

Josef Zvěřina and Impulses for Theological Studies – Contemporary Issues

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Abstract

The presented article reflects the perspectives that can be observed in Josef Zvěřina, in his impulses for universities, mission, contribution and continuous spiritual formation of students. An integral part is the contribution and influence of theological thinking on science, culture, human society, and value orientation.

Keywords

God; ecumenism; faith; practical theology; scholarship; theology of agape

Introduction

Josef Zvěřina is an important Czech theologian who penetrated many scientific fields during his life. Among his most important works is *Theology of Agape*, in which he approaches the union of God and man, science and spirituality. This connection is the source and root of evangelization, mission, and thus also education in the field of mission and training of clergy. This fact is followed by a speech at the University of Tübingen. Science and spiritual practice go hand in hand and shape students across disciplines. Zvěřina emphasizes the role of the university as a free environment where students acquire not only knowledge and skills, but also tools for understanding life, its meaning and ultimate goal.

In the following contribution the author updates the content of the recording of Josef Zvěřina's lecture at the University of Tübingen. The aim is to point out the topicality of Zvěřina's statements and remarks, but also the overlap that is given by contemporary knowledge, ethical issues, and the transfer of knowledge of social sciences and exact sciences – clinical and natural sciences. The author points to the meaning and mission of the contemporary university, especially theology as a discipline that speaks of the Divine You, which can be known and experienced. The following article deals with current issues of theology at our universities. The importance of quality education and responsibility for the formation of a new generation that needs to be ready to face new challenges needs stimuli, impulses, a return to the original roots – namely to Christ. Josef Zvěřina very brilliantly connects the view of the field of natural sciences and the field of anthropological and spiritual sciences. The reason for the creation of this article is a certain imperative – that is, the knowledge that theology stands on Jesus Christ, and although other sciences also have their share of knowledge of reality, this reality is not

complete if we only use a narrow methodological procedure or push some scientific disciplines out of the interest of scientific dialogue.

Impulses for the third millennium or the inspiration of Josef Zvěřina for the present time

Josef Zvěřina, an eminent theologian and educator of the 20th century, with his range of approaches and knowledge, offers a broad view of spirituality in the context of human experience and its intersection with the living God. In the presentation of his speech on the occasion of his receiving an honorary doctorate in Tübingen we can see an honest and diligent effort at synthesis, but at the same time also a deep recognition of God's uniqueness, love and respect for creation and creatures. Zvěřina reflects on the position of the natural sciences, which aim to know how things work, why they exist, what their characteristics are, what their purpose is. Zvěřina notes that this is only one way of knowing reality – it is not a reason for pride, academic superiority over the social sciences or humanities. Knowledge, as the encyclical *Fides et ratio* reminds us, has two sources – the source of knowledge from faith (revelation) and the source of knowledge from reason; both of these wings have their deep meaning in the beholding of Truth and cannot be reduced to the merely technician and reductive approach of rationality. The encyclical *Fides et ratio* also highlights the importance and relevance of universities, which remains relevant for the present time. Universities have their irreplaceable place in society, they are a place of free research, a place of encounter, and also a place of honest and demanding dialogue, which should be based on humility.

The ideal of the university and its mission cannot be diluted into one-sided utilitarianism, and the composition of individual disciplines should not be merely theorizing, but a profound understanding of human existence, its ethical, social, spiritual and biological framework. Each university discipline should seek how it contributes to fulfilling the requirement of service to society and how it contributes to the understanding of universality. The search for meaning is not possible except through searching and questioning. It is not about economic indicators and economic results – it is about trans-generational sharing, the formation of the young person, helping them to find themselves, to seek reality and the depth of knowledge of the Truth, that is, what tasks, challenges and questions are posed to contemporary theology and university education and what are the main challenges, threats and weaknesses. Nowadays we can see that the changing social situation opens up new questions and perspectives, and scientific progress also encounters ethical questions, whether what can be realized scientifically is also ethical, and on the basis of which pillar we can agree on general ethical principles and how theological ethics are in the light of Scripture, i.e., the experience of the Resurrected. Zvěřina asks similar questions as a contemporary man, but in a different historical and political context; some of them are the same, others less topical. Yet the dialogue between the natural sciences and the humanities should contribute to the cultivation of both sides, not only in the measurable gain of economic indicators. The question of eternity is also not measurable by material means, yet its value is incalculable. Zvěřina points out that a rationality that puts itself above God or excludes God altogether is a rationality that serves pride. True reflection fosters knowledge that

