

SPIRITUALITY

Topic: The Resurrection, the Communion of Saints and Spirituality
Convener: Diana L. Villegas, Acton MA
Moderator: Pamela Kirk Rappaport, St John's University NY
Presenters: Thomas J. McElligott, St. Mary's College of California
Janet K. Ruffing, Fordham University
Respondent: John R. Sachs, Weston Jesuit School of Theology

Janet Ruffing discussed the spirituality of Elisabeth Leseur (1866–1914), especially as it was impacted by the way she imagined and lived in faith, the doctrine of the communion of saints. Ruffing sees Leseur's life as exemplary of the lay person engaged in both culture and faith, seeking to integrate the two. Further, Leseur left original reflections on this integration. Elisabeth was a happily married woman who experienced a number of challenges in her life. She lived with her atheist husband in anticlerical, religiously hostile circles; she was unable to bear children, and she suffered a number of deaths and life threatening illnesses in her family. She herself suffered and died from breast cancer. Leseur developed her own strong way of living the mystery of the communion of saints as a central way of dealing with these sufferings. Ruffing summarizes, "Deeply influenced by a number of prominent Catholic literary and philosophical writers in France at the end of the nineteenth century, she developed a spiritual vision of the hidden supernatural life of each person, participating in a great exchange of spiritual goods with the communion of saints." She envisioned an interconnectedness among the community of those in her present, earthly life, and those enjoying eternal life. Thus, the connections of love remained alive, offering hope and genuine support. In addition, Elisabeth took seriously the interconnection of those united through participation in the Eucharist, regardless of physical proximity, creating a communion in the Risen Christ. Thus, her spirituality included the offering of her emotional, physical and spiritual suffering, certain that this suffering would benefit others. This spirituality of shared spiritual goods among those living and dead came alive in the experience of Leseur's husband after her death. Though an intellectual completely skeptical regarding spiritual realities, he had several experiences of his wife's presence which were so real, he had to accept her continued presence in his life, and therefore the existence of a non material reality. In one of these experiences, Elisabeth urged him to go to Lourdes, where he began a conversion that eventually led to his becoming a Dominican priest.

Tom McElligott offered an exegesis of three paintings by Caravaggio (two of the Emmaus supper, one of the death of Mary) showing how art can call forth ways of imagining and therefore living mysteries of the faith. McElligott contends that the artist draws viewers into the mystery of the resurrection, and, therefore, into participating in this mystery by the way the bodies are depicted and items are placed in the paintings. In the earlier Emmaus painting, the viewer is invited to participate in this encounter with a risen Jesus by the placement of the disciples. One is

drawing his chair right out of the frame of the picture, the other, extending his hands in the shape of the cross, reaches out of the picture with his left hand. A fruit basket half off the table invites the viewer in as well. In the first painting, the body of Jesus is glorious, shown “beardless, youthful, flooded with light.” By contrast the disciples are shown with torn clothes and the heavy hands of their fishing trade. The second painting invites participation in a different way, as the artist himself has been transformed by his experience of death, having killed a man in a duel. In the second painting Jesus appears more somber and sad, the reaction of the disciples is more subdued, and there is bewilderment in the face of one of the disciples. There is a rack of lamb on the table, symbol of sacrifice, thus inviting the viewer to a contrast between sacrifice and bodily presence, all, though in a somber, tentative mood. This exegesis of Caravaggio’s paintings symbolizes how a spirituality of the resurrection of the body requires imagining and engaging the doctrine in concrete, incarnational ways.

In his response, Randy Sachs affirmed the connection between a spirituality of the communion of saints and the doctrine of the resurrection of the body. Sachs tells us, “This connection is explicit and central in Leseur’s writing. Christian faith hopes for the resurrection to eternal life of whole persons as part of an all-embracing consummation and communion of God’s creation in all of its interpersonal, historical and cosmic dimensions.” The essential theological meaning of the resurrection of the body depends on a lived life of faith that makes possible the imagination of this mystery. Sachs comments, “What is at stake for Paul, Leseur, Caravaggio and for us today is the reality and import of resurrection faith for the present life of the community. The body is not merely a perishable entity of no ultimate value. It is the realm in which God acts, in which the Lord reigns and in which God is to be glorified. Bodily resurrection in the future means that we must take life ‘in the Spirit’ now seriously as bodily. . . . As we look at the bodies of our own lives and world, how easy is it to see them as something infinitely loved and eternally embraced by God? But this is precisely what both Leseur and Caravaggio want us to see. And in this they echo, each in different ways, the paradoxical accounts of the appearances of the risen Lord.”

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