

COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

Topic: Episcopal Sacramental Mediation: A Comparative Approach
Convener: Peter Feldmeier, University of St. Thomas
Presenter: Peter Feldmeier, University of St. Thomas
Respondent: Tracy Tiemeier, Loyola Marymount University

Peter Feldmeier began the session by presenting a creative tension between Vatican II's vision of the episcopacy and its vision of the laity. While theologians know this tension, he argued, they tend to minimize the former claims in light of the latter, particularly when those claims detail the bishop's role as a sacramental mediator. The purpose of the paper was to investigate three interreligious examples of sacramental mediations, namely, the Hindu guru, Vajraayna lama, and Hasidic rebbe, to see if what we learn from them can give us insight on both the role at large and on our own bishops specifically. The investigation also highlighted liabilities in mediatorial dynamics that need to be attended to.

In the comparative process, Feldmeier argued for five interrelated themes. First, because sacramental mediators do not simply announce the sacred but communicate it, they had to be holy. Without this foundation, they become at least a counter-sign. Second, they principally performed the function of drawing the community or aspirant beyond themselves. Third, this ultimately means that they work for empowerment of the other; and this Feldmeier suggested was a spiritual law. Fourth, mediators represent a tradition and teach a tradition, one that needs to be embedded in their psyches. Fifth and finally, mediators act as wisdom figures. This meant that to be effective, they had to have the ability to sympathetically enter the hearts of others and to know how to skillfully engage the new moment. Further, and associated with empowerment, they model a way of inquiring, thinking, and proceeding faithfully and creatively.

Following this brief sketch, Feldmeier then argued that our bishops, insofar as sacramental mediation is important, have to be candidates who themselves are holy, something that does not appear to be a dominant criterion. Second, they if they are going to empower others, they themselves have to be self-authorized. This would mean that they cannot believe themselves to be or experienced by the people of God as if they were middle managers or vicars of the pope. Third, and regarding the category of wisdom, Feldmeier argued that they would have to be the kinds of priests who have the ability to understand how the tradition, movements of the Spirit, and unique moment meet, and how to respond accordingly. Fourth, bishops' efficacy is aligned to their immersion into the life of the people. Given the large size of a diocese this would be a great challenge, and indeed we may be asking too much of our bishops—to be our administrator and *shaman* at the same time. Finally, the focus of their kind of mediation would have to be principally that of shepherd, which, Feldmeier argued, is what the apostles themselves were marked by.

Feldmeier completed his paper with a challenge to the community to consider our bishops as actual mediators. This would include all necessary caveats and certainly be attentive to the second set of claims by Vatican II about the people of God. Nonetheless, Feldmeier suggested that our relationship to our bishop and our experience of his ministry would be far different if we took those claims seriously.

Tracy Tiemeier responded with a number of insights. She wondered how the ideal of Vatican II and the reality of our all-too-human bishops can really meet. She also pointed out that, with regard to gurus and lamas, lay people personally choose whom to follow. This creates a dramatic difference in relational dynamic. She also asked whether there are more helpful models of mediation than the guru, lama, and rebbe, and whether even in Hinduism there might be more helpful models and less helpful models. This is something to consider for a larger project. Further, she asked if issues of mutuality are different than simply honoring a creative tension between various claims for bishops and laity.

Two particularly fruitful points of discussion dominated the larger group conversation. We discussed how the selection of bishops affects their mediatorial function, and we discussed how reasonable it was to expect, or even want, a bishop to be a *holy man*. Obviously we do in the sense that all are called to holiness, and the bishop's unique role makes this all the more imperative. The real point was that the office is that of overseer and not resident mystic/abba. On the other hand, to divorce interest in bishops as sacramental mediators would undermine a great deal of the teachings of Vatican II regarding the episcopacy, something no one wanted.

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