

LODE WOSTYN AND THE DYNAMIC CHARACTER OF THEOLOGIZING

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This article celebrates the life and contribution of Lode Wostyn to the growth of dynamic and relevant theologizing in the context of the Philippine Church. It describes his theological method and how it impacts his doing of Christology and ecclesiology.

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for this opportunity to say something significant to a dear friend and mentor. I have always wanted to write about him but the limitation of time and frailties of my spirit have prevented me to fulfill that desire. The gentle prodding of Dr. Dennis Gonzalez and Fr. Eric Genillo of DaKaTeo has proved effective in fulfilling this long felt desire of mine. So today, I will share with you a sketchy portrait of this wisdom figure, called Lode and along this still hazy portrait is embedded my personal gratitude for a man who believed in me and was instrumental in who I have become today, that is, a lay theologian. This is my personal tribute to Lode.

HE IS ALIVE!

Let me start with a short narrative: On the morning of July 6, 2017, I opened my Facebook account. There I saw a post carrying a shocking news. The news was about the “death of Fr. Lode Wostyn.” Upon reading it, I froze. Then sadness and the feeling of regret slowly crept in. A death of a person close to you is always a cause of sadness. However, I was especially sad at that moment, because two of my mentors and good friends have died, in a matter of one year, the first being, Fr. Georges De Schrijver,

S.J. I had that stabbing feeling of regret too because I have never said my formal goodbyes to Lode before he was unexpectedly brought back to Belgium. I found myself calling and texting some of my priest-friends requesting them to include his intentions in their masses. But lo and behold, after some hours I got a message from a friend informing me that Lode is still alive and he is in a retirement home somewhere in Belgium. Upon hearing the good news, a gush of positive energy enveloped me and I felt an inexplicable joy from within. At that moment, I was moved to pray and thank God for this wonderful news. In hindsight, I thought to myself that this experience might not be too different from what the disciples felt when they have heard the news of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. They felt a strange kind of joy that eclipsed any trace of fear and sadness and it had actually moved them to be courageous witnesses to their revered Master.

Obviously, Lode was a victim of a fake news. It was a bizarre fake news that pronounced death to him for several hours. Fortunately, this malicious scheme was uncovered. To friends of Lode, the unmasking of a fake news had caused him to "resurrect" figuratively in their hearts and minds. I must say, it was a record-breaking resurrection, even beating the time record of Jesus' resurrection. For the record, I am not in any way attributing divine powers to Lode. But for me this event and Lode's possible reaction to it is instructive of the person that he is. I am quite sure that he would do a spin-off of this fake news. He would be laughing it off and would jokingly attribute it to a heavenly conspiracy for his seeming theological irreverence. To the one responsible for the fake news, he would say "Excuse me, I might have lapses in memory right now but my spirit is still alive so be careful with what you write." Such is Lode's dry humor and his tenacity of spirit. He is a strong-willed person, sometimes verging on stubbornness but surely very passionate about what he believes in. His spirit is not easily defeated. This is how I have experienced him as his student and mentee at Maryhill School of Theology and most importantly as a dear friend.

Let me now continue to describe this man. Here are some important biographical notes¹ to situate him: Born in Tielt, Belgium in 1937, Lode Lucas Wostyn is a missionary priest of the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, better known as the CICM. He obtained his Doctorate in Theology at the Facultés Catholiques de Lyon in 1968 just a few years after Vatican II. He is a founding father of the Maryhill School of Theology (MST), a school established in 1972 out of a desire “to revitalize the formation of the local clergy.”² He spent years teaching at MST and later became its Dean from 1989 to 1993. He then took a sabbatical year at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley from 1993-1994. While in Berkeley, he took a course in massage at “Care Through Touch Institute.” In 1995, he was assigned at Saint Louis University (SLU), where he became the director of the Institute of Philosophy and Religion from 1995 to 2001 and then, the Acting Dean of the College of Human Sciences from 2001-2002. He went for a one-semester sabbatical at Catholic Theological Union, Chicago on the Spring of 2003, where he also taught in 2004. In November 2007, he returned to Maryhill School of Theology (MST) as a regular lecturer while also being a teaching staff at Saint Vincent School of Theology (SVST). This would be his last assignment here in the Philippines. All throughout his teaching career, he has been active in pastoral work in several parishes in Manila. He even taught massage to groups of blind people in the Philippines. Lode is interested in religious and native art and in fact assisted in the re-organization of the museum at Saint Louis University, Baguio City. He is also into sports like swimming and cycling. Currently, at the age of 78 years old, he is in the CICM retirement home in Belgium.

