

CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT—TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Structures of Grace from the Grassroots to the Global Common Good
Convener: Anna Floerke Scheid, Duquesne University
Moderator: Megan K. McCabe, Gonzaga University
Presenters: William George, Dominican University
Marcus Mescher, Xavier University
Joan Crist, Calumet College of St. Joseph

In “International Law as Emerging Structures of Grace,” William George built on views of God’s universal salvific will and grace as perfecting, rather than obviating human nature in history, assembling four examples which demonstrate that, indeed, international law can be a *locus gratiae*. As the first example, former U.N. representative Arvid Pardo argued for international sea law reflecting an understanding of the oceans as the common heritage of humanity. In the second *locus gratiae*, a cooperative of nonprofits known as the Neptune Group demonstrated grace through communal, diplomatic, and effective work in support of Pardo’s vision. The third example, secular lawyer Antonio Cassese, was drawn by his work in international law to investigate the problem of evil—questions, George pointed out, likely prompted by grace. The final example of structures of grace in international law is Sri Lankan Catholic layman Christopher Weeramantry, who opposed nuclear weapons and defended the environmental rights of the small island nation Nauru. George concluded that the relationship between persons and structures, as well as the potential of international law as a structure of sin, need further exploration.

Marcus Mescher focused on Catholic Social Thought (CST) as method in “Catholic Social Thought: An Imaginative Framework to Build a Habitus of Grace.” Grace is rarely mentioned in Catholic Social Thought documents and is often given an individualistic cast which focuses rather on God’s activity than on human cooperation. Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of social *habitus* demonstrates how communal human action can create destructive structures; in light of Willie Jennings’ indictment of the failure of Christian sacraments to interrupt white supremacy, can we dare to hope that grace can interrupt social injustice? What is needed is an understanding of grace as present in intimacy and tenderness, an understanding that is largely missing from CST although present in documents on the family and the work of Pope Francis. Imagination can help us connect CST’s call for social solidarity with the intimate tenderness present in family life, envisioning an “ever-more-inclusive intimacy” of solidarity with those oppressed by structures of sin.

In her presentation “Grace at work in Bajawa, Flores, Indonesia” Joan Crist argued that a communal lifestyle centered on simple living and local, sustainable agriculture is a structure of grace. Crist presented a textured and detailed portrait of village life on the island of Flores, Indonesia, where Crist has been visiting her in-laws for more than 20 years. On Flores, islanders practice sustainable agriculture by cultivating plants in the forest. Cooking and eating practices are completely communal, such that eating or even smoking cigarettes without others is culturally unthinkable. Recently adopted and near-universal Catholicism cooperates well with indigenous religious traditions. However, globalization—with its influx of cash, communications technologies, and insistent pressure to consume manufactured goods—may alter Flores’ traditional way of life. The takeaway, said Crist, is that indigenous people and people of color should

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be “in the driver’s seat of development” and not beholden to U.S. and European standards of what development should look like and accomplish. As a successful example of grassroots development directed by those most affected, she cited FAITH Farms, an interfaith program to restore local, communal agriculture to impoverished, segregated communities in Gary, Indiana.

The conversation which followed these presentations examined many different implications for grace in communities. Attendees and panelists were able to engage multiple views on each of the following questions: Can structures of grace self-reproduce? Does the concept of “structures of grace” limit personal agency? Is the image of grace emerging from wounds accurate and generative, or potentially damaging? Does magisterial teaching accurately reflect the diverse avenues for accessing grace in life? A final comment highlighted the diversity of papers presented, which depict the presence of structures of grace from the most local to entirely global communities.

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