

ANOTHER WORLD: DISMANTLING CLERICALISM AND PURSUING  
HEALING – SELECTED SESSION

Topic: Another World: Dismantling Clericalism and Pursuing Healing  
Convener: Jacob Kohlhaas, Loras College  
Moderator: Mary Ann Hinsdale, I.H.M., Boston College  
Presenters: Mary Beth Yount, Neumann University  
William Portier, University of Dayton  
Kathleen Mroz, Boston College

In her opening paper, “Another World: Repositioning the Laity,” Mary Beth Yount argued distrust wrought by the clerical sexual abuse scandal jeopardizes the Church’s identity as sacrament of salvation. Using scripture and Kenan B. Osborne’s concepts of *depositioning* and *discipleship*, she advocated for reintegrating lay and clerical roles. While Vatican II encouraged the view, common among the laity, that apostolic succession through clerical ordination safeguards church leaders’ integrity in the faith, the sexual abuse crisis fractured naïve trust in this assurance. In response, Yount traced the changing functions of the priesthood through scripture, noted the danger of anachronistically projecting present lay-clergy distinctions too far into history, and cited Susan K. Wood’s argument that the functions of clerical orders evolve alongside historical needs. Yount proposed that a theological lens of discipleship applied to existing church structures can help the Catholic Church counter destructive, self-protective, and self-perpetuating clericalism—and emphasized this as a shared responsibility among all the faithful.

William Portier followed with “Dismantling Clericalism and Pursuing Healing: Brief Historical Perspectives.” He acknowledged Pope Francis’s condemnation of clericalism and framed clericalism as a historical phenomenon that is fundamentally about distinction leading to “harmful separation.” Portier gave examples of clericalism today including a priest whose primary concern with the sexual abuse crisis was its harm to the dignity of the priesthood and tales of an interning seminarian whose pronounced sense of superiority destructively saturated multiple encounters with parishioners. Both were suggestive of John Paul II’s “resacralization” of the priesthood which encouraged the idea that churches and sacraments belong to the priest. Portier then sketched the rise of clericalism from the late middle ages and suggested that the laity, including him and his audience, liturgically perform clericalism on a regular basis and consequently substantiate the otherwise ephemeral essential difference between lay and ordained.

Kathleen Mroz concluded with, “When the ‘Sacrament of Salvation’ Needs Saving: Schillebeeckx as a Resource for Theologians Responding to the Clergy Sex Abuse Crisis.” Mroz examined the church’s essential mission as sacrament, and visible realization, of salvation in light of the sexual abuse crisis. Using Schillebeeckx, she argued the church should be a sacrament of dialogue that engages the lives of people and listens to the “foreign prophecy” of the secular world. Mroz noted Schillebeeckx’s skepticism concerning ontological change through priestly ordination and questioned the superiority latent in categorizing laicization as among the severest clerical punishments. She considered the “fragments” of salvation in human experience that

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substantiate hope for eschatological salvation and challenged the Church to make faith “credible and worthwhile.” Mroz then addressed Schillebeeckx’s insight that ethical imperatives arise from negative contrast experiences (experiences of “that which should not be”) and appraised lay-led ecclesial communities as resources for recreating the life of the Church. Mroz concluded that being “the sacrament of salvation” must mean more than being the best way to get to heaven; it demands active care for persons.

The subsequent discussion, moderated by Mary Ann Hinsdale, I.H.M., noted the Boston report, the importance of educating seminarians alongside lay peers, and the broad effects of clericalism beyond abuse. The possibility of naming ontological difference without implicating superiority was discussed as was the connection of post-Vatican II clericalism to sexual abuse given the dates of the highest abuse rates. Portier noted that John Paul II’s language proved an effective recruiting tool for a certain type of seminarian. In response to concern for the damaging effects of harmful rhetoric, Yount noted that strong language is sometimes appropriate. Yount and Mroz both responded to James Carroll’s June 2019 article in *The Atlantic* calling for an end to the priesthood. Yount surmised that a total end went too far while Mroz noted that many Catholics already participate in dismantling clerical authority through departure and disobedience. Finally, concern was raised that the framework of abuse as sacrilege misidentifies abuse as falling away from the priesthood not as a reason for entering, given how access to opportunity is often sought by abusers.

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