

Liquidity and the Abyss: Lifelong Theological Formation for U.S. Franciscans

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Introduction

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak at this important event in which we explore together themes relating to lifelong formation for Franciscan men within the particular context of the United States. While our respective branches on the Franciscan family tree may look from the outside to vary one from the next, reflecting certain variations in habit and constitution, the core of our shared *vita evangelica* (“Gospel Life”) and the lifeblood that flows like sap throughout is the very same and shared tradition launched by Francis and Clare of Assisi eight centuries ago, and which serves to maintain our diverse unity.

When invited to present some points of reflection with you today, I was told two key things. First, I should focus on the theological trends, challenges, and hopes of our time that are perhaps overlooked in many formation settings (and even some academic ones) and yet ought to be recognized and attended to by Franciscans today. Second, I was to keep my remarks to around 25 minutes. Period. Both of these are formidable requests; the latter may in fact be the most difficult.

Given the time constraints, I have organized my remarks into major two parts. Part One is a look at our contemporary context, as well as social and theological landscape. It is, as it were, an exercise in naming the “signs of our times” as *Gaudium et Spes* describes it or the initial “seeing” or “recognition” step of the “See, Judge, Act” methodology outlined by John XXIII in *Mater et Magistra*.¹ Part Two is where I name two particular theological themes that I see largely unaddressed today and propose them to you as loci for lifelong Franciscan formation. These two themes are not meant to be exclusive, but are presented as illustrations of pressing theological questions that we ought to recognize, name, and begin to address from within our particular Franciscan tradition. It is my hope that our processing and discussion of these questions might lead to further emphasis on these and similar topics moving forward.

The Context of Now: Liquidity, the Abyss, and the Decolonial Turn

The Second Vatican Council’s “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World” (*Gaudium et Spes*) identified a central task of Christian discipleship, stating: “the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel” (no. 4). This activity, described famously by John XXIII as the “seeing” or “perceiving” act of the reduction of theological principles to pragmatic action, requires that we take a clear and sober look at what I will call “the context of now.” *Gaudium et Spes* further

¹ See Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (December 7, 1965). Available online at: http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html; and Pope John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, On Christianity and Social Progress (May 15, 1961). Available online at: http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_15051961_mater.html

explains this urgent dimension: “Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, [the church] can respond to the perennial questions which [women and] men ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other. We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics” (no. 4).

In other words, it is necessary for us to make sense of the context in which the Franciscan family now stands in order to understand anything about the theological themes that we must consider. This is where I draw on the metaphorical imagery of “liquidity” and “the abyss.”

It has become customary throughout the second-half of the twentieth century to describe our historical, intellectual, and cultural milieus as “postmodern.” The term—admittedly ambiguous or at least without a consensus definition—sought to capture the fractured nature of our individual and collective identities. It is marked by what the French philosopher and sociologist Jean-François Lyotard famously summarized as a general “incredulity towards metanarratives.”² While perhaps useful as a delimiter of epochal time, the term “postmodern” has come under scrutiny by various thinkers for its inherent ambiguity. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman proposed another descriptor for the context of now.³ He called it “liquid modernity.”

Drawing on the standard states of matter as classically defined by natural science, Bauman noted that the modern era (marked by the so-called “turn to the subject,” celebrating the “triumph of reason and science,” and narrating a *telos* of human progress) was best likened to a solid. Solids are stable, static, unchanging, unmovable, hold their shape under stress, are immobile, and permanent. By contrast, the age in which we find ourselves is less “post-modern,” Bauman contends, because we are in many ways still living in the shadow of modernity and exist within the reality that was understood to be more solid or frozen. What we experience now is the “melting” of that stalwart modernity. As Bauman explains, “‘fluidity’ or ‘liquidity’ [are] fitting metaphors when we wish to grasp the nature of the present, in many ways *novel*, phase in the history of modernity.”⁴ Bauman contends that early modernity is best understood as that time and effort in which earlier “melting” of standard metanarratives and cultural presuppositions were accomplished in order to make room for replacements that were intended to be even-more solid, integrative, and lasting. What distinguishes our time—that of *liquid* modernity—is that the “task of constructing new and better order to replace the old and defective one is not presently on the agenda.” Bauman goes on to explain:

