

CHRIST – TOPIC SESSION

- Topic: “All You Who Labor...”: Theology, Work, and Economy
 Convener: Brianne Jacobs, Emmanuel College
 Moderator: Elizabeth O'Donnell Gandolfo, Wake Forest University
 Presenters: Eugene R. Schlesinger, Santa Clara University
 Julia Feder, Creighton University
 Respondent: Megan K. McCabe, Gonzaga University

Julia Feder's paper, “Posttraumatic Recovery as the Work of Christian Discipleship: Jesus as a Model of Resistive Courage,” argues for post-traumatic healing through the practice of courage that is modeled on the example of Jesus. Feder begins by turning to the healing and teaching work of Jesus during his life—both of which are oriented toward the restoration of right relationships. This is not the courage of exalted personal peaks, but the slow, long and frustrating, and even boring, work toward healing, best identified with what Katie Canon identifies as “unshouted courage.” Next, utilizing Edward Schillebeeckx and Delores Williams, she explores Jesus' own approach to his death as resisting the violence that was forced upon him and insisting on the enduring nature of his social and political vision seeded in open table practices. Finally, Feder offers Jesus as a model of resistive courage. This resistive courage is particularly evident, according to Feder, in Jesus' claiming of agency in the gift of his body in the last meal shared with his friends. According to Feder, “This was a way to insist that his body did not belong to those who would try to take control of it the next day.” For Jesus then, this resistive courage is a reclamation of agency. Recovery from sexual violence is animated by Jesus as a model when it is work that is oriented not only to restoration of individual victims, but also to the transformation of rape culture.

Eugene Schlesinger's paper, “‘There is nothing hidden that will not be brought to light’: Christ's Cross and the Discovery of Labor,” pulls together the Catholic Social Tradition's treatment of work—particularly the contribution of Pope John Paul II's encyclicals—with Jon Sobrino's Christology in order to argue against systematic, unjust labor conditions built into capitalism. While few would deliberately and directly exploit their neighbors, the globalized market economy obscures the mechanics of production and distribution just enough to grant a plausible deniability, so that rich nations can enjoy an affluence built upon the backs of the world's poor. Drawing from Colossians 2:15's image of the crucifixion making a “spectacle” of the powers, Schlesinger considers how the cross makes visible the often otherwise invisible plight of the oppressed. Properly understood, it robs us of capitalism's plausible deniability. Exploited workers are offered by Jesus a call of “renewed and restored agency” that grounds the rights of workers to “have a stake in their situations.” Such a restored agency would imply support for labor unions which could help workers “spell out their needs and their aspirations, and then joining with them in seeking their realization.” Here, Jesus' offering of his own yoke eases the burden of workers. Such renewed agency is one way of opposing the capitalist economic systems and conditions of labor as means of oppression. Jesus' praxis of the Reign of God that exposes these systems as “death-dealing” and idolatrous.

Megan McCabe's response showed how both papers center the life and ministry of Jesus, through engagement with the political theologies of the late twentieth century (such as the work of Edward Schillebeeckx, Delores Williams, and Jon Sobrino). Both papers highlight Jesus' praxis of the Reign of God and his embodiment of the preferential option. Feder, following Williams, emphasizes Jesus' righting of relationships and table fellowship. Schlesinger emphasizes Jesus' solidarity with the oppressed and favor for the victims of history. In so doing, McCabe shows that both papers also point to the threat of using the cross of Jesus to sacralize and justify unjust suffering in our contemporary context. McCabe began a discussion with Feder asking, in the context of rape culture and striving for social transformation, what specifically does courage look like? Engaging Schlesinger's paper, McCabe considered the implications of the intersection of the Catholic Social Tradition and the liberationist approach of Sobrino, asking how we consider and maintain the dignity of work if the reality of the conditions of labor are "death dealing and idolatrous systems"? How can these two ideas be meaningfully held together?

Approximately fifteen participants engaged in a discussion following the presentations, discussing virtue ethics and courage, liturgies that bring sexual violence and violence against the oppressed to the fore, and John Paul II's notion of the dignity of work.

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