¹ Here are online profiles related to Lode Wostyn as written by him: <http://www.zoominfo.com/p/Lode-Wostyn/374331848>; <https://ph.linkedin.com/in/lode-wostyn-73203835>. see also <http://www.svst.edu.ph/wostyn.html>

² See *A Brief History of Maryhill* at <http://www.maryhillschooloftheology.com/history>

ENCOUNTERING HIM

I had Lode as a teacher, initially, in a seminar course on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* when I was in my second year in theology and then in my synthesis class in systematic theology in my 4th year at Maryhill School of Theology. I believe these were the two important moments, though limited, that were formative in terms of my relationship with him. These courses exposed me to his theological ideas. But also, they served as the bases for gauging my academic capabilities as a student of theology. These were the moments where a struggling student, who was still in search of his confidence, encountered a self-assured mentor whose expertise on the field is beyond doubt.

THEOLOGY, A DYNAMIC PROCESS

Through Lode, I have learned that theology is a dynamic activity rather than a reproduction of a static content of faith. It is a vibrant process of discovery and actually making a breakthrough in terms of deciphering and discerning the movements of God in our history. It is also about the exciting task of formulating our responses to God's self-communication in the here and now. The dynamic character of the field is captured in phrases like *Doing Theology*, *Doing Christology* and *Doing Ecclesiology* which incidentally are the titles of the books that he and Joe De Mesa wrote together.³

Hence, for Lode, rather than an act of intellectual assent to the deposit of faith, theology is actually the uncovering and the unearthing of the significance of past faith articulations for the present. Rather than the mere acquiescence to a crystalline doctrinal affirmation on the divine sonship of Christ, Christology is a living encounter with God's Parable, Jesus of Nazareth. Rather than fortifying an already sturdy fortress, ecclesiology is a pilgrimage

³ See the following works of Lode Wostyn: *Doing Ecclesiology. Church and Mission Today* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications); with Jose de Mesa, *Doing Christology. The Re-Appropriation of a Tradition* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1989); with Jose De Mesa, *Doing Theology. Basic Realities and Processes* (Quezon City: MST, 1982), rev. ed. (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1990).

or a journey of a specific Christian community in bringing to life the Reign of God. In his *Doing Ecclesiology* book, Lode asks the following questions: “Are we a Church of genuinely liberated people or a Church of anxious people who are nurturing our little sinful souls to prepare them for heavenly bliss? As Church, we should be a sign of the kingdom, a sign of salvation, liberation and humanization.”⁴

THE CENTRALITY OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE AND THE NORMATIVITY OF JUDEO-CHRISTIAN TRADITION

I have learned also that theology is an exciting and dynamic adventure because “it is never far from home,” to borrow the words of Joe De Mesa.⁵ It draws from our human experiences. It takes into account our hopes and our dreams. Our yearnings to be authentic and our desires to free ourselves from personal and structural enslavements. It dignifies our very own theological stories that spring from our ethos as a people. Concepts should evoke important experience in our lives argues Lode. He contends further that “[a]n experience is real and meaningful for human beings when it is related to their search for happiness, well-being, humanness, salvation and liberation.”⁶

The claim that human experience constitutes a *locus theologicus* has a far reaching effect. First, it considers our cultural uniqueness and “situatedness” as Filipinos in creating our own theological ideas. So when Lode scoffs at the continued emphasis on the concept of *homoousios* in Christology, he does not disparage it per se, rather he simply signals its irrelevance for our search for meaning and well-being as Filipinos. The concept is no longer relatable to modern sensibilities, he would say. Second, it brings

⁴ See *Doing Ecclesiology*, 41.

