

BERNARD COOKE'S CONTRIBUTION TO THEOLOGY

- Topic: Cooke's Christology, Theology of Ministry,
and Theology of Friendship and Marriage
- Convener: William P. Roberts, University of Dayton
- Moderator: Michael H. Barnes, University of Dayton
- Presenters: William P. Loewe, The Catholic University of America
Barbara J. Fleischer, Loyola University New Orleans
William P. Roberts, University of Dayton

This session was convened to celebrate the immeasurable theological contribution that Bernard Cooke has made over the past five decades.

William Loewe presented an overview of Cooke's Christology from his 1969 Aquinas lecture entitled "Beyond Trinity" through *The Distancing of God* (1990) and *God's Beloved* (1992). Cooke has consistently focused on Jesus' human religious consciousness, now rendered transhistorically accessible by reason of the resurrection, as the revelatory Word constitutive of Christianity. Construing the post-Easter experience of Jesus' disciples as a sharing in the immediacy and intimacy of Jesus' personal relationship to the God he addressed as Abba, in *The Distancing of God* Cooke reads the history of Christianity through a dialectic presence and distance. Cooke's fuller reconstruction of Jesus' consciousness in *God's Beloved* suffers the limits of any such project based in part on more or less probable historical judgments that are in principle always revisable, but it transcends those limits insofar as it finds the hermeneutical key for interpreting historical data in the present faith experience of the community. Cooke thus confirms Lonergan's claim that the real foundation of theology lies in the authenticity of the theologian.

Barbara Fleischer's presentation reflected on Bernard Cooke's theology for ministry, theology of ministry, and theology for ministers. Cooke's theology for ministry is most evident in his curricular innovations that he began in the 1950s, emphasizing Scriptural literacy and historical consciousness. The contours of his innovative curriculum for theological education still form the heart of most university-based ministry education programs today. Cooke's integrative theology of ministry draws creatively from a variety of disciplines and melts away the distinctions between systematic theology and ministry education. A few descriptors of Cooke's theology of ministry are: (1) hopeful and evolutionary, (2) down to earth and human, (3) sacramental and communal, (4) ecumenical and worldly, and (5) prophetic and pluriform. In keeping with Cooke's emphasis on sacramentality, his theology for ministers involves teaching in pastoral and parish settings and his ministering example, which he carries out through his many ministerial works with his wife, Pauline Turner. Together they reach out in solidarity with those who struggle for justice and with those who seek to learn more about entering into a liberating solidarity and praxis.

William Roberts focused on Bernard Cooke's theology of the sacramentality of human friendship and marriage. Cooke sees human friendship as the basic sacrament, and the sacrament of marriage as a paradigm of human friendship. The self-gift, the self communication of oneself in friendship and love to another is an *effective sacramental* sign of God's self-gift in friendship and love. It is *sacramental*, that is, the visible, tangible experience of human love and friendship enables us to perceive in faith the invisible reality of Divine friendship and love; and it is an *effective* sign, that is, through human friendship and love God is communicating God's self to us in friendship and love. It is within this framework that Cooke situates his theology of marriage. As an exclusive, permanent, intimate partnership of life and love, expressed uniquely in marital intercourse, Christian marriage is a unique expression of the sacramentality of human friendship, and a unique participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus. This sacrament, then, cannot be identified merely with the wedding ceremony. Rather, it is a lifelong sacramental and eschatological process. It is within this theological context that we need to rethink what makes a marriage indissoluble, sacramental, and consummated. We also need to inquire further the nature of the marital bond. In what is it rooted? In a legal prohibition? Or rather in the quality of the marital relationship?

In his response, Bernard Cooke outlined nine areas of theology that clamor for future theological exploration: (1) the unexplored potential of women's religious experience and the interaction of that with the male experience; (2) the theological meaning of spirit, that is, what does it mean for us to be persons and to relate as persons to the divine; (3) soteriology, especially how the Christ Life is a transformation of our humanity and our social structures; (4) the meaning of the mediation of Divine Presence through the community; (5) the uniqueness of Jesus of Nazareth, and, consequently, the uniqueness of Christianity; (6) the meaning of sexuality as a spiritual reality and as participation in the life of God; (7) the reign of God and how God has been at work transforming humanity from the beginning, before Christianity, and through other religions; (8) how theology can become more practical, not just in the sense of dealing with practical realities, but also in becoming more of a participant in the development of the intellectual life of the times as it effects social and economic aspects of life; (9) the need for theology to reflect much more thoroughly on our liturgical celebration and how liturgy ought to be a source of theological reflection. Bernard Cooke ended his remarks with this appendix: In order for theology to achieve these tasks, it must be free to seek and search for the truth, the truth that will make us free.

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