

MORAL THEOLOGY (I) – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: “All You Who Labor...”: Theology, Work, and Economy
Convener: Alessandro Rovati, Belmont Abbey College
Moderator: Daniel Cosacchi, Marywood University
Presenters: Kathy Lilla Cox, University of San Diego, and Jason King, Saint Vincent College
Jonathan Malesic, Southern Methodist University

In their paper, “Beyond Laboring: Fostering the Love of Learning and the Desire for God in Theological Education,” Kathy Lilla Cox and Jason King reflected on how the Rule of Benedict (RB) and its practices might help us shed light upon and cope with some of the structural problems that affect academia. The RB offers insights for integrating theologians’ professional and spiritual work by defining different types of work and their characteristics. Their reflection focused on both the continuities between the communal life in colleges and universities and the one in monasteries and the salient distinctions among them. Such an approach allowed them to suggest ways of implementing Benedictine practices capable of fostering the personal good of those involved in academia and fight against its systemic institutional problems. Overall, Lilla Cox and King made a compelling case that adopting aspects of Benedict’s understanding of *ora et labora* for ethically structuring and relating to each other as theologians in our academic communities gives us significant resources to imagine an alternative way of working, being a community, and serving others as Christ in academic settings.

Jonathan Malesic presented a paper titled “‘You Get Over It:’ How the Benedictine Way of Work Can Overcome the Culture of Burnout.” He described burnout as a widespread social disorder that upends both the objective and subjective goods of work. In the process, burnout makes workers less effective and leads them to despair over their human dignity. Because burnout is built into our economic and moral culture, Malesic argued, we can only overcome it if we change how we understand the relationship among work, community, and human dignity. Benedictine religious offer a model for work that escapes burnout culture. Based on participant-observation and interviews with contemplative and active Benedictines, Malesic showed the monks escape burnout not through a robust and individual sense of vocation (though they have that), but because their community affirms their value apart from work. Here lies the critical difference between Benedictines and denizens of the burnout society. Even as they work hard, Benedictine communities demonstrate that members’ dignity and vocation are more significant than their productivity, a lesson that our consumer society is in dire need to learn.

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