

CHURCH/ECUMENISM – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Another World is Possible: Violence, Resistance and Transformation
Convener: Edward P. Hahnenberg, John Carroll University
Moderator: Eugene Schlesinger, Santa Clara University
Presenters: Mary Kate Holman, Fordham University
 Jaisy A. Joseph, Seattle University
 Elyse Raby, Boston College

The widespread critique of clericalism that followed in the wake of the clergy sexual abuse crisis set the context for Mary Kate Holman’s paper, “Another Church is Possible: The French Worker Priest Movement (1943-1954) as Resource for Contemporary Ecclesial Reform.” As a structural problem, clericalism rests on a theological and institutional commitment to the priest as “set apart.” Holman draws on the mid-twentieth-century experience of the French “worker priests” as a historical resource for reimagining the Catholic priesthood today. In response to the perceived “dechristianization” of France, a small group of priests took up full-time jobs as manual laborers, with an eye toward evangelizing workers in the midst of their daily lives. Seeking to transform the world beyond the parish, these priests were themselves transformed. They abandoned the cassock and wore blue jeans. They identified with the workers’ struggles, joined labor unions, and participated in strikes—setting aside sacramental functions for what Marie-Dominique Chenu called a ministry of “presence.” When Rome called for an end to this experiment, the worker priests responded with a prophetic critique of the church’s own complicity in the oppression of the working class, arguing that the church supports an unjust system “because she is bound to it materially by the conditions of her existence and her institutions.” Their witness, Holman concludes, challenges the church’s ongoing complicity with injustice today.

Jaisy Joseph’s paper, “One Long Epiclesis: The Eucharistic Table as Diaspora Space,” begins with the reality of white racism—a social wound that is a scandal to the eucharistic celebration. Drawing on Avtar Brah’s notion of diaspora space, Joseph’s argument proceeds in three parts. First, the notion of diaspora space foregrounds the “entanglement of histories” in a way that disrupts US Catholic narratives of assimilation. As diaspora space, the Eucharist decenters both the rooted native and the uprooted diasporan, making mutual transformation possible. Second, this two-fold decentering means that the diasporan becomes a native and the native becomes a diasporan, calling forth a spirituality of kenosis. Third, Joseph cites Yves Congar’s description of the church as “one long epiclesis” to provide the pneumatological key to healing the wound of racism that contradicts the very nature of Eucharist. With the help of James Alison and M. Shawn Copeland, Joseph argues that the grace of the Holy Spirit makes present the forgiving victim in the Eucharist, opening the path of ascetic surrender and eucharistic solidarity. To follow that path is to abandon and abolish all those claims to superiority that tear up the body of Christ from within.

In “The Intercorporeal Body of Christ: Transforming an Ecclesial Image Through Maurice Merleau-Ponty,” Elyse Raby takes the metaphor of the church as a body and turns it outward. The particularly modern interpretation of the church as a kind of

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Cartesian, monarchical body—which runs from the later work of Johann Adam Möhler, through the schemata on the church at Vatican I, to the papal teaching of Leo XIII and Pius XII—frustrates an ecumenical, missionary ecclesiology. Raby points to a different construal of the body in the work of Merleau-Ponty. The body is neither hermetically sealed off from other bodies, nor totally determined by its “head.” Rather, the body exists as a unity only “*when it is engaged in meaningful task-oriented action in the world.*” The body is dynamic and malleable, extended outward, always “involved” in its environment. Two implications follow. First, Merleau-Ponty’s “intercorporeal” body suggests that the church is the body of Christ when it is actively engaged in mission in the world. Second, the flexibility of one’s body image suggests a fruitful starting point for ecumenical engagement—where unity among separated communions comes through action extended outward to others. All of this resonates with Pope Francis’ repeated insistence that the transformation of ecclesial structures *ad intra* cannot be accomplished without attention to the church’s mission *ad extra*.

Approximately thirty-five participants engaged in a wide-ranging discussion following the presentations, taking up such diverse topics as solidarity, ontological change, the sexed body, the themes of bodily growth and illness, and the dangers of idealizing or instrumentalizing the Eucharist.

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