional to and supervenient upon that granted by baptism. In that

⁹ A good example, now almost classical, is Hans Urs von Balthasar's "Theology and Sanctity," in idem, *Explorations in Theology I: The Word Made Flesh* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 181-209. First published in German in 1960.

¹⁰ A significant majority of those who would self-describe as Catholic theologians in North America now are lay people.

respect, it's like marriage.¹¹ Baptism isn't cancelled by these sacraments but rather complemented and developed in a particular way. In the priestly case, the intimacy with Christ established by the sacrament permits priests to represent Jesus to his body in several ways. First among these is presiding *in persona Christi capitis* over the liturgical assembly at the celebration of the Eucharist. All the other priestly modes of representing Jesus to his body are participant in and derived from this one. By priestly ordination priests come to be able to shepherd their particular flocks by participation in Jesus' shepherding of the universal flock. This peculiar intimacy with Jesus reserves to priests some particular actions. Two among these are especially significant for our question about the buttressing and burnishing of the priestly identity by the prayerful reading of theology. I mean preaching first, and then the provision of pastoral counsel.¹² Each of these in its own way requires priests to be theologians; each is improved by priestly theological skill and damaged by its lack; and since each is proper to the priestly vocation, their improvement by the reading of theology is also the improvement of the priest's ability to do what priests must do, and thus also of priestly vocation and identity. But how exactly does theological skill improve these priestly actions, and how should, or might, theological reading be done by working secular priests in such a way exactly as to improve them?

Priests preach often. It's part of the ordinary rhythm of the secular priest's week that he prepares for and delivers his Sunday homily, and he may often, in addition, preach at weddings funerals, daily masses, and other events during the course of a week. In delivering those homilies, priests do a number of things at once. First, they speak as Jesus to his people, participating in and re-presenting the archetypal moment of Christian preaching, which is Jesus' proclamation to the Jewish people assembled in Nazareth that the Scripture just read has today been fulfilled in their sight and hearing.¹³ All Christian preaching says this: that the *verbum Domini* just read and acknowledged as such is about Jesus and can be heard in its fullness if and only if it is so understood. To attend to Scripture is to attend to Jesus; to attend to the *verbum Domini* is to attend to the *Dominus* who is the *Verbum*. That's the fundament of Christian preaching; it provides the form of everything priests say when they preach the word about the Word. Priests do this not merely by uttering truths about what Scripture is and says; I can utter truths of that sort, and I am no priest. They do it, rather, *in persona Christi capitis*, speaking as Jesus to the people about Jesus. The people, in turn, do what (some among) the Jewish people did when they heard Jesus – they marvel, that is, at the *auctoritas* with which the priest speaks, something that, by participation, he really has.

More particularly, when priests preach they expound Scripture to the people, explicating what the LORD is saying to the people assembled here, in this place and at this time; and they do all this in their own words, not, as is the case with almost

¹¹ Marriage and priestly ordination are alike, as well, in that they are sacraments not for everyone. Perhaps, too, they are both sacraments received by many more people than should.

¹² It's true that only the former is reserved to priests; but the latter takes on a special flavor and significance when done by priests; and sometimes it's done by them – e.g., during the sacrament of reconciliation – in contexts which are reserved to them.

¹³ Luke 4:14-30.

everything else they say as liturgical presiders, in words given to and prescribed for them by the Church.¹⁴ This is a poignant situation. The priest has texts to expound (the lections for the day), and he offers his expositions as Christ to the people; and yet, to do this essential and difficult work he must speak in his own voice in the language of his time and place to a people with whom, ideally, he shares that language. This is a deep and darkly difficult situation; it contains, in miniature, the mystery of the noncompetitive relation between divine and human agency. I expect that many priests find the situation daunting; I certainly do on the few occasions when I preach (with episcopal permission) in Protestant settings. I speak, and yet it is not I who speak, but rather Christ in me. The Spirit leads, of course, but it's usually far from obvious which are the movements of the Spirit and which the promptings of the preacher's fearful mind. In such a difficult situation – speaking as Jesus to the people about the meaning of the LORD's words; exhorting the people to live the kind of Christian life that the preacher is scarcely capable of himself; vested and caparisoned as what he knows himself not to be, while also knowing that he is and must be, exactly what he is dressed as;¹⁵ his lips receiving the lover's kiss while yet knowing that they need to be seared pure with red-hot coals before they're remotely worthy to return that kiss¹⁶ – in this situation, being a person who has read and continues to read theology, who is formed as a theologian, can be a help. It can provide priests with the words that need to be said; and it can provide them with the assurance that they can in fact speak those words as Jesus to the people.

