

THE TRANSFORMATIVE ROLE OF THEOLOGY IN CHURCH AND SOCIETY:  
NORTH AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES—SELECTED SESSION

Anne E. Patrick

Topic: The Transformative Role of Theology in Church and  
Society: North American Perspectives  
Convener: Anne E. Patrick, Carleton College  
Moderator: Anne E. Patrick, Carleton College  
Presenters: Steven J. Pope, Boston College  
Nancy Pineda-Madrid, Boston College School of Theology  
and Ministry

This session was a contribution of the CTSA to an initiative of the International Network of Societies for Catholic Theology (INSeCT), which in 2011 launched a three-year global research project on “the nature, function and location of theology, with particular attention to the power of theology to overcome power abuse in Church and Society.” Each member society was asked to respond to the project title in a way that is relevant to the contemporary realities of its region. The resulting reflections will contribute to the July 2014 gathering of INSeCT’s Network Council in Belo Horizonte.

Steven Pope began the session with a paper on “The Institutional Abuse of Power: North American Voices.” He compared two instances of the abuse of power: the recent Pennsylvania State University case of child sexual abuse and cover-up, and the scandals that broke in 2002 concerning the Archdiocese of Boston. In 2012 Jerry Sandusky, assistant to football coach Joe Paterno, was convicted of child sexual assault, and sentenced to prison. Paterno and university administrators who failed to report the crimes to police had earlier lost their jobs over the scandal, and three former officials now face criminal charges.

Pope noted that while there were similarities between the cases, it had been “easier to get away with abusing institutional power in the church than in the university.” Although Cardinal Bernard Law had “resigned in disgrace” as Archbishop of Boston after it became known that he had failed to report the criminal activity of priests, he received “no institutional sanctions for his failures,” either from Massachusetts or the U.S. bishops. The bishops established the Dallas Charter and Essential Norms in 2002 to protect children, but “no provision was made for bishops who refuse to implement the Charter,” and they have not addressed underlying problems of clericalism and power. Pope then suggested ways to “make the church’s organization of power more just, fair, and transparent so that it is less likely to be abused and, when it is abused by individuals, it is quickly made accountable and corrected.” In the first place, lay men and women should have a role in the appointment of priests and bishops and in the evaluation of pastoral effectiveness. Secondly, a sense of “servant leadership,” which “requires responsiveness to the whole community and not just to one’s superior” should be developed among priests and bishops. Finally, structures of collegiality and collaborative modes of governance should be built at all levels.

Next Nancy Pineda-Madrid spoke on “Theologizing to Transgress: A Response to the Rising Tide of Femicide in the Americas.” By “theologizing to transgress,” she means that “our theology must stretch beyond the bounds of our theological comfort zone” and “wake us from whatever slumber...keeps us from paying attention” to femicide, the “systematic assassination of women because they are women.” This evil is essentially “genocide against women,” involving brutality, large numbers of victims, and impunity for the men who abuse power in this way. She noted that since 1993 hundreds of women and girls have been “raped, tortured, and murdered” in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, due both to a patriarchal reaction over women’s employment in *maquiladoras* and to the “culture of extreme violence” of drug cartels. Also, a pattern of “forced prostitution and the killing of women” has emerged in Argentina since 1996, and both examples indicate a problem that is growing in the Americas and elsewhere.

Drawing on Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, Pineda-Madrid then indicated that the victims of femicide should be understood theologically as “a crucified people,” whose tragic suffering is due to the social sin of “kyriarchy in all its permutations,” or “social structures of domination within a context of extreme poverty and desperation.” She observed that liberation theology needs to “take gender seriously” and learn “how to stay grounded in the concrete life of poor people,” especially victims of femicide. Regrettably, church and government officials have remained silent about these crimes, blamed the victims and their advocates, or failed to address the issue of femicide in sufficient depth. Such failures amount to “an abuse of power,” which “underscores the urgent theological necessity of identifying the femicides’ victims as ‘a crucified people’ and thus taking one step toward bringing this crucified people down from the cross.”

Each paper inspired vigorous discussion, with two dozen theologians exploring ideas for implementing the conversion whose need had been so amply demonstrated.

ANNE E. PATRICK  
*Carleton College (Emerita)*  
*Northfield, Minnesota*