² See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

³ As with any public intellectual, the late Professor Bauman is not without his critics, both intellectual and personal. Regarding the latter, it is worth noting that some have taken issue with Bauman’s admission of participating as a bureaucrat in the Communist Government of Poland as a young man. While I do not wish to make a personal judgment about the quality of Bauman’s character or political affiliations, I do want to acknowledge this rather public aspect of his early adult life. For more on his biography, see Vanessa Gera, “Zygmunt Bauman, sociologist who wrote identity in the modern world, dies at 91,” *Associated Press* (January 9, 2017), available online at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/zygmunt-bauman-sociologist-who-wrote-identity-in-the-modern-world-dies-at-91/2017/01/09/ba6f821e-d6b2-11e6-b8b2-cb5164beba6b_story.html?utm_term=.4317afe4a68d

⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 2.

The “melting of solids,” the permanent feature of modernity, has therefore acquired a new meaning, and above all has been redirected to a new target—one of the paramount effects of that redirection being the dissolution of forces which could keep the question of order and system on the political agenda. The solids whose turn has come to be thrown into the melting pot and which are in the process of being melted at the present time, the time of fluid modernity, are the bonds which interlock individual choices in collective projects and actions—the patterns of communication and co-ordination between individually conducted life policies on the one hand and the political actions of human collectivities on the other.⁵

The sense of our liquid times—that which bears the weight of history and time and space, but slips through our proverbial fingers when we attempt to grasp it firmly—is one felt by women and men around the world in various ways as a result of the increased globalization. The effects of globalization are not universally experienced singularly, for there are perceptible gaps between the economic, political, cultural, and ecclesial winners and losers. Nevertheless, the de-solidification of our contexts is, to some degree, a widespread phenomenon of our time.

So, what does this mean? Bauman suggests that, among other features, “These days patterns and configurations are no longer ‘given,’ let alone ‘self-evident’; there are just too many of them, clashing with one another and contradicting one another’s commandments, so that each one has been stripped of a good deal of compelling, coercively constraining powers.”⁶ In some instances, the liquidity of our modern age is experienced in the form of that perennial ecclesial boogeyman known as “relativism.” Most often, it simply means that identities, cultures, meaning, value, and grounding is not presupposed or axiomatic. Whereas Karl Rahner described early modernity as like a “wintry season,” we might argue with Bauman that our context is now more akin to a “rainy season,” or even a “monsoon.” Meaning making in liquid modernity means always being in flux, not keeping shape for very long and subject to revision, especially in the wake of fast-paced technological and scientific discovery and near-instantaneous global communications.

If liquidity most readily describes the condition of our modern era and contemporary context, then I believe that the image of the “abyss” best describes the challenge before us theologically. The image of abyss is a deeply theological concept that finds its scriptural origin in Genesis 1:2 with the naming of the *tehom* over which the divine *Ruach Elohim* draws near at the outset of creation. Within that primordial context, there is chaos and uncertainty, disorder and confusion, lack of future and yet infinite potential. So too, our modern context—liquid as it may be—is distinguished by rapid change, chaos, uncertainty, the unknown, and yet bears unknown potential. Theologian An Yountae reminds us that the image of the abyss is not

⁵ Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 6.

⁶ Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 7.

merely raw chaos, but it “also becomes the womb of creative potential.”⁷ I believe the language of the abyss is both descriptive and diagnostic for the enterprise of doing theology today.

