

## FIELDWORK IN THEOLOGY – INTEREST GROUP

- Topic: Embodiment in Fieldwork  
 Conveners: Jaisy Joseph, Seattle University  
 Layla Karst, Loyola Marymount University  
 Lorraine Cuddeback-Gedeon, Mercy High School  
 Moderator: Layla Karst, Loyola Marymount University  
 Presenters: Susan Bigelow Reynolds, Emory University  
 Leo Guardado, Fordham University  
 Respondent: Nancy Pineda-Madrid, Loyola Marymount University

The session began with Susan Bigelow Reynolds’s paper, “‘*Encaminémonos*’: Good Friday, Embodied Solidarity, and the ‘Generosity of Ritual,’” which broke open the theologies informing and shaping the Way of the Cross as practiced by St. Mary of the Angels Parish in Roxbury, Massachusetts. The parish, historically and geographically situated as a bridge for racial communities in Roxbury, uses the ritual power of the Way of the Cross to embody solidarity and invite its participants into the life of the community.

Reynolds began with a rich description of the ritual and how it reflects the lives of its community: for example, the inclusion of a mother who lost a son to gun violence at the station where Jesus meets his mother, or how the cross changes hands throughout the procession, thereby refusing to single out one particular member of the Church body as Jesus. Through these actions, Reynolds argued that the *via crucis*, both in its historical development and its present incarnation with St. Mary of the Angels, lingers in the uncertain spaces of lament. By emphasizing solidarity through embodied practices of empathy and accompaniment, the Way of the Cross resists theologies that move too easily from uncertain grief to Easter certainties. As a parishioner-researcher herself, Reynolds analyzed her own uncertain position as an insider-outsider, drawing on Don Seeman’s ritual “generosity” to explore how ritual invites and forms one another into community. This sense of ritual generosity that Reynolds experienced in the Way of the Cross reveals how ritual shapes solidarity and recognizes that “there is no salvation outside of one another.”

Leo Guardado’s paper, “Theologians in the Field,” continued the exploration of fieldwork, and how its desire to engage lived realities challenges theology to attend to other embodied forms of knowledge and communication. Speaking of his fieldwork with Rosa (a pseudonym), Guardado recounted struggles in their communication in Spanish (her native language is Mixteco), and how he worked to understand Rosa’s own theologies as a *curandera*, or spiritual “healer.” As he learned from Rosa and accompanied her in her work as a healer, Guardado found himself unpacking his own theological and spiritual assumptions. Fieldwork, he argued, needs a “carnal” approach that demands the theologian inhabit spaces and worlds of theological knowledge that are often overlooked.

Guardado also argued that this recognition of where theological knowledge may lie has repercussions for teaching as well as for research. Spirituality, he noted, is the foundation of both liberation and Latinx theology. Working from specific spiritual and pastoral contexts, the pioneers of these theologies assumed a certain embeddedness

within communities for their work. In teaching current lay students of theology, however, that pastoral context can no longer be assumed. Guardado made the case that teaching with ethnographic, qualitative, or participatory action methods of research can bridge this gap in theological formation and strengthen a commitment to understanding the relationship between theological knowledge and the practices from which that knowledge arises.

In a response to Reynolds and Guardado, Nancy Pineda-Madrid drew out the common threads in their work. She noted how both Reynolds and Guardado invite the extension of our epistemological and theological imaginations. She also drew connections with the work of Ricoeur and Tillich, both of whom wrestled with the processes of symbols and meaning-making. She noted how the interplay of theory and lived experience has been described as the “axiom” of theology, one which demands consideration for how both book-knowing and experience can be taken seriously within theological work. In addressing the epistemological challenges raised by both Reynolds and Guardado, Pineda-Madrid asked whether the power of presence and rituals both Reynolds and Guardado offered can point to a greater unity without collapsing diversity within communities.

During open questions, there was a lively discussion that engaged how symbols develop into narratives, the idea of ethnography as a practice of “translation,” and other important themes of the work presented. There were about 20 people present for the session.

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