

CATHOLICITY AND MISSION – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Another World is Possible: Violence, Resistance and Transformation
Convener: Kevin Glauber Ahern, Manhattan College
Moderator: Stephen Bevans, S.V.D., Catholic Theological Union
Presenters: Thomas Massaro, S.J., Fordham University
Laurie Johnston, Emmanuel College
Jaisy A. Joseph, Seattle University

What do Catholicity and mission look like in a world marked by rising nationalism and violence? This question was present in all three of the papers presented to the Catholicity and Mission topic session. Addressing different dimensions of the present global context with an eye towards the teachings of Pope Francis, each paper illuminated ways in which the Catholic mission opens up possibilities to make another world possible.

In his paper, “A Renewed Mission to Dialogue and Social Transformation: Catholic Peacebuilding Advocacy under Pope Francis,” Thomas Massaro, S.J., argued that the words and actions of Pope Francis illuminate profound missiological commitments that can contribute to social transformation. Pope Francis, more than any other world leader, Massaro maintained, offers a vision of a more just world. The paper explores how this vision has been expressed in three categories of papal global engagement: (1) diplomatic initiatives, including active efforts to bring peace in US-Cuban relations and the civil conflicts in the Central African Republic, Syria, and South Sudan; (2) pastoral visits to more than forty countries; and (3) bold initiatives for peace between Muslims and Christians, including the recent joint document with Sheik Ahmad al-Tayyeb, the Grand Imam of al-Azhar. Each of these efforts, Massaro concluded, draws attention to the centrality of reconciliation and peacebuilding to the Catholic mission today.

In her paper, “Catholic Mission in a Climate of Islamophobia,” Laurie Johnston drew from her research on dozens of colleges and universities in the United States and Belgium which explore the meaning and shape of Catholic mission in Catholic educational institutions with growing numbers of Muslim students. Questions of how to engage mission in such contexts take on new dimensions in the shape of a growing globalization of Islamophobia. For many Muslims, Johnston argued, Catholic institutions can, at their best, offer spaces of refuge and tolerance. This experience can also highlight several areas of common ground among Catholics and Muslims, as well as common struggles that both communities face. This, too, is evident with the recent meeting of Pope Francis with Sheik Ahmad al-Tayyeb and their joint Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together.

The third paper, “The Church as Leaven and Pilgrim: The Postcolonial Turn to Interstices,” by Jaisy A. Joseph, complemented the first two papers, with a critical appraisal of Catholic mission in light of Robert Schreiter’s distinction between universal and universalizing. The social realities of the poor and global migrant flows, she argues, offer new challenges and opportunities for mission. These social dynamics interrupt the universalizing tendencies that so often dominate Catholicism’s approach to mission. They also help to reframe concepts of power, thereby opening up new

Topic Session: Catholicity and Mission

spaces for the Vatican and universal pilgrim church to “cultivate concrete human communion.”

In the interactive discussion that followed the three papers, the participants addressed a number of key questions related to Catholic identity and mission in the world today. These included: the nature and meaning of evangelization in a multi-religious educational context; the challenge of religious literacy in the formation of a Catholic identity; the role and privilege of the Catholic church as a global actor in the world; and the experiences of suffering faced by religious minorities, including Muslim students in US higher education.

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