⁵ See Jose De Mesa, *Why Theology Is Never Far from Home* (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 2003).

⁶ “Readings in Ecclesiology” in *Church: Pilgrim Community of Disciples*, 2. Accessed on September, 2017, <http://www.bekkoame.ne.jp/~sukke/church2.html>.

into our attention the importance of the human dimension of the church and the humanity of Jesus. Following Edward Schillebeeckx, Lode believes that the church should be the human face of God in the world. The Church accordingly is able to fulfill her true calling through its meaningful actions and genuine concern for the good of people. “They are the anamnesis, i.e., the living recollection among us of the saving presence of God in our world history.”⁷ Similarly, in his Christological outlook, Lode puts premium on the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth. Following an angel is already difficult, so much so with following the second person of the Trinity, Lode would joke. His call is to free the historical Jesus from the rubbles of dogma that have imprisoned it. For instance, in his critique of Cardinal Ratzinger’s (whom we now call Pope emeritus Benedict XVI) work, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Lode did not hide his disappointment in terms of the Christological faith hermeneutics of the latter. For him, Ratzinger’s scholastic framework has robbed Jesus’ humanity and made Jesus no longer relatable to humans. Lode articulates his frustration in the following words,

I felt bad because Ratzinger apparently tried to steal my master, Jesus of Nazareth, by sending him to the higher spheres of the Divine... The Jesus of Ratzinger’s book is a God appearing on the human scene to teach humans the right doctrines about his person, one-in-Being with God.⁸

This “may be dogmatically correct,” admits Lode, but such a docetic and spiritualizing presentation on Jesus is uninteresting for him. Apparently, he has discovered and met a different Jesus in his years of historical-critical studies. He writes,

I learned to meet another Jesus, the prophet of Nazareth who belonged to the human community

⁷ Ibid. 10.

⁸ See *Ratzinger’s Jesus of Nazareth: A Review* by Lode Wostyn, accessed on September 2017 at <http://diwajoquin.blogspot.com/2012/06/boor-review-jesus-of-nazareth.html>.

and struggled to set people free from the many sins that enslaved them, personal and structural. I would like to hear Jesus' prophetic words again, with all their untamed incisiveness, challenging Christians to become people in the world of today, bringing hope and loving kindness to their families, communities, societies, and Church. This may be a way through which Jesus may become interesting once more.⁹

Thirdly, the implication of an experiential theology is that it leads to action and engages the rough realities of life. Ecclesiology then necessarily leads to missiology. "Our view of the Church and of mission belong together,"¹⁰ Lode contends. The unbreakable bond between faith and praxis happens in Christology too. Christology is always about discipleship. Lode writes, "I believe that Jesus can still be interesting and challenging in our secularized global world when we meet Christian disciples, living Jesus' liberating message of the coming Kingdom, a Kingdom that is already happening now."¹¹

TWO POLES OF DOING THEOLOGY

Any student of Lode Wostyn and Joe de Mesa would be familiar with the two poles of doing theology, i.e., the pole of human experience and the pole of the Judeo-Christian Tradition. The tension and the mutual interaction and confrontation that these poles create spell the dynamic nature of theology. Theology happens in their interfacing and interweaving. We can look back at our received tradition; however, rather than copying them, we need to re-appropriate that tradition to our situation so that it becomes culturally meaningful and pastorally relevant. *Re-appropriation* then is also a key concept for Lode. He contends, "[w]e need a new look at Jesus for our time and our situation. The figure of Jesus of

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ *Doing Ecclesiology*, 121.

¹¹ See *A Review by Lode ...*

Nazareth can only become meaningful for us if he is re-appropriated in our context and addresses the concerns and challenges of our own historical situation.”¹²

Overall, Lode’s approach to theology is called a theology-from-below. As such, it always begins with life and ends with life, i.e., life that is abundant and eternal. Any docetic (denial of the real humanity of Jesus), spiritualizing (takes no account of human experiences) and traditional (irrelevant for the times) take on theologizing makes Lode quite nervous.

