

## CATHOLICITY AND MISSION – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: The Work of Doing Contextual Theology  
 Convener: Stephen Bevans, S.V.D.  
 Moderator: Stephen Bevans, S.V.D.  
 Presenters: Eduardo Fernández and Deborah Ross, Jesuit School of Theology at Santa Clara University  
 Antonio Sison, Catholic Theological Union  
 Mary Kate Holman, Benedictine University

Three lively and fascinating presentations made up this year’s Catholicity and Mission session, all of which were connected to the theme of the task or the work of doing contextual theology.

Constructing their presentation as a conversation, Eduardo Fernández and Deborah Ross offered their perspectives on their recent co-edited book, *Doing Theology as If People Mattered*. This volume, written by members of the faculty of the Jesuit School of Theology at the University of Santa Clara, recounts how each author taught her or his courses with the goal of helping students do theology in a way that takes into account theology’s essentially contextual and practical nature. After both editors offered a helpful overview of the book, Fernández spoke about the enriching impact of a faculty colloquium subsequent to the book’s publication in which each faculty member read and responded to another faculty member’s chapter. Ross reflected how the commitment to contextual theologizing at JST had transformed her teaching and theological scholarship, evident in her own chapter that focused on how students learned theology by experiencing and working in a poor but vibrant parish in nearby Oakland.

Antonio Sison’s presentation, entitled “*Hekima Christus*: Inculturation and the Imaging of Anthropological Dignity,” focused on the “fifteenth station” in the chapel at Hekima University College in Nairobi, Kenya. The image represents an astonishing work of visual inculturation by the Cameroonian Jesuit theologian and martyr Engelbert Mveng, and depicts the risen Christ in glory over the skyline of Nairobi and a view of the vast Kibera slum in the city. The risen Christ, like the other figures in the stations of the cross, wears the African ritual mask, situating the passion narrative and the resurrection at the center of African life, and unmasking at the same time the “anthropological poverty” that Mveng decries in his theological work. God’s incarnation in Jesus thus reveals the dignity of African humanity and with it all of suffering and oppressed women and men.

A third presentation, “‘The Church in this world like yeast in dough’: The Impact of Worker Communities on Marie-Dominique Chenu’s Missiology,” was given by Mary Kate Holman. In 1937, Holman related, Chenu published his groundbreaking book on theological education, *Une école de théologie: Le Saulchoir*, in which he advocated a study of Thomas Aquinas in his historical context—a study that called for an engagement of the church, like Aquinas himself, with the pressing issues and movements of the contemporary world. In 1942, when *Le Saulchoir* was placed on the Vatican’s Index of Forbidden Books, Chenu was transferred to Paris, where he became more engaged with worker communities than he had been in his former teaching

position. It was in this pastoral situation that he began to realize that only by a renewal of the church could Christianity recover its place of influence among the working class. At first he saw this in terms of Jacques Maritain's understanding of a "new Christendom," but as he continued his work he began to think more in terms of "mission." Only by engaging itself in the world could the church really be the church. Anticipating and perhaps influencing Vatican II's perspective, Chenu saw the church as missionary by its very nature.

A short but thoughtful discussion followed the presentations. One central question concerned the distinction—often made when discussing African contextual theology—between an inculturation that favors reflection on cultural values and one that emphasizes social inequality and the need for liberation. Antonio Sison argued persuasively that Mveng's work in particular brought both the attention to culture and the quest for liberation together by joining "icon" to "logos."

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