Descriptively, there is in fact a gap or abyss between the reality of the lived experiences of most women and men in the world—including those within the Franciscan family—and the way that theological reflection has proceeded without prejudice for the shift from early modernity to its current liquid state. In other words, because so much of theology is presented as if the solid foundations of modernity have not melted and metanarratives remain axiomatic, there is a real impasse between what rises as the truly pressing theological and pastoral concerns of our time and the way we often articulate the faith. To borrow an apt set of categories from the Jesuit theologian Bernard Lonergan, too much of the way theology is understood and passed down within the tradition is in the “classicist” mode and does not adequately take into account “historical consciousness.”⁸ A “classicist world-view” is a black-and-white way of approaching reality, seeking timeless, simple, and static answers to complex questions that deserve a more robust and nuanced response. “Historical-Mindedness,” on the other hand, is a handy term to denote recognition of the world’s complexity, the need for nuance in scholarly inquiry, and an appreciation for the fullness of understanding of our faith toward which we seek but of which we may never master. The latter aligns better with the state of liquid modernity in which we find ourselves today.

Diagnostically, the image of the abyss as “creative womb,” that space of being “in-between” where the creative work of God’s Spirit can take place, offers us a challenge and invitation. In order to overcome the abyss-as-impasse and do theology in an age of liquidity, we must shift our individual and collective focus from the status quo and repetition of an untenable “classicist” approach to God and the world toward, instead, other ways of knowing and interpreting ourselves, the rest of creation, and God. To this end, I suggest that what has been emerging in recent years as a “decolonial option” or “the decolonial turn” as a way of thinking about knowledge, interpretation, and practice offers us an important methodological starting point.⁹

There is not enough space here to do justice to the richness and development of decoloniality having risen to greater prominence as a deliberate hermeneutical approach in recent years.¹⁰ In brief, as theorists Catherine Walsh and Walter D. Mignolo explain, decoloniality “is not a new paradigm or mode of critical thought. It is a way, option, standpoint, analytic, project, practice, and praxis.”¹¹ One of the key dimensions of a hermeneutic of decoloniality is the critical interpretation of standards of knowing and experiencing, which have been

⁷ An Yountae, *The Decolonial Abyss: Mysticism and Cosmopolitics from the Ruins* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 11.

⁸ See Bernard Lonergan, “The Transition from a Classicist World-View to Historical-Mindedness,” in *A Second Collection: Papers by Bernard J. F. Lonergan*, eds. William F. J. Ryan and Bernard J. Tyrrell (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 1-9.

⁹ An, *The Decolonial Abyss*, 20.

¹⁰ For more on this, see Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); and Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Social Classification,” in *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate*, eds. Mabel Moraña and Carlos A. Jáuregui (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 181-224; among others.

¹¹ Catherine E. Walsh and Walter D. Mignolo, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 5.

conscripted by singular forces that align with the expansion of the Western European colonial enterprise. To get at this reality, we might ask: what constitutes *real* or *legitimate* knowledge, science, or scholarship? Put in a pastoral context, we could also inquire about what is considered a *real* or *legitimate* devotion, Christian practice, or saint to be venerated? Oftentimes, the gatekeepers to what is considered *real* or *legitimate* are the same in both cases: those who maintain and deploy this colonial power, in broader society and in the church (that the history of colonization is a simultaneous and overlapping history of these two realities is not coincidental here).

Those who pursue a decolonial turn or embrace a decolonial option seek “conceptual instruments, other ways of theorizing, and other genealogies” in an effort to broaden what has typically been limited in terms of the “real” or “legitimate.”¹² Such a shift in prioritization of knowing and interpretation moves from the centers of power to the colonial peripheries, which is a move that is deeply *Franciscan* at its core, particularly when one considers the intentional location of *minoritas* as our grounding principle. It is a call for us to consider and privilege voices, experiences, and ways of knowing that are often overlooked and ignored. It demands humility on the part of those who have found themselves the gatekeepers of orthodoxy, tradition, and legitimacy. It recognizes that God’s Spirit is at work wherever God pleases and not just where those who have held power and authority say God is at work.

So, given that the context of now is liquid modernity, that we face an abyss, and that the constructive potential that exists in this moment includes a call to embrace the decolonial turn, I wish to highlight two theological areas we as Franciscans need to pay special attention to and engage in creative and constructive ways. The first is what I am calling a “theology of authenticity” and the second is “the meaning of the human person.” In what follows, I wish to merely propose these theological topics as a point of departure for our discussion and ongoing theological formation, which is both shaped by and ought to inform our pastoral praxis and community life in the *forma vitae* of Francis and Clare of Assisi.