Two years ago, I have requested him to critically evaluate a work I was doing. It turned out that the heart of his critical observation on my work leaned on the dynamic process of doing theology and its link to life. His short comment on my work reads, Dear jun, I read the article slowly and find it a very good critical study... Jun is also very diplomatic...to be expected? ...yet very clear in his critique of the document. The only thing I would stress more is the premise of the document: faith as a belief in a content-in truths- vs the premise of see-discern act-faith as trust, fidelity, and a way of experiencing and seeing. The experiential basis of the whole theological enterprise is clearly formulated at the end of your article-theology is about life.¹³

Indeed, theology is life and is never divorced from it. In the same vein, he would say in his classes the following phrases, “there is no salvation outside our world” ...*Extra Mundum nulla salus*... as Schillebeeckx puts it.¹⁴

¹² See *Readings in Ecclesiology*, 2.

¹³ This is a note he sent to me via email after reading the draft of the work I was working on.

¹⁴ See E. Schillebeeckx’s Final Message to Colleagues in Leuven, December 2008.

SEE-DISCERN-ACT

Lode adopts the SEE-DISCERN-ACT framework to demonstrate the actual process of theologizing. This 3-fold process is what is referred to as a *hermeneutic spiral*. Accordingly, theologizing starts with a critical understanding of what is going on in life. Lode has a particular critical concern for the present-day situation of the Roman Catholic Church. He would be always on the look-out for major developments in the church and would be ready to say his critical observation when he deems fit. He is a gatekeeper of some sort, not of the kind that protects the *status quo*, but the one who makes the leadership accountable to their true calling. Lode's "friend," Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI or more accurately, the then Cardinal Ratzinger was described sometimes in the press as *God's rottweiler*. This is with reference to his strict leadership style when he was in charge of the *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*. I think Lode was more a *Labrador Retriever*, a dog that is a best fit to guide a blind person. Blindness here refers to the perceived myopic vision of the leadership. Of course, I am the first one to say that this analogy is inaccurate. But again, all this is done in jest to make Lode laugh a little bit, if he was here present today.

Lode strongly promotes *interdisciplinarity*. He considers it an essential element in a comprehensive and rigorous reading of reality. For example, in his *Doing Ecclesiology* book, he conducted an analysis of the current state of the Roman Catholic church using history, social psychology and sociology.¹⁵ He employed a feminist critique and relied on some insights from missiology. Based on this interdisciplinary analysis, he concluded that Mother Church is sick for the following reasons: she is too easily entangled in economic and political powerplay. She is obsessed with the preservation of power. She is patriarchal too and has a defensive attitude towards the world. This "unhealthy situation" brings about a crisis of church and mission that must be responded to urgently, according to Lode.

¹⁵ *Doing Ecclesiology*, 18.

Being in an unhealthy condition, Lode then proposes a *deconstruction* process to our vision of Church to facilitate the *reconstruction* process to happen.¹⁶ “Un-learning” must take place especially with theological doctrines that run counter to “the findings of critical historical exegesis of Scriptures and are further undermined by a judicious study of the development of our Tradition.”¹⁷ In both these related processes, ideological suspicion must be taken so that we don’t become “unwittingly the victims of so-called perennial doctrines which are developed to justify existing situation.”¹⁸ Ideological suspicion presupposes critical thinking. Lode calls the latter as a constant companion in his academic life. He states,

One of my companions in my pilgrimage with Maryhill has a name: *critical thinking*. He was a close friend of Jesus of Nazareth, been less welcome among some of his disciples. He is indeed a very unpredictable companion who could bring you to the palace of Lady Wisdom or make your life miserable. I keep recommending this companion to my fellow travelers. He is a tricky one, but he makes the pilgrimage of faith colorful and full of surprises.¹⁹

His critical thinking skill is sharpened further by the ideas he gets from those in the progressive sectors of theology, such as E. Schillebeeckx, H. Kung, J.A.T Robinson, the liberation theologians Boff, Sobrino, Segundo, Nolan, etc.²⁰ Therefore, we can see clearly where his orientation and sympathies are.

