

CATHOLIC THEOLOGY AND THE CONTEMPORARY UNIVERSITY –  
SELECTED SESSION

Topic: Catholic Theology and the Contemporary University  
Convener: Edward P. Hahnenberg, John Carroll University  
Moderator: Leo J. O'Donovan, S.J., Georgetown University  
Presenters: Nancy Dallavalle, Fairfield University  
Massimo Faggioli, Villanova University  
Catherine Punsalan-Manlimos, Seattle University

For many CTSA members, the immediate context of our work is the college or university—a particular type of institution in the midst of a quiet metamorphosis. Each of the panelists explored the role of the theologian within that institution, with an eye toward advancing the distinctive mission of Catholic higher education in a time of change.

Nancy Dallavalle framed the issue as the need to attend to one's own academic institution as a fourth "public" alongside David Tracy's classic triad of society, academy, and church. In "Whose Mission? Theologians and the Mission of the Catholic University," Dallavalle argued that theologians' "purchase" on the tone of the faculty and their privileged place in the curriculum can no longer be taken for granted. Some of our theologian colleagues may now stand as wisdom figures on their campuses. But is there anyone to take their place in five years? Shifting demographics, rising costs, escalating student debt, the eclipse of parish and school-based formation by the extremes of Catholic social media, the vacuum of ecclesial leadership—all make for a challenging external environment. Now more than ever, theologians have a responsibility to cultivate the Catholic narrative of our institutions. This entails a lot of hard intra-institutional work, such as developing new seminars or organizing teach-ins that demonstrate Catholicism's broad commitment to the seamless garment of life; educating our marketing and advancement teams about the tradition's integration of faith and the intellectual life; or leveraging data to design programs around the local Catholic population. Like the Camino de Santiago, the Catholic university "works" because of "its rootedness in a particular place with a specific narrative of mystery and mercy, lived anew because seekers continue to show up and to walk in company."

In "Institutional Church and Academic Theology in a Time of Catholic Disruption," Massimo Faggioli turns attention from the university to the church. This is a time of ecclesial *disruption*, characterized by the politicization of theological rifts and the "extremization" of interpretations of Vatican II. The most recent revelations of sexual abuse by bishops and cardinals serves merely as an accelerator of a much larger vertical collapse of hierarchical authority. Academic theology faces a similar collapse. The commodification of higher education, the undermining of curricular support for the humanities, the erosion of Catholicism at the popular level, and a frontal attack on the theological establishment by the forces of neo-traditionalism all play a role. However, the institutional church has resources (financial, political, symbolic) to weather the storm of disruption that academic theology does not. Thus, theology is even more vulnerable than the church. Its best hope, according to Faggioli, is to become a theology more openly and intentionally Catholic *in the sense of ecclesial*. This is not

a call for a return to clerical control, a reduction to catechetics, or a romanticism for neo-Scholastic apologetics. Rather it is a call for greater engagement with the pressing questions of *church* that our students are asking and that our times demand. What would the church's response to the sexual abuse crisis have looked like if more theologians were so engaged? Theology's current pattern of detachment from the fate of the institutional church is unsustainable in the long run. As Faggioli asserts: "there is no detachment from the institutional Church that does not entail also some detachment from the real people of God."

In "Theology, Religious Diversity and the Catholic University: The Case of the 'None-Zone,'" Catherine Punsalan-Manlimos sees the dynamic of religious disaffiliation in the Pacific Northwest as a bellwether for the nation as a whole. Acknowledging that schools like her own Seattle University are no longer Catholic havens, Punsalan-Manlimos asks the question: How does a religiously diverse faculty deliver the Catholic mission of our institutions to a diverse student body? In addressing this question, departments of theology and religious studies have a crucial role to play in bringing the intellectual heft of the Catholic tradition to bear on pressing issues facing the university (e.g., social justice, diversity and inclusion, unionization, divestment, etc.). If faculty across the university—of various faith traditions, or none—are to engage the Catholic intellectual tradition, theologians and religious ethicists have to play a leading role in creating the culture of dialogue such an aspiration requires. Punsalan-Manlimos concludes with several successful examples at Seattle University: faculty study groups that bring a Catholic perspective to salient conversations already underway; special seminars on the Catholic intellectual tradition; and a series for faculty dedicated to the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm.

Of the more than eighty in attendance, a dozen participants engaged in discussion with the panelists. Topics included: dialogue with bishops; strategy in a time of institutional contraction; the larger context of Christian theology; the erosion of normative thought in general; the evisceration of tenure; the role of money; and the importance of mentoring.

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