Two Theological Loci: Authenticity and Personhood

The first theological topic I wish to draw our attention to is something that has been a focal point of young adults from around the world as they articulated the pressing issues that face them ahead of the 2018 Synod of Bishops on Young People.¹³ One of the most repeated themes that surfaced was the desire young adults had for what they named as an “authentic church,” marked by leaders who could admit mistakes, seek forgiveness, and accompany their younger sisters and brothers in their respective faith journeys with Christ. They address those in hierarchal leadership by name and exhort these leaders to be: “transparent, welcoming, honest, inviting, communicative, accessible, joyful and interactive.” To this end, the challenge that arises is an invitation for us to reflect on our own theology of leadership, holiness, and sin in the church—something all the more pressing in the wake of the recently revealed history of sexual abuse cover up witnessed to in the 2018 Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report.

¹² Walsh and Mignolo, *On Decoloniality*, 7.

¹³ For a fuller account and analysis of what will only be briefly explored here, see Daniel P. Horan, “Authenticity, Vocation, and the Risk of Faith: Hopes and Challenges for the 2018 Synod on Young People,” unpublished keynote addresses (September 2018) available online: <https://youtu.be/AGKfUdk8OeU> (Part I) and <https://youtu.be/m75GVVYejxY> (Part II).

What young people seem to be naming is the fact that we as a faith community, especially those of us in ecclesiastical leadership roles as men religious, are not working adequately enough to present the life of the Gospel authentically. We have too easily forgotten that one of the earliest and central Christian ecclesial claims is that the “church is holy,” and yet, as described in *Lumen Gentium*, it is “at the same time holy and always in need of being purified” (no. 8). The sinfulness of the church is seen in both the personal sins of its members, including its leaders, as well as collectively in the church’s historical complicity in various structural evils over the centuries.

This is where I believe the work of the Franciscan theological tradition is so important. Deeply human, rooted in an incarnational understanding of God’s humility and desire for creation, we celebrate the goodness of our created world and our human family while at the same time recognize the deeply fallen state of our affairs. The Franciscan tradition started as a medieval lay *penitential* movement after all! For this reason, we have never been willfully ignorant of the reality of our simultaneous sinfulness and justification in Christ. Other religious traditions within the Catholic Church are far less comfortable with this tension. Furthermore, this tension is heightened in our context by a cultural fear of litigation and the obsessive need “to be right” or win at all costs.

Rather than start our theological narratives with a presumption of ecclesial purity and perfection, perhaps we would do well to heed the wisdom of St. Francis in his *Admonitions* or look to the lesser-known and, at times, uncomfortable stories of our founder that center on his making mistakes, offending or sinning, and yet never shying away from the need to admit his wrongdoing, seek reconciliation, and offer penance. Rather than contribute to a misperception of moral weakness or ambiguity, such public practices convey to young adults and all people a more honest face of ecclesial leadership and pastoral ministry. We are not perfect. The Church, which is composed of all the baptized, the members of the Body of Christ, is *not perfect*. Why should we pretend to be otherwise?

Fear of further instability of mission and identity in the age of liquid modernity leads many church leaders and theologians to grasp onto the melting ice floes of a “classicist” worldview. But this attitude and practice only contributes to a deepening abyss between reality and falsity, between the church as some wish it were and the church as it really is. Embracing a decolonial option means that our starting point, as those in a privileged location of leadership and ministry, ought to be one of humility that allows us to hear the experiences and realities of the women and men—such as the young adults from around the globe—and follow their lead, learn from their wisdom, and empower their action.

The second theological topic I wish to name is that of personhood or, more directly, what does it mean to be human? The received tradition of theological anthropology rooted in an Aristotelian–Thomistic frame is breaking under the weight of historical, social, natural, psychological sciences, philosophy, and theology that have provided important and unassailable insights about what it means to be human over the last eight centuries. Furthermore, the lived experiences of women and men in various cultures and contexts at best do not confirm and more often contradict the proposals that have grounded so much of the way our magisterial teaching and theological reflection on humanity and morality have been articulated. I think we have to take seriously both our received tradition, but not merely repeat it with a kind of

fideism. Instead, we must have the epistemological, theological, and pastoral humility to receive input from the world around us that challenges the accuracy of our claims.

