

VOTING RIGHTS AND MORAL URGENCY – SELECTED SESSION

Topic: Voting Rights and Moral Urgency
 Convener: Susan Bigelow Reynolds, Emory University
 Moderator: David DeCosse, Santa Clara University
 Presenters: Nichole M. Flores, University of Virginia
 Rev. Kim Jackson, Episcopal Church of the Common Ground and the
 Georgia State Senate

This selected session was convened in order to think interreligiously about the right to vote, and in a particular way, to interrogate the conspicuous and painful absence of Catholic theologians from public moral discourse on voting rights. As a cradle of the ongoing struggle for civil rights and home to many of the movement’s prophets and martyrs, Atlanta offered an auspicious context from which to engage the moral, theological, and political status of voting rights in 2022.

The session convened an ecumenical conversation between Rev. Senator Kim Jackson and Nichole M. Flores. Rev. Jackson is the Vicar of the Episcopal Church of the Common Ground in Atlanta, a church without walls that serves people who are currently unhoused. In 2020, she was elected to the Georgia State Senate for District 41, becoming the first openly LGBTQ state senator in Georgia. Due to COVID-19, Jackson joined the session remotely. Flores is associate professor of religious studies at the University of Virginia. Her work examines moral theology and democratic participation.

David DeCosse began the session by tracing contemporary national developments in voting rights and voter suppression. In response to this protracted struggle, DeCosse observed, Catholic bishops and theologians in the US “have had far too little to say... about a right that is grounded in the dignity of the person and in their corresponding responsibility to participate in political life” and “affects every other social justice concern of Catholic social teaching in this country.” Indeed, DeCosse noted that the relatively low attendance in this session was perhaps reflective of broad Catholic ambivalence about investment in voting rights.

Turning to the local context, Susan Bigelow Reynolds observed in that in the 2020 election, Georgia voters elected two Democratic senators—Rev. Raphael Warnock, senior pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church and Georgia’s first Black senator, and John Ossoff, Georgia’s first Jewish senator—and helped to defeat incumbent president Donald Trump. In the months that followed this historic election, Georgia’s Republican-controlled state legislature immediately moved to pass more restrictive voting laws. Under the guise of securing elections, these laws enacted roadblocks to voting, particularly for voters in minoritized communities, voters with disabilities and health vulