

THEOLOGICAL DIVERSITY – INTEREST GROUP

Topic: Competing Conceptions of Ecclesial Authority in the Theological Guild:  
Sources of Division and Hopes for Convergence  
Convener: Kristin Colberg, College of Saint Benedict / Saint John's University  
Moderator: James F. Keating, Providence College  
Presenters: Richard R. Gaillardetz, Boston College  
Holly Taylor Coolman, Providence College

This session was the fourth and last sponsored by the Theological Diversity Interest Group, which arose in response to the report of the CTSA Ad Hoc Committee on Theological Diversity. Richard Gaillardetz began his presentation with a brief overview of the previous three sessions, which focused on differences between “liberal” and “conservative” views concerning a theology of revelation, embodiment within contemporary theological anthropology and sexual ethics, and ecclesiology and church-world relations.

Gaillardetz's paper, “Authority Beyond Hierarchy,” presented an account of ecclesial authority marked by three theological commitments as an alternative to “authority within hierarchical communion.” The first was a renunciation of “hierarchy.” Based on developments toward “a cautious egalitarianism grounded in Christian baptism and a vision of the church as the pilgrim people of God” in Vatican II, this renunciation is today necessary because the “deep-seated negative associations attached to the term ‘hierarchy’ make it practically irretrievable.” The second is an understanding of authority within a non-hierarchical, non-competitive ecclesiology. Like a symphony conductor, the bishop's duty is “to moderate all the other gifts of the Spirit,” a task of “coordinating the initiatives of their fellow believers.” This entails the recognition of three distinct teaching authorities: the *sensus fidelium*, the community of theologians, and the college of bishops. The third theological commitment is “the rejection of ecclesial monophysitism,” acknowledging “the full humanity of the church,” and recognizing that “officeholders are always subject to the reality of human finitude and sin and stand in need of conversion.”

Holly Taylor Coolman's paper, “Hierarchy: An Indispensable Dimension of the Catholic Church,” argued that hierarchy is indispensable because Catholic faith is founded in tradition. It is not “a chessboard, where we simply assess the current situation, note our resources, and then work out the smartest and most effective moves.” We have received a tradition and will actively hand it on to those who follow us. The fundamental rationale for hierarchy is founded on the office of the bishop. Christ vested the authority to forgive sins into offices which are held by persons. “By the end of the second century, the principle of one city—one bishop had become almost universal.” Of course, along with Hans Urs von Balthasar, we must recognize that the church “must be purified each day anew from her guilt and spiritual idolatry.” And hierarchical authority needs “vastly increased transparency and accountability,” a servant leadership. But hierarchy, based in the office of the bishop, is an indispensable element of the Catholic Church.

The discussion afterwards was energetic. A Dominican member noted that their Master is elected for a fixed term of years. Why couldn't the same be true of bishops,

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eventually returning the bishop to the role of parish pastor? Gaillardetz responded that he would not favor such a change. There is a kind of transformation that occurs in sacramental ordination that would be undermined by term limits.

The longest discussion surrounded the proposal to stop using the word “hierarchy.” One member commented that the authoritative office of bishops and pope concerning doctrine is a good thing—something unfortunately missing in Islam, Protestantism, and many other religious faiths. “We’re not Congregationalists.” Another member pointed to the variety of meanings of “hierarchy,” for example referring to the presidency in liturgy. Another member reminded the group of the transformation of the structures of leadership that has occurred in nearly all congregations of women religious, to authority without hierarchy.

Gaillardetz responded that the word “hierarchy” has become so negatively loaded that it is “tainted” and no longer able to name well the “exercise of authority collegially and in a pluriform way,” and that the use of the word, even if intended collegially, gives sanction to bishops who simply prefer a more absolute power. Coolman responded that if we think that a bishop should be able to give a directive to the priests of the diocese, it is a hierarchical system and we should call it that.

A final questioner congratulated the two panelists for the fruitful dialogue and asked, “what about the theologians far to the left of Rick and far to the right of Holly?” The short answer was that this was why the current Interest Group was created: to model a better form of theological conversation.

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