What kind of theology should the priest read, and how should he read, and have read, in order to bring about these desiderata? The point of first refuge should surely be the massive and rich literary deposit in the Christian archive of the words of other priests doing what he must now do. It may be that the literary genre taking up the most shelfspace in the Christian archive is that of the homily, which is scarcely surprising given the importance to the tradition of the act of preaching. The homilies preserved in manuscripts and printed books are theology *stricto sensu*: they are the record of what priests of the past have said to their people about the LORD, which is also to say that they are the record of what men living out the same vocation that the priests of the present are now living out have said. It's hard to imagine a richer source of support and help for the vocational needs of today's priests. It's also hard to imagine a richer thesaurus of theology. This part of the archive, its record of homilies preached, is certainly among the things priests should be reading as an ordinary part of their discipline, and as an essential part of their weekly preparation for preaching themselves. In doing so, they will find and be formed by much good theology; they will also find their own vocation and identity shown them in a deep way. The men who spoke these words of the past about the LORD to the LORD's people were doing what they themselves are doing every week.

¹⁴ There is no Catholic equivalent for the sermon-books used in the Anglican Church in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Those books contained collections of sermons to be read verbatim by ministers not licensed to preach.

¹⁵ Cf. George Herbert's poem, 'Aaron.'

¹⁶ Songs of Songs 1:1; Isaiah 6.

It's not surprising that many of the Church's most thoughtful and suggestive theologians have also been among her most moving and influential homilists. Neither is it surprising that some of the Church's best theology, catechetical, mystagogical, and speculative, has been done in homilies. If the picture I've just given of what happens when a homily is preached – of what it is to preach a homily – is even approximately correct, then this ought to be true. The liturgy is the place where the LORD's intimacy with his people reaches its highest pitch; and within the liturgy, the homily is the place where theology, in all its modes, gets most explicitly done. When the homily works as it should, then preacher and people become as cognitively intimate with the LORD as it is possible to get in this devastated world: they do theology together as a means of understanding and responding to the LORD.

With all this in mind, it should be clear that the homiletical parts of the Christian archive could be, for the seminarian and the working priest, the first place to go for prayerful theological reading. Some principle of selection is necessary, of course. There's a very great deal of homiletical material in the archive, and no single priest can read more than a tiny portion of it. Such a principle is easily to hand: the Church has distinguished some among its theologians as pre-eminent among its theologians by giving them the title *doctor ecclesiae*. The works of these women and men ought be of great importance for all theologians, lay and priestly, just because they are *eminens doctrina*, and because most of them have by now a long history of being read, thought and prayed about, and commented upon by later theologians. The works of the *doctores ecclesiae* might, however, be of special importance for priests; this is especially true of the works of those among the *doctores* who were themselves priests, and even more especially those among them whose surviving works include a substantial body of homilies. Repeated and prayerful reading of the homilies of the *doctores*, beginning in seminary and then extended through the course of a priestly life, could be doubly formative for priests: First, homilies are the work of priests, and the close, careful, and repeated reading of them by priests might nurture and form their own priestly identity as homilist-theologian, certainly, but in other ways as well. Second, the ways in which theology is done in the homilies of the *doctores* are also the ways in which theology is principally done by working priests now; repeated exposure to such theologizing ought make priests better at doing it themselves.

For example. More than four hundred of Augustine's homilies survive. Many among these are virtuoso performances of scriptural exegesis, moral and practical exhortation, and catechetical, mystagogical, and speculative theology, all woven together into a seamless rhetorical garment. Reading them on a regular basis as preparation for preaching might, over time, be transformative for a contemporary priest. It's not that Augustine's homilies can or should be imitated – fourth- and fifth-century Africa is distant in many ways from twenty-first-century North America, perhaps not least in the rhetorical norms informing public speech; but Augustine can, if everything goes well, be an inspirational and shaping force, a preaching priest of his time whose words can enter into those of the preaching priests of ours. Similar points can be made about others

among the priestly *doctores* whose surviving works include significant *corpora* of homilies.¹⁷

Priests prepare (I hope) for preaching, which means that they don't have to speak extemporaneously even though the words they speak are their own. But there are many other situations in which they must do theology extemporaneously – offer catechesis, or mystagogy, or theological speculation, that is, off the cuff, in response to a situation that arises unpredictably. A parishioner might buttonhole the priest after mass with a pressing question about the sufferings of the innocent, the rights and wrongs of sexual congress between people of the same sex, the meaning of the dogma of the Assumption and so on. Or, at the sacrament of reconciliation a penitent, deeply troubled by something he's done, might want not just absolution, but also help in understanding how he should describe and think about what he has done. When priests speak to situations like these, they necessarily do so as theologians – those who speak, that is, about the LORD's ways to the LORD's people. And, they do this without having had a chance to prepare what they say, and without knowing, typically, that the situation will arise at all. They speak in these situations out of who they are and what they know, and in response to the urgent needs of those to whom they speak and to the equally urgent promptings of the Spirit. Sometimes they speak well in these situations, and sometimes not. For the most part, the extemporaneous theology they give voice to is the theology that informs them, just as when anyone speaks extemporaneously about anything the accent, lexicon, and syntax we use is the product of our formation.