The second part of the process is that of discernment. At this stage, a correlation between our present day concerns and the Judeo-Christian tradition (JCT) and subsequent developing traditions, for instance, Vatican II takes place. Lode sees the

¹⁶ See *ibid.*, 30-41.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁹ See <http://www.zoominfo.com/p/Lode-Wostyn/374331848>.

²⁰ See *Readings in Ecclesiology*, 1.

necessity of drawing from the well-springs of our faith visions to shed light on the predicament that a faith community currently faces.

Finally, when present day experience has been interfaced with the JCT, then a decision is ripe to come up with a strategy for praxis. This is now what is called the ACTION part. A pastoral or missionary practice needs to be undertaken to correct the situation. The praxis orientation of Lode makes it clear that *orthopraxis* gains the upper hand over *orthodoxy*. To be precise, for him orthodoxy is orthopraxis, meaning to say, right action or a liberating praxis constitutes a measure of orthodoxy in faith. But again, he is quick to see the danger of this approach. We are not merely social activists he would say, but we are first and foremost people of faith. Liberating praxis then should always go with spirituality and mysticism. Therefore, “an unbreakable bond between worship of God and liberation in the fullest and most comprehensive sense of the word,”²¹ must be forged, contends Lode.

THE CONCEPT OF THEOLOGICAL ANGER

Among his students, Lode has gotten the moniker, “angry theologian.” More than a description of his temper, this nickname speaks of the inner disposition that must be nurtured by every theologian especially when confronted with negative contrast experiences. Outrage and indignation are the emotional manifestations of this disposition. “I am angry,” he declares, for the indifference of the Church to the plight of the poor and its lack of imagination in terms of being relevant today. He further contends that “...all doing theology, should start somehow with anger, or better still, with indignation which directs us to question a situation.”²² According to him, the problem with theologians is simple: “we do not have a question, we do not want to be disturbed, we are too tame or simply tired of questioning. And without questions, we also do not need answers!” Anger in this context is actually a form of protest to an ungodly and inhumane situation.

²¹ Lode quotes Schillebeeckx, In Readings in Ecclesiology, 13.

²² *Doing Ecclesiology*, 2.

With this concept, it is as if Lode is saying, hey, your sheep are being slaughtered, are you as their Shepherd to remain silent? More than ever, this idea needs revitalizing in Philippine society today.

ON EXPERIMENTATION, CREATIVITY AND THE NEED FOR NOVELTY

Lode believes in the idea that change is a reality and is a permanent fixture in life. With change comes the possibility for creativity and innovation. It triggers improvement in life. Hence, he is saddened when church leadership stifles creative thinking in the church like for instance, when harassment and censorship of progressive theologians happen, as he himself experienced, when it suppresses innovative ideas and practices like creative forms of liturgies or when it simply replicates and propagates the same doctrinal teachings. The church is not a museum, he would say sometimes. It is supposed to be alive and dynamic and willing to embrace change. He argues that

We need a renewed Church that is inspiring not because it is a museum that showcases a colorful and glorious past but because it is a pioneering people courageously venturing through uncharted ground toward an anticipated liberating future.²³

It is along these lines that he would re-echo Bernard Lonergan's succinct summary of what Vatican II is all about, i.e., the "Catholic Church rediscovered history." Therefore, the Church is not impervious to change. Rather than resisting change, it should navigate its way through it in a meaningful way.

The appreciation for change, creativity and innovation is apparent also in his teaching style. He would ask us to create our own Creeds or creatively re-express a theological concept to be relevant and current for the times. He would ask his students to do a critical evaluation of a church document. My first paper for

²³ Lode quotes the FABC to visualize a renewed church. See *Doing Ecclesiology*, 126.

him was on a critical evaluation on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The CCC was just published then when he held a seminar for the purpose of a critical look on it.

