

## *On the Christian Teacher*

Unlike the Christian theologian, the Christian teacher assumes the truth of the Christian witness and therefore acknowledges the sole primary authority of the apostolic witness. She or he also acknowledges the secondary authority of the scriptural and traditional formulations of this witness, including those acknowledged as substantially normative by her or his own institutional church, because or insofar as their witnesses are authorized by the formally normative witness of the apostles.

Even so, the Christian teacher is precisely that—a teacher; and, like any other teacher, she or he is charged with the distinctive responsibility for furthering understanding—in this instance, understanding of the decision called for by the Christian witness. She or he discharges this responsibility by clarifying the self-understanding, or understanding of existence, for which the Christian witness calls each person to decide and then explicating its implications for life-praxis, which is to say, belief and action, secular as well as religious. In this connection the Christian teacher is at pains to take account of the full range of alternatives for responsible choice, given the assumption and acknowledgements on the basis of which she or he functions as a Christian teacher. This means that she or he seeks to clarify other live options for self-understanding and then to develop their implications, also, for both religious and secular life-praxis.

In all of this, the Christian teacher primarily addresses the question of the *meaning* of the Christian witness; accordingly, as much as she or he naturally has to interpret and reformulate the witness the church has already borne so that it will be credible and fitting in the new life-situation of her or his students, she or he is primarily concerned to discipline and reform the witness that the church now has to bear—beginning with her or his own teaching—so that it will above all be appropriate in this same situation.

As such, the Christian teacher is also unlike the Christian preacher, notwithstanding that both differ from the Christian theologian in alike assuming

the truth of the Christian witness and therefore also acknowledging the authority of scripture and tradition because or insofar as their formulations of this witness are authorized by the formally normative witness of the apostles. What the Christian preacher does on the basis of this assumption and acknowledgements, however, is to call directly for the decision as to self-understanding whose meaning the Christian teacher is concerned to clarify and to make explicit. Of course, the Christian teacher also calls for this decision *indirectly* in clarifying the self-understanding of faith and explicating its implications for belief and action. Given the assumption and acknowledgements on the basis of which she or he alone can teach, the whole point of clarifying the understanding of existence for which the Christian witness calls is to make possible a fully free and responsible decision for it; and the same is true of explicating its implications for Christian life-praxis or bearing Christian witness, which, being precisely witness *of faith*, is more than simply believing and professing even true beliefs and performing even right actions. But if the ultimate end of the Christian teacher is indeed the same as the Christian preacher's, her or his *immediate* end is different, even as, on the other side, the Christian preacher's responsibility to call *directly* for the decision of faith can hardly fail to involve her or his indirectly carrying out the Christian teacher's responsibility to further understanding of the meaning of this decision.

It should be clear from this that, while the responsibility of the Christian teacher, like the different responsibilities of the Christian preacher and the Christian theologian, could only be carried out by a human person, the phrase, "the Christian teacher," refers, in the first instance, not to any *person* as such, but to a certain responsibility—very likely one of several responsibilities—that a person may be charged with carrying out. In other words, this phrase properly designates an *office*; and this means, among other things, that its proper use fully allows for the possibility that no person could fill the office so designated without also filling certain other related offices by carrying out their distinctive responsibilities.

It will be clear enough from what has been said here that neither the Christian teacher nor the Christian preacher could fill her or his own office without in some way, or to some extent, filling the other's office as well. But it is no less clear, for reasons I have explained at length elsewhere, that no person could carry out the responsibility distinctive of either of these offices of actually bearing Christian witness without also carrying out the responsibility distinctive of the Christian theologian for critically reflecting on it—in such a way, namely, as to address not only the question of its meaning but also, and not least, the question of its truth.

15 October 1986; rev. 26 August 2003