

VIOLENCE, RESISTANCE, AND TRANSFORMATION *IN THE CHURCH*:  
EXPLORATIONS OF ECCLESIAL SINFULNESS AND HOLINESS –  
SELECTED SESSION

Topic: Violence, Resistance, and Transformation *in the Church*: Explorations of Ecclesial Sinfulness and Holiness  
Convener: Daniel P. Horan, O.F.M., Catholic Theological Union  
Moderator: Jen Lamson-Scribner, Boston College  
Presenters: Brian P. Flanagan, Marymount University  
Cristina Lledo Gomez, Charles Sturt University  
Daniel P. Horan, O.F.M., Catholic Theological Union

This session focused on the realities, challenges, and hopes of transformation in the church in terms of the relationship between its sinfulness and holiness. Each paper, while not exclusively focused on clergy sexual abuse and its systematic cover up, nevertheless acknowledged the urgency of a renewed theological consideration of ecclesial sinfulness and holiness in the ongoing wake of the scandal.

Brian Flanagan opened the panel with his paper, “Confessing Ecclesial Sin as a Path to Ecclesial Justice.” Situating the paper in the context after John Paul II’s “Day of Pardon,” which named sins and injustices but did not acknowledge “that the church had sinned,” Flanagan argued that one of the enduring problematics, generally, and contributing factors to the cover up of clergy sexual abuse specifically has been “the lack of a theology of ecclesial sinfulness.” He then named and responded to four major arguments frequently presented against using the language of “sinful church.” The first two arguments are philosophical: the difficulty of attributing actions to a collective body and the nature of what the church is beyond a collection of individuals. The third argument focuses on the “hypostatizing” of the church as something distinct from its members. The fourth argument relates to alleged pastoral or ministerial concerns about describing the church as sinful being harmful to the faith of the laity. Drawing on Karl Rahner, among others, Flanagan offered a *respondeo* to each proposed objection, arguing for greater attention to confessing ecclesial sin and recognizing ecclesial holiness.

Cristina Lledo Gomez then presented her paper, “Holy Mother and Sinful Church: Transforming Violence through our Ecclesial Images,” in which she opened with a recounting of public episcopal responses to clergy sexual abuse within the Australian context. Engaging the work of Karl Rahner, Lledo Gomez responded to the persistence of a *societas perfectas* view of the church that encourages ecclesial leaders to distance the church from a sense of sinfulness or “unholiness.” She then argued that the presentation of the church in Christian creedal formulae and the tradition’s reliance on maternal images “fail to serve our churches at present by their inclusion of the church’s holiness without mention of its sinfulness.” Furthermore, Lledo Gomez posited that gendered images for the church also continue to perpetuate abuse. She concluded with the invitation to consider: “Maybe it is time to add a word in our creeds which states the church as being both holy and unholy helping then the people of God to accept this double reality.”

*Selected Session: Violence, Resistance, and Transformation in the Church*

Daniel Horan closed the panel with his paper, “Sin, Holiness, and the Communion of Saints: A Decolonial Rethinking of Church.” He opened his paper arguing that a potential positive response to clergy sexual abuse crisis is the constructive reimagining of previously static conceptualizations of doctrines and ecclesial discourse that has contributed to the misperceptions of ecclesial holiness to the exclusion of recognizing ecclesial sinfulness. To this end, Horan’s paper focused on the doctrine of the communion of saints by way of illustration. The paper proceeded in four parts. First, building on the work of Elizabeth Johnson, he showed how the classic Western Christian treatment of the communion of saints, particularly in the Roman Church, reflects and reinscribes problematic understandings of sanctity and sinfulness in the church. In his second section, titled “on earth as it is in heaven,” Horan argued that this projection of social structures into the trans-spatial and trans-temporal realms circles back around to inform our spatial and temporal understanding of sanctity and sinfulness *ad intra ecclesia*. Third, drawing on the work of Walter Mignolo, Anibal Quijano, and Catherine Walsh, he provided background on decoloniality and showed how the Christian tradition’s current doctrinal conceptualization of the communion of saints actually presents what Horan called a “colonial logic of sanctity.” Finally, he closed with a presentation of five potential trajectories that might contribute to a “decolonial rethinking of church.”

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