

PRECARIOUS LABOR AND 21ST-CENTURY CAPITALISM: THE CATHOLIC TRADITION'S GROWING EDGE – SELECTED SESSION

- Topic: Precarious Labor and 21st-Century Capitalism:
The Catholic Tradition's Growing Edge
- Convener: Kristin E. Heyer, Boston College
Jeremy V. Cruz, St. John's University (New York)
- Moderator: Melissa Pagán, Mount St. Mary's University
- Presenters: Joseph A. McCartin, Georgetown University
Jeremy V. Cruz, St. John's University (New York)
Kristin E. Heyer, Boston College

In his paper, “Confronting Elusive Accountability in 21st Century Capitalism: Catholic Social Teaching on Labor at a Crossroads,” Joseph McCartin presented on several challenges that Catholic colleges and universities face in living up to Catholic social teaching on labor, as these institutions are reshaped by the forces of 21st century capitalism. He argued that four key features of late-stage capitalism—financialization, the extension of global supply chains, extensive subcontracting, and shifts toward casual or temporary labor—increasingly entangle Catholic institutions in an economy of growing inequality and elusive accountability. Catholic colleges and universities, like private universities in general, have invested increasing shares of their endowments in “alternative investments” such as private equity partnerships, whose business models have demonstrably increased inequality. Further, Catholic institutions now depend on goods manufactured across the globe under conditions that often violate workers’ rights, subcontract their services without taking responsibility for how subcontractors treat labor, and rely on temporary labor in the form of adjunct faculty. While some institutions have tried to address these problems through membership in the Worker Rights Consortium, the establishment of campus “just employment” policies, or recognition of adjuncts’ union rights, these efforts have been few and inadequate overall. McCartin concluded by suggesting that an initiative called Bargaining for the Common Good, key principles of which are drawn from Catholic social teaching, might provide a model for how workers can pressure these institutions to be more accountable to their needs.

Next, Jeremy Cruz presented “Labor Associations and Worker Power: Catholic Social Teaching and Political-Economic Democracy,” which called for deeper integration of existing Catholic teaching on labor rights and the aims of work with its affirmations of democracy and commitment to preferential action with and for oppressed persons and groups. The paper argued that the power of labor associations is a primary avenue toward the realization of political-economic democracy and ecological integrity. This is because labor associations and collective bargaining can be sources of social and political empowerment, in the form of direct and indirect workplace and community governance, well beyond securing adequate compensation and safe labor conditions. Toward this end, Cruz saw signs of hope in Francis’s strong endorsements of worker co-operatives in *Laudato Si’* (2015), in several papal speeches in Italy and in South America, and through the Economy of Francesco initiative.

Kristin Heyer, in “Enfleshing the Work of Social Production: Gendered Labor and Moral Agency,” presented on how the hidden dynamics of reproductive labor raise troubling moral questions about labor exploitation, gender inequality, and complicity in complex structures of injustice with far-reaching consequences. Her analysis illuminated how beliefs and practices around sex and gender encode oppressive economic relations and how domestic workers’ race, gender, and citizenship status intersect and compound their experiences of exploitation. She noted that even as the pandemic has exacerbated intersectional inequalities, it offers an opportunity to examine the factors contributing to these entrenched patterns of exploitation and to consider how societies can return to a “new normal” in its aftermath. Toward that end, the paper analyzed the structures and ideologies contributing to these entrenched patterns in order to frame them in terms of social injustice rather than isolated choices made by virtuous or vicious mothers alone. Heyer’s paper also considered how Catholic teaching both contributes to exploitation and offers resources for reform. She concluded by signaling how a “new normal” will require significant changes in structures, incentives, ideologies, and policies, given the intersectional operations of power at play and their reinforcement by cultural and religious narratives alike.

The papers elicited substantial discussion and questions, with particular focus on academic labor. McCartin elaborated on the work of Bargaining for the Common Good, which Georgetown University’s Kalmanovitz Initiative for Labor and the Working Poor helped launch. In response to a request for resources on the topic, Cruz recommended Gerald Beyer’s *Just Universities: Catholic Social Teaching Confronts Corporatized Higher Education*.

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