

THEOLOGICAL DIVERSITY—INTEREST GROUP

Topic: Grace at Work in the World
Convener: Kristin Colberg, St. John's University/College of St. Benedict
Moderator: Christopher Ruddy, The Catholic University of America
Presenters: Joseph Mueller, S.J., Marquette University
Bradford Hinze, Fordham University

This session explored diverse views of the church-world relationship, setting them into dialogue. In his paper, “The Church’s Relation to the World: Disputed Questions,” Bradford Hinze explored the nature of the church-world relationship in three steps: (1) the development and treatment of these topics during the Second Vatican Council; (2) a post-conciliar shift from privileging the people of God ecclesiology to a renewed emphasis given to communion ecclesiology; and (3) recent attention to people of God ecclesiologies in current debates about the church’s relation to the world. Hinze argued for the need to embed discussions of the church-world relationship in deeper understandings of the historical and theological developments related to the dispute over the church’s relation to the world; he noted that understandings of this relationship have undergone three major phases since Vatican II. Through a close examination of *Gaudium et spes* as well as the teachings of Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI, Hinze illustrated that differing approaches and emphases in describing the church-world relationship grounded varying ecclesiological models and uses of authority. Building on this historical and theological survey, Hinze argued that Pope Francis’ efforts to decentralize ecclesial structures reflect the dialogical impulses of Vatican II and also reflect a sense, reminiscent of John XXIII, that the church must immerse itself in the world with a sense of wonder and humility. Central to Francis’ understanding of the church-world relationship are impulses toward greater consultation among all the faithful as well as a willingness to integrate theological and pastoral tension into the church’s life and doctrine. He concluded that Francis’ commitment to decentralization as well as more free and open discussions by all the faithful reflects a high degree of optimism about what the church can learn from the world.

In his presentation, “Limits and Conditions of Conservative and Liberal Practice in Ecclesiology,” Joseph Mueller, S.J., explored the differences between liberal and conservative positions on the church-world relationship. He observed that the categories “liberal” and “conservative” are not specific to theology; rather, they constitute “general categories” which the church has learned and sometimes adopted from the world. This adoption, Mueller notes, is largely unsuccessful because the application of conservative or liberal “macro-narratives” to theological issues inadequately captures or measures the church’s progress towards its true goal, moving closer to the Kingdom of God. As such, attempts to employ these categories often cloud real dogmatic issues involved in particular theological questions while obstructing the process of authentic discernment. Mueller asserted that, because the church’s progress toward its eschatological goal cannot be fully known or measured, especially without the benefit of historical distance, there is a need for epistemological humility which invites partisans out of their entrenched “liberal” or “conservative” positions and calls them to make judgments on matters not so much on ideological grounds as on a case by case basis according to pastoral needs, dogmatic judgements and prayerful discernment.

Interest Group: Theological Diversity

The conversation that followed connected the two presentations in interesting ways and put the presenters into dialogue with one another as well as the members gathered. Considerable conversation was devoted to the question of the difference between “revealed knowledge” and “contingent knowledge.” In response to Mueller’s claim for greater epistemic humility and limits on what historical consciousness can claim to know, there was a robust discussion about what exactly is known and can be known—and who makes these determinations. Another source of discussion was the extent to which it is necessary for people of differing viewpoints to find “shared principles” in order to have a meaningful discussion. Lastly, there was conversation about Francis’ vision of the church-world relationship which drew on the history explored by Hinze and the limits of “conservative” and “liberal” categories presented by Mueller.

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