

SEMINAR ON THE NATURE AND METHODS OF THEOLOGY

The Seminar on the Nature and Method of Theology held two sessions this year. The first, entitled "Social Activity and the Theological Enterprise," was a formal paper presentation, together with a respondent. The second was devoted to a consideration of the question "Is There a Specifically Catholic Feminist Theology?" and was a discussion stimulated by two panel presenters.

The first session was an essay in the use of interpretive social sciences to facilitate the work of theology. Philip Chmielewski of Loyola University of Chicago, gave the paper, arguing that three methods of social inquiry combine to provide a way of examining common human experience as a source for theology. These three methods enable theologians to examine activity in its everyday, local and social characters. The presenter felt that theologians could benefit from these methods of social inquiry by being forced to look outward, to address previously unexamined questions arising from another way of life, community or culture, and to learn from a consideration of how people shape their lived world.

Chmielewski spoke first of Clifford Geertz, and utilized aspects of his anthropological analysis in a phenomenology of inculturation, showing something of the complexity of being a "visitor" in the culture of the other. Second, he turned to Aldo Rossi's approach to urban planning, and to how both urban space and the communal deposit of memory in buildings stimulate activity. Third, he examined Michel de Certeau's sociological studies of how daily practices can reveal inventive power constantly arising within systems, often bending them to some other end. Geertz, he said, examines the body of the city in its political activity, Rossi studies the work which crafts the body of the city, and de Certeau focuses on the incessant labor of the urban body.

The speaker intended these anthropological, architectural and sociological studies to lead the theologian to attend to social activity in the world, that is, to activity which makes use of particular forms of matter within specially articulated spaces. They should also lead theologians to see the widening array of other forms of life, to acknowledge their own positions, and to learn that collaboration requires the respectful practice of mutual evaluation. Moreover, he concluded, to study the ordinary, regional and resourceful activity of other (sub)cultures should lead to further insight and inquiry about divine activity. Values conveyed through artifacts are crucial for theology to engage.

The respondent was Gerard Magill of St. Louis University. While highly appreciative of the originality of the presentation and of the suggestiveness of working with such sources not normally attended to by the theologian, Magill had a series of questions. He was concerned above all for the applicability of the investigations in the field of theology. Was anything here universalizable, and what was

the criteriology? More specifically, was their any room in the argument for the notion of sin? The ensuing discussion and clarification focused very much around the question of relevance to the theological task. Auditors on the whole seemed a little bemused about what they were to do with the analyses, while Chmielewski himself seemed to suggest that as social analyses they had their own validity, and any research that illumines forms of life and social activity in the urban environment must be valuable to theologians looking for signs of the transcendent in the world around them.

PAUL LAKELAND
Fairfield University

The second session of the seminar centered upon the question, "Is there a specifically Catholic feminist theology?" Presentations were given by Susan Ross of Loyola University, Chicago, and Marianne Sawicki from the University of Kentucky. The two presenters chose to make their remarks antiphonally, in dialogue with one another, a mode which stimulated much participation by the group as a whole.

Marianne Sawicki began with a moment of suspicion. What desires, what interests, were at work in framing this question? The interest might be a Herodian one: "When you have found the child, bring me word. . . ." On the other hand, it might be part of an effort to identify a genre, or merely to add a footnote to some other topic entirely. Naming and defining are important activities, but static definitions are not characteristically feminist. Feminist theology is not a fixed posture, rather it is a *poiesis*, a competence, a readiness to deal with the socially constructed realities of gender and the forms of reason in relation to the tradition. To some extent, therefore, the answer to this seminar's question depends upon our knowing what desires went into the framing of it.

For Susan Ross, also, the question did not entail a "metamethodological exploration of conditions of possibility." Rather, she began by recalling some generally accepted starting points in a feminist approach to theological texts, and these too require a hermeneutic of suspicion: noting and demonstrating the absence of women's perspectives; and exposing instances where women are ignored, diminished or romanticized. These methods include a critical approach to scripture which regards the bible as prototype rather than archetype. Rosemary Ruether has described this critical principle of feminist theology as the promotion of full humanity. Thus, whatever diminishes the full humanity of women is not revelatory; nor can the promotion of women's full humanity denigrate men. Here the question of what constitutes revelation and the authentic tradition remains open, since what promotes women's (and men's) full humanity is not yet fully known. We have only begun to define the task of Catholic feminist theology.

Marianne Sawicki pointed to three methodological options presently available to Catholic feminists. The "canonical method" would be based on materials recently produced by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. These make much of the work of Edith Stein, philosopher and student of Husserl, whose work was cut short by her death at the hands of the Nazis. The "Chicago method" is

typified in the work of Anne Carr. It makes use of the method of correlation between contemporary experience and the classical texts of the tradition. It has proved fruitful, but perhaps insufficiently critical of the antifeminist bias within the tradition. The final method we might call one of "perichoresis." It can be found in the work of both Elizabeth and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza. As the latter describes it, theology is characterized by three activities which mutually interpenetrate, criticize and affect one another: critical hermeneutic reconstruction of the texts of the tradition, reflection on the ability of tradition and praxis to guide one another, and investigation of the "relevant background theories" that would tend to govern the kinds of argumentation or evidence acceptable in a given historical context. Here the work of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza serves to typify the hermeneutical reconstruction of texts in the light of feminist theory and praxis.

Susan Ross agreed that the task of Catholic feminist theology goes far beyond the effort to replicate traditional categories in a feminist mode. This has value as an intermediate exercise, but feminist theology raises serious questions about the nature of theology itself. Here, no matter how much one may wish to concentrate on other issues, the issue of women's ordination serves as an implacable "negative marker," hovering in the background of our consideration of some of the most basic notions of catholicity, such as the notion of sacrament, of ecclesial identity, and even of the theology of God. Feminists need to think about the discontinuities as much as about the correlations. In this regard we need an eclecticism that allows us to draw from other disciplines, and to listen to the experience of other traditions.

This approach lets us listen to the experience of many women, and many women (and some men) certainly contributed at length to the vibrant conversation that interrupted the antiphonal presentations and ensued upon their completion. There was discussion of how recent scholarship has provided richly detailed contexts for examining the lives of some of the women who, for reasons we may either applaud or deplore, have been presented to us as models for the Christian life. We also need to look beyond the negative moment to where women really are in the church, at our aunts and mothers and sisters who are doing educating and organizing at the local level, and who thereby help to determine the future shape of the church at the most basic and practical levels.

MARGARET CAMPBELL
Holy Names College