

DEVELOPING GROUPS

THEOLOGY AND ECOLOGY

- Topic: Theological Insights, Practical Challenges:
The Bishops, the Church, and the Environmental Crisis
- Convener: Jame Schaefer, Marquette University
- Moderator: Erin Lothes Biviano, St. John's University, New York City
- Presenters: Erin Lothes Biviano, St. John's University, New York City
Suzanne Franck, St. Joseph's College, Patchogue
Greg Zuschlag, University of St. Thomas, Miami

In "Responsibility in a Creation Context: Freedom for the Other," Dr. Lothes adopted a theoretical approach to responsibility as a fundamental theme of theological anthropology. She retrieved the concept of disproportion from the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur as an interpretive category and pointed to the inherent human tendency to excess, overconsumption, and the unjust use of resources. For Ricoeur, the idea of disproportion expresses a basic instability in the human condition that is evident in the disjuncture between infinite objects of knowing, motivation, and feeling, and the finite and limited human capacity to grasp these objects. This existential feeling of disproportion causes values and motives to be confused, thereby creating excessive forms of consumption and the unjust exercise of power, all of which are evident in the skewed priorities that characterize the environmental crisis as a cultural crisis. As John Paul II and Catholic bishops have taught, environmental responsibility is increasingly viewed as a moral obligation for all. How to express this responsibility remains the crucial question, and the environmental justice initiative in the Archdiocese of Newark was proffered as one promising example.

Dr. Franck proceeded to examine Pope John Paul II's 1990 statement on the ecological crisis as a moral responsibility and four of the approximately thirty statements issued by Catholic bishops throughout the world over the past fifteen years. In "The Bishops' Ecological Pastorals: Foundations for an Ethics of Ecological Interrelation," she pointed to the urgency expressed in the bishops' statements to address the ecological crisis in order to assure the integrity of human and other constituents of God's creation and the tradition of Catholic social teaching the bishops followed when judging the injustices and systemic social problems behind the ecological crisis. The strength of the pastoral statements lies in raising the consciousness of individuals and communities to recognize their complicity in upsetting the balance of relationship between humanity and the rest of nature. All

of the statements called for a conversion—a radical change of heart—on the part of individuals as well as nations. Recognizing that no single solution will be adequate to the task, the bishops called for new attitudes and actions that will bring about a greater recognition of the inter-relatedness of humans and other species and systems of Earth. The challenge remains for the bishops to further develop the theological understanding of the God-world relationship among the people and formulate ethical, moral, and pastoral responses that will motivate the church to express in daily life.

In “Stewardship and Sacramentality: The Problem of Responsibility in the US Bishops’ Environmental Pastorals,” Dr. Zuschlag questioned whether or not the theology of environmental stewardship can coexist with thinking about Earth as having a sacramental character (that the visible creation discloses the presence and character of God). Key to answering this question was determining the correct meaning of the language of “responsibility” that promotes stewardship over sacramentality and perpetuates anthropocentric attitudes toward God’s creation. Using Gabriel Moran’s analysis of the “grammar of responsibility,” Zuschlag concluded to a problem when adopting an ethics of (human) responsibility *for* the environment. One way of preventing this idea of stewardship from completely eclipsing sacramentality will require a shift from the terminological complex of responsibility-stewardship-sustainability-trust to that of responsiveness-solidarity-subsistence-gift. Support for such a shift can be garnered from recent green biblical exegesis and contemporary eco-praxis.

The three panelists stimulated a lively discussion that elicited questions and comments by most of the CTSA members in attendance, many of whom chose to remain in conversation beyond the time allotted for the session. Among the issues raised were the need for in-depth, systematic theological discourse that is responsive to the environmental crises, careful investigation and application of theological terminology, and action on looming issues for which theological bases are well articulated. All shared the general conclusion that considerable work has yet to be accomplished by Catholic theologians who should strive to retain ecological concerns as a key topic of discourse at upcoming CTSA conventions.

Toward that goal, some future CTSA options were discussed for addressing ecological concerns from a theological perspective. Foci for forming interest groups were identified, and encouragement was given to be alert to calls for proposals from among the groups that will be retained in the new convention structure.

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