It is not accurate to cast the experience of sexual and gender diversity as “postmodern ideologies” bent on ushering in a radical relativism. It is not accurate to cast the differing experiences of embodiment and social location marked by race, class, ability, national status, and other characteristics as irrelevant to our understanding of Christian anthropology. It is not accurate to suggest that the reality of transgender persons is untrue or that gay and lesbian persons are merely electing to make a counter-cultural “choice” about sexual attraction. As the saying goes, just because something is “new to you” does not make it objectively “novel.” The compression of time and space in an age of globalization and liquid modernity has made access to and created platforms for the dissemination of diverse human experiences, which must be taken seriously and without prejudgment if we wish to authentically assert our belief in the inherent and unalienable dignity and value of each and every human person.

One of the pressing theological challenges for Franciscans in the twenty-first century is to engage these realities with a Christian theological response that is both grounded in the tradition but also applicable in light of the diversity of experiences, identities, and locations of the widely diverse members of the human family. The good news for us is that I believe there are in fact an abundance of pastoral and theological resources that form what I often call the “minority opinion” within the theological history of the last millennium. While Pope Leo XIII effectively elevated Thomas Aquinas as theologian *par excellence* to the near exclusion of other thinkers,¹⁴ he did not eradicate their thought and writings. Bonaventure, Scotus, Olivi, Angela of Foligno, William of Ockham, and so many other luminaries have been under-resourced and offer perfectly orthodox yet alternative approaches to many of our most pressing concerns.¹⁵

Embracing a decolonial option prioritizes not only the often subjugated experiences and ways of knowing that belong to marginalized women and men, but it also prioritizes our historical hermeneutics, our way of interpreting and seeing—it challenges us to go back and look at what Scotus says differently than Thomas, what other figures say in a manner that has not been adequately heard to date. Embracing a decolonial option means starting *not with* a sense that we already have the answers, but that *we have yet to hear* the experiences and insights of a significant portion of our human family. Indeed if Anselm was right about the enterprise of theology, then we must be in the business of *seeking greater understanding* of the faith we profess—this is an ongoing responsibility.

As Franciscans concerned with lifelong theological formation, committed as we are to meet women and men where *they are* in the spirit of our itinerant tradition, we must be advocates personally and collectively for starting with the voices and experiences of those previously ignored or overlooked. We must ask ourselves: *whose experience counts* as the starting point for our theological reflection? Furthermore, we must be open to renewing our sense of theological anthropology that is true to our Christian faith but also is capacious enough

¹⁴ See Pope Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris*, “On the Restoration of Christian Philosophy” (August 4, 1879). Available online at: http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_04081879_aeterni-patris.html

¹⁵ This is something I address explicitly in my forthcoming book. See Daniel P. Horan, *Catholicity and Emerging Personhood: A Contemporary Theological Anthropology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2019).

to hold the experiences of LGBTQ persons, women of color, the poor and outcast, and all others as much as it has for the Euro-American, white, male cleric.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, what I have been advocating here is a concerted shift in the way we approach theological questions and respond to the experiences and circumstances of the women and men of our time. Having recognized the state of our context as liquid and the abyss that stands between where we are and where theology has too often come from, we are challenged with the need for a renewed sense of authenticity and personhood. This raises a number of critical questions and leaves us with more queries than answers. I want to draw our attention to a few of these. Among the questions I wish to leave us to ponder and discuss include the following:

- With whom or with what do we begin our theologies?
- Whose voices are heard, whose experiences count?
- What does it mean to say that we are at once holy and sinful?
- What does authenticity look like in the church? How do we understand the human person?
- What role (if any) does the abundant diversity of the human experience play in our theological anthropology?
- How might we lead the way in modeling—within the church and beyond—a mode of studying and doing theology such that our pastoral practice is grounded in a coherent, sensible, and relevant understanding of the human person?

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