His personal life also demonstrated how he has embraced change himself. For instance, his sabbatical year in Berkeley proved to be a turning point in his life. When he got back, he started to do research on topics that he would normally not indulge in, like the charismatic movement and the new age movement of which I happen to be a part. Back then, I did not understand what it was all about. But now I have realized that it was after all about how the church can creatively respond to these phenomena that effect a significant number of people.

Normally, he would be uncomfortable with “touching,” and showing his emotions but then surprisingly he ventured into massage. He offered an elective course on it, teaching seminarians the art of massage. As students, we witnessed some of these small changes in him and we would joke among ourselves, saying that Lode is no longer the Angry Theologian. Now he has become a massage master. So, before our eyes was the unfolding of a gentle giant whom we taught then was devoid of emotions. But we were proven wrong. I personally am a witness to how he has slowly but surely nurtured this side of his personality. I have witnessed him bare his soul to his friends and share his difficulties and the issues that he was wrestling with. I saw him shed tears a couple of times and these were occasions that made me appreciate him better as a person.

Lode was not afraid to try out new things, whether this is a restaurant or a good recreation place. He had always kept that adventurous spirit alive within him. He would swim in the seas alone or go somewhere else he has never been before. For me, all of these were manifestations of how Lode opened himself up to change and transitions in life and how unafraid he was to venture into new territories. I must also say that sometimes he gets into trouble because of his adventurous spirit.

EMPOWERING THE LAITY

Discipleship is a theme that is recurring in his theology. For him, discipleship is an inclusive concept that covers all whether one is a priest, nun or lay. Discipleship privileges no one. He has championed the idea of a participatory church.²⁴ He also sees the church as a community of disciples called upon to bring to life God's reign. Hence, he sneers at clericalism and disdains a too hierarchical view of the church. The church is the servant people of God, he emphasized. As a consequence of this view, he would advocate lay empowerment. But it was not all talk. He walked the talk, so to speak. It was actually a commitment that bore significant fruits. He is one of those who initiated the *Adult Theological Program* at MST. ATEP provides a rigorous theological formation to lay people in order to prepare them to assume leadership roles in their respective parishes and academic communities. He believes that lay people can manage a theological school efficiently and effectively. That a competent laity can handle the academic formation of priests and the religious is a pioneering and revolutionary idea that is unprecedented up to now. And so, he invested on lay people's theological formation. He sent them for further studies in prestigious theological schools abroad so that when they come back, they can take on the reins of theological formation, particularly at Maryhill School of Theology. I was one of those lucky ones whom he had tapped for this noble project. Unfortunately, this vision did not fully take off. The lay persons whom he has sent for further studies, came back, excited to fulfill the vision. However, those in church leadership then, were not ready to see a theological school run by predominantly lay people. Lode gave dignity to lay people in an unparalleled way in a context of highly clericalized Church in the Philippines.

²⁴ Doing Ecclesiology, 59.

CONCLUSION

I must admit that the outline I have shared with you today about Lode's contribution to theologizing is still very sketchy and might have not even given justice to his contribution at all. Yet I am at peace with the thought that somehow a person's contribution to history is not measured eventually by how small or how big it is. It only takes one person to say that the ideals and ideas of a person have made a difference in his or her life. So today I am here before you declaring that Lode's ideas have made a significant impact in the way I approach theology and the way I do theologizing.

I would like to end with a short poem from Raymond Carver, an American poet. His poem is entitled "Late Fragment." The poem goes:

And did you get what you wanted from this life, even so?
I did.
And what did you want?
To call myself beloved, to feel myself beloved on earth.²⁵

Lode, surely your theological ideas have gripped me. But it is your gift of person that I would treasure for a lifetime. For you made me feel that I am loved, supported and beloved in this part of the world, what we call theological world.

Thank you.

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²⁵ Raymond Carver, "The Last Fragment," <https://wordsfortheyear.com/2014/07/07/late-fragment-by-raymond-carver/>