

SPIRITUALITY—TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Spirituality and Conversion
Convener: Marian Maskulak, St. John's University, New York
Moderator: Thomas McElligott, St. Mary's College of California
Presenters: Min-Ah Cho, St. Catherine University
Kathleen Dolphin, St. Mary's College, Notre Dame
Simon J. Hendry, University of Detroit Mercy

This session considered the topic of spirituality and conversion from three different perspectives. In her paper, “‘Longing Keeps the Wounds Open and Undressed’: Rethinking Lonergan’s Notion of Conversion through Hadewijch of Antwerp’s Mystical Poetry,” Min-Ah Cho sought to place Lonergan’s concept of conversion into context through a comparative reading of Lonergan and the 14th century mystic, Hadewijch of Antwerp. For Lonergan, the religious dimension of conversion involves both the gift of divine love and one’s own desire for the divine love known as the “*eros* of the human spirit.” Anchored in a dynamic state of longing for God’s love, a person experiences religious conversion as an ongoing process.

Following a summary of Lonergan’s analysis of conversion, Cho applied his thought to the experience of Hadewijch. She highlighted Hadewijch’s experiences at the Eucharist as revealing the transformative moments of her spirituality comparable to conversion experience in Lonergan’s terms. Also, she correlated Hadewijch’s illustration of the human soul in love with *Minne* (a personification for Love, God, Christ, and the relationship between God and the soul) to Lonergan’s description of the “*eros* of the human spirit” in religious conversion. Hadewijch’s poems express ever greater yearning for God, but the failure to possess love is not a “breakdown” in Lonergan’s definition; rather, fruition and failure in love are complementary. Hadewijch exemplifies Lonergan’s reference to the openness and vulnerability to divine love involved in religious conversion. Both Lonergan and Hadewijch demonstrate that religious conversion is an invitation to uncertainty and continual yearning for divine love as opposed to a sense of security.

In the second paper, “Imitating Christ: Ongoing Conversion,” Kathleen Dolphin introduced Giles Constable’s three delineations of *Imitatio Christi*: the imitation of the *divinity* of Christ, the *humanity* Christ, and the *body* of Christ. She concluded that today, the imitation of Christ is understood as a process of ongoing conversion. Dolphin then argued that Edward Schillebeeckx provides a more nuanced perception of the imitation of Christ because of his attention to human experience, namely mystical experience, the experience of contrast, and a praxis of alleviating suffering and fostering love and justice. Living through such experience requires ongoing conversion and it is in and through the lives of Christians that the reign of God continues to unfold. Schillebeeckx calls action that alleviates the suffering of others “the praxis of the reign of God.” To illustrate this type of imitation of Christ, Dolphin recounted the story of the largest single-site immigration raid in the United States until 2008 that occurred in Postville, Iowa. In response, people from both within and beyond the town came to help in various ways.

In the final paper, “‘Ruined for Life,’ A Spirituality of Conversion: Donald Gelpi’s Conversion Scheme Applied to the Experience of the Jesuit Volunteer Corps,”

Simon Hendry explained that JVC's unofficial motto, "ruined for life," conveys the profound changes that have occurred in participants' lives because of their contact with the poor. As a means of addressing questions pertaining to what mattered to people in their experience and spirituality, Hendry interviewed former volunteers and others who worked with them to find what held meaning and significance for them. Using statements from these interviews, Hendry then constructed and sent out a written survey to nearly 1000 former volunteers. For the purpose of his study, Hendry defined spirituality as "the manner in which a person or a group experiences, understands, and enacts a relationship with God."

Hendry used various scales of variables, individual variables themselves, and regression equations to interpret the results of the 560 replies. A handout of various tables conveyed the results. It was found that while some volunteers' lives were changed, a number of others found their life values reinforced. Other findings included the importance of community life, the impact of contact with the poor and its effects on volunteers' subsequent views on justice, and the fact that individuals considered their time in JVC as a spiritual time. Hendry then applied Donald Gelpi's theory of conversion with its five forms of conversion and seven dynamics of conversion to his observations on Jesuit volunteers.

Following the presentations, discussion about conversion focused on how individuals experience the longing for God today, the experience of the people of Postville during and after the raid, and the experience of Jesuit volunteers. Two former Jesuit volunteers were in attendance, as well as a former volunteer in a similar organization, all of whom gave feedback on their own experiences in light of the third presentation.

MARIAN MASKULAK, C.P.S.
St. John's University
Queens, New York