

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Church Work
 Convener: William A. Clark, S.J. (College of the Holy Cross)
 Moderator: Elsie Miranda (Association of Theological Schools)
 Presenters: Phyllis Zagano (Hofstra University)
 Jennifer Owens-Jofré (Lexington Theological Seminary)
 Milton Javier Bravo (Fordham University)
 César Baldelomar (Boston College)

The panel began with ten-minute presentations, followed by conversation among panelists and the small number of online attendees.

Phyllis Zagano, Senior Research Associate-in-Residence at Hofstra University, set the tone for the panel with her paper, “Pope Francis and (Women’s) Church Work.” “Church work” can be either “paid” or “unpaid,” with the former positions dominated by clerics and the latter filled by women. Zagano considers this disparity under three headings. Discussing “Francis’s emphasis on lay involvement in the church,” she highlights the Apostolic Exhortation *Querida Amazonia*, defending its emphasis on the position of “Parish Life Coordinator” as an effort to recognize and formalize existing pastoral leadership by women. Turning to “the problem of clericalism,” she speculates that, church legal and financial structures being largely dedicated to the all-male priesthood, ordaining married deacons to the priesthood, in the Amazon or elsewhere, would likely return women leaders to subordinate roles. Finally, Zagano draws on her experience in the original papal commission on the topic and examines “the possibilities for women deacons.” She finds cause for mixed reaction in Francis’s recent allowance for women in the formal ministries of lector, acolyte, and catechist; his retention of the canonical *latae sententiae* excommunication for attempting to ordain women to sacred orders; and the postponement of the planned “synod on synodality.” “That [women] carry the Gospel to the people is to be applauded. That it is so hard to do so within church structures is sad.”

Jennifer Owens-Jofré, of Lexington Theological Seminary, discussed an as-yet-unpublished survey, conducted with co-researcher Kate Dugan, of contributors to the book *From the Pews in the Back: Young Women and Catholicism* (Liturgical Press, 2009). Most respondents continue to identify as Catholic, but their answers suggest themes and questions about the meaning of that identity: it “has more to do with how you show up in the world around you than it does with traditional measures of Catholic practice,” which should be “discerned by the fruit it bears” and, although “rooted in community,” may not involve parish participation. While some of the women surveyed continue to pursue church work, “others are living into more secular vocations.” Could the church ever recognize the work of the laity as mission-driven, wonders Owens-Jofré, “without reifying the divide” between clergy and laity? Owens-Jofré notes the loss of credibility suffered by US and Canadian bishops on social and political issues, and ends with another question: In light of all this, “What does it mean to do the work of the church faithfully?”

“As a response to experiences of marginalization and exploitations within our Church,” Milton Javier Bravo, of Fordham University, presented “*Un pueblo en salida*:

Latino Practical Theology from the Borderlands Perspective,” a case study concerning “dehumanization of Latinos at the Mexico–US border.” Bravo argues that “Hispanic Catholic-Panethnicity” represents the future of the U.S. church, and identifies the US southern border as “the place of pastoral conversation” as this “new people” continues to evolve. This process, however, has been highly contested. Bravo details a pilgrimage, teach-in, and public action organized by US Hispanic Catholic leaders (October 2019), witnessing against the cruelty and injustice of US border policies and “accompany[ing] refugees as one accompanies Jesus at the Good Friday processions.” Between the typical internal church matters that absorb the attention of many Euroamerican Catholics, and such accompaniment of a marginalized community, the difference is striking. Concluding his remarks, Bravo asks, “[W]ill this project remain siloed or will it become the entire enterprise of the U.S. Catholic Church in the 21st century?”

Finally, César Baldelomar of Boston College read, “Knowledge Creation [Meaning Making] as Church Work.” Picking up a theme from Zagano, Baldelomar agrees that “clericalism is undoubtedly a culprit in women’s limited roles within the church.” However, clericalism itself is a symptom of a much larger problem which Baldelomar describes as “limited colonial and Eurocentric understandings of the ‘human.’” He asks, “How would church roles look if women (and especially women of color) and others historically excluded from knowledge creation [were recognized as] the principal producers of knowledge, rather than simply reproducers of existing theological knowledge?” Relying on the work of decolonial scholars and “Afro-Pessimists,” Baldelomar outlines the emergence of the concepts of “human” and “gender” within the context of European colonialism. Far beyond increasing faculty diversity, Baldelomar calls for a “deep deconstruction” of the discipline of theology itself, addressing its “historical ties to colonialism.” In conclusion, Baldelomar declares that “church work will continue to be the domain of gender disparity until theological imagination expands and influences ecclesial thought and life.” He cites this CTSA panel itself as a movement in the proper direction.

The subsequent discussion noted the often-surprising intersections revealed by these presentations.

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