can humbly acknowledge its limitations and shortcomings, and that all knowledge – technical, humanistic or practical – is a gift of the same Spirit. At the same time, as generations, we build on the foundations and experiences of past generations. Each discipline has its own foundations, questions, experiences, methodology and way of asking. In the technical sciences we can see the delicate line of human inspiration, but also the danger of abuse against man. Likewise in the natural sciences, if the natural sciences are not cultivated by the Spirit, by the consciousness of God's gift, it is easy for mankind to commit errors, blunders and crimes against humanity. Zvěřina promotes knowledge that is multilayered yet respects universality. A university is meant to educate all-rounders, to shape them and to regard understanding this world. Theology is a space of attempts to know the Ineffable. It is a space of humble beholding of the Lord, an attempt to articulate the invisible, yet deeply spiritually and physically experiential. Zvěřina noticed in the speech for University Tübingen: "The theology of agape points to the profound Trinitarian love of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This love gives priority to the other – it is like a dance. It promotes reciprocity and tolerance." (Zvěřina 1989, 20, my translation) Yet it does not lose itself, it is an ideal, a creativity, a being there for the other. Communication happens in the direction of the I-You. Personalistic theology discovers the I-You relationship as the key one. It is possible to find inspiration in authors: Martin Buber, Jacques Maritain, Franz Rosenzweig, Maurice Blondel. Zvěřina notices this. The communication between God and man thus takes place in humility, reverence, contemplation, receptivity and respect for the individuality in question. God does not violate human freedom and decision, but through experience slowly guides and tries to make man see in purity of heart the true state of himself and of reality.

For the sake of completeness, here are some quotations from Josef Zvěřina's speech on the occasion of receiving an honorary doctorate.

Josef Zvěřina – a selection of quotations from his speech at the University of Tübingen

"Doctor of Theology" is not only a title or an honour, it is also a challenge and a service, especially when this honour comes from a university that has played such an important role in the history of the spirit and still does today. ...

One hundred and fifty years ago, at the end of the Enlightenment, the Tübingen School not only emphasized the supernatural character of revelation, the Church and grace, but also evoked a sense of mystery against one-sided rationality and objectification. Here we see the risk of a purely positivistic approach to knowledge and its fruits. ...

This heritage is today surprisingly visible even where rationalism of the worst kind prevails – namely in the natural sciences. It is becoming more and more evident that the natural sciences, with their positivist and materialist outlook, do not respond to the ultimate truths'. There is a certain pride of growing knowledge, but there is a lack of humility of a certain provisionality and incompleteness. ...

Agape itself had to come to a fundamental validity in its various forms – hand in hand with revelation: as openness and expectation, as closeness, encounter and presence, as

compassion and forgiveness, as participation and communion, as the unity and fullness of man, yes of being in general. Truth, freedom and love are the vehicles of my thought, my will, my struggle and also my theology. But the greatest is love. (1 Cor 13:13) ...

From below and above – Jesus will recognize, acknowledge, love and proclaim LOGOS in His word, in His signs and actions, in His death and resurrection, yes, in His divine-human pre-existence as the supreme, absolute, irreplaceable revelation of agape, naturally with His mother Mary, the Church as a sign of love. (Zvěřina 1989, 18–21, my translation)

Radim Palouš said:

Nurturing is therefore the art of all arts, it is what is supposed to make a person a human being, a being endowed with an open soul. It is a matter of being nurtured, educated to accept openness as a human vocation: education, including erudition, goes higher than mere familiarity with the multitude of existences. Caring for the soul means caring for the good and the bad in the world at large. The world is a community by virtue of the fact that beings are evident, i.e., visible in their respective appearances. (Palouš 2008, 82, my translation)

Education and training (even in faith) is not just a tool for the individual to conform to society, to the Church – to the conventions of the time and to the needs of the state. It is meant to be a tool for development, cultivation, support in the context of the individual's quest. So what is important? It is humility of heart, knowing that the student or pupil are people who are on the journey with me, who enrich me, and I can enrich them. Too much self-control hinders surrender into God's hands – to be able to be open, to listen and to introduce the truths of the theology of agape is a lifelong endeavour for all, including theologians, catechists, clergy and, last but not least, all believers across continents. Radim Palouš submits:

People neglect the essentials and give preference to the secondary, betraying the main goals in favour of partial, immediate and short-term ones, concerned with momentary benefits and pleasures. Komenský emphatically reminds us that he did not write a didacticism of the art of baking or painting or speech or logic or any other particle of things worth knowing, but a didacticism of life. (Palouš 1991, 82, my translation)

Zvěřina also speaks of nothing less than God giving man space and entrusting himself into his hands, learning to love and rediscovering what God has placed in his heart. What is essential is the knowledge of the Trinity, the knowledge of God revealing Himself to man and how this knowledge directs and changes human existence, human attitudes, morality and scholarship.

Conclusion

The university has the enormous task of finding ways, tools and means of forming its students. And this task is not an easy one, because to navigate between the Scylla and Charybdis of freedom and dogmatism, to teach students to think critically and to give them the space to express themselves is a great task that we will not be able to accomplish without the help of

the Holy Spirit. Let us hope that the theology of Josef Zvěřina will always be an inspiration and an arrow that points to Christ our Saviour, to the true *devotio moderna* in the context of Josef Zvěřina's speech to the scholars at the University of Tübingen (Zvěřina 1989, 21).

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