In situations of this sort, too, and in a different way than is the case with preaching, priests need to be theologians. Pastoral counsel is inevitably theological through-and-through, and the usual thing is that the better a priest is formed theologically and the more continuing and lively his formation is, the better he will do as a theologian when he's called on to offer extemporaneous pastoral counsel.¹⁸ How might priests get the kind of theological formation that will make them good extemporaneous pastoral theologians? This is a harder question than the one about homilies, for in that case there's an obvious body of theological literature in which the priest can see the theological work he must do being done by men like himself. In the case of extemporaneous pastoral counsel, this isn't so clearly the case – almost by definition if the extemporaneity of pastoral counsel is emphasized. The theological literature that approaches most closely, perhaps, is the letter. The *doctores*, at least some of them, were considerable letter-writers, and a good proportion of their letters shows them doing something like extemporaneous pastoral and spiritual counseling. Interesting instances are Jerome's Letter to Eustochium and Augustine's to Proba. And sometimes such letters get worked up into something more like treatises. Examples include Francis de Sales' *Introduction to the Devout Life*, which is derived from letters of counsel written to a number of different lay people; and John of Avila's *Audi, Filia*, which has a similar origin. Close and repeated

¹⁷ E.g., John Chrysostom, John of Avila.

¹⁸ Two caveats: *tout est grâce*, and so we shouldn't rule out the LORD's capacity to use the unformed, recalcitrant, and even corrupt priest as a means of grace for the people by giving him the right words to speak. Neither should we think that formation in academic theology of the sort mentioned above is likely to make any contribution to the priest's capacity to offer pastoral counsel.

reading of (selections from) the pastoral correspondence of the *doctores* could have some of the same benefits I've suggested might come from reading the *doctores'* homilies.

I've another, though more tentative, suggestion in this connection. It is that literature and film can contribute deeply to the kind of formation that produces skill in extemporaneous theologizing. This is in part because those genres can depict with rich detail particular human situations and possible (priestly) pastoral responses to them; and it is in part because they can provide theological formation by way of the *affectiones* and *passiones* as well as by way of the intellect. And in many cases that's exactly what's needed to make good extemporaneous theologians. A few very brief examples of what I mean – and here, inevitably, I move away from the *doctores ecclesiae*, and in some cases also from the Christian archive altogether. This can create problems, but it certainly ought not be the case that priestly reading of theology should in principle be restricted to what's in the Christian archive. Consider, then, Flannery O'Connor's (American, 1925-1964) short story 'Revelation,' in which the nature of pride and self-righteousness are shown, scarifyingly; or Alessandro Manzoni's (Italian, 1785-1873) novel *I Promessi Sposi* [The Betrothed], one of Pope Francis' favorite books, in which there is a deep contrast between the good and the bad priest, a depiction of the dangers of comfort, and a series of stories about conversions from evil to good; or John McDonagh's (English, 1969-) 2014 film, 'Calvary,' in which a priest-martyr offering counsel to a devastated world is the central character; or Georges Bernanos' (French, 1888-1948) novels *Journal d'un curé de campagne* and *Monsieur Ouine*, in which the priest's place in a devastated world is shown with a remorseless precision rarely approached; or Robert Bresson's (French, 1901-1999) films 'Journal' (of the Bernanos novel), and 'Au hasard Balthazar,' in which the texture of the priestly relation to the world is woven closely. Prayerful reading of and looking at these (and there are many more possibilities) could transform priests toward being the kinds of men who are good – even profound – extemporaneous theologians, who can speak as Christ, face-to-face, to people who need to hear what he has to say to them.

In brief conclusion. Priests are, perforce, theologians. They speak about the LORD to the people all the time, formally/liturgically in the homily, and in innumerable face-to-face extemporaneous situations. Theological formation and continued theological reading are important if those things are to be done well. The best kind of theological reading, for priests, is that in which they can see their own persons and work refracted; ideally, such reading ought to be of works composed by those whose significance as the Church's teachers has been recognized, hence my emphasis in these remarks on the *doctores ecclesiae*. It would be a wonderful thing if every seminarian were encouraged to find one among these who could be his literary companion throughout life, and whose corpus he would return to for nourishment and formation ever and again. It would make sense, too, for his companion also to be a priest, and for him to be someone to whom he could pray. Priests ought also read theological works which themselves depict and perform the theological work that priests have to do; hence my emphasis here on letters and homilies rather than on treatises; hence, too, my suggestion that priestly identity can and ought be supported and formed by works of literature and film. If the priest's lips ought guard and communicate the knowledge of the LORD (Malachi 2:7), then those lips

ought be ready to speak about the LORD with passion and care to the people who are always eager to hear.