

STRUCTURES OF GRACE—SELECTED SESSION

- Topic: Structures of Grace: Catholic Social Movements As *Loci Theologici*
Convener: Kevin Ahern, Manhattan College
Moderator: Nichole Flores University of Virginia
Presenters: Kevin Ahern, Manhattan College
Robert Pennington, Mount St. Joseph University,

In his paper, “Social Movements as Structures of Grace,” Kevin Ahern draws from the experiences of international Catholic youth movements to outline a framework of social and structural grace. A more robust understanding of the social and structural dimensions of grace, he argues, offers at least two important insights. First, it can assist Catholic social movements to be more responsive to God and insights from theology in their collective witness. If grace has the potential to manifest itself in structures and movements, then leaders of those collectives must develop attitudes and discernment processes to better attend to where God is calling them. To argue for the possibility of social or structural grace is certainly not to suggest that all aspects of Christian social movements are “graced” or that these organizations possess autonomous moral agency in the same way as a person. As human institutions, Ahern insists, Christian social movements are imperfect, and always in need of reform. It is precisely because of this fact that a more robust theological framework is needed. Such an approach, he argues, can go a long way to help organizations avoid what Pope Francis has described in *Gaudete et Exsultate* as enemies of holiness, namely contemporary manifestations of both Gnosticism or Pelagianism. For Ahern, the contemporary forms of these ancient heresies represent not only temptations for individuals but also for Christian movements and collectives. Second, Ahern’s paper draws attention to the need for theologians to be more attentive to another source of theology, particularly how God works in movements, including those organized by marginalized groups, such as young workers. This, according to Ahern, has been an under-appreciated source of theology, which is evident by the lack of scholarship on the movements in the tradition of specialized Catholic action, including the Young Christian Worker movement.

In his paper, “The Canonicity of Cardijn’s Methodology: From Catholic Social Movements to Catholic Social Teaching and in the Classroom,” Bob Pennington situates the question of theological methodology and Catholic Social Teaching within the context of theological ethics pedagogy. He uses a genealogical strategy to show that Cardinal Joseph Cardijn’s See-Judge-Act methodology, which emerged from his work with the Young Christian Worker movement, has become canonical in Catholic Social Teaching. Pennington highlights the impact of this methodology in the magisterial teachings of Pope Pius XI, Pope Pius XII, Saint Pope John XXIII, Pope Paul VI, and Pope Francis. This method, Pennington argues, also plays a critical role in the development *Schema XIII*, the Conciliar document that became *Gaudium et Spes*, and the key texts by the *Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano* in Medellín, Colombia (1968); Puebla, Mexico (1979); and, Aparecida, Brazil (2007). Pennington then explains how he adapts Cardijn’s methodology in his theological ethics courses to develop students’ ability to discern whether a current business, healthcare, or environmental practice is a structure of grace or a structure of sin. For Pennington, Cardijn’s methodology not only leads students to new insight about realities they are

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unaware of but it likewise introduces them to the countercultural wisdom inherent in the Catholic intellectual tradition, as well as the importance of moving beyond critical theological reflection and into the realm of social action.

In the discussion following the presentations, several points from both papers were addressed. There was a general conversation on the legacy of Joseph Cardijn and the youth movements he helped to inspire. Four of the participants discussed how these movements including the Young Catholic Students and the International Movement of Catholic Students formed them in their vocation as theologians. This led to a conversation on the challenge of forming young adults in the present social and ecclesial context, particularly in light of the 2018 Synod on Youth. A prolonged conversation continued into the break on what the Cardijn-inspired youth movements could offer to urban young adults of color today, especially those who are marginalized from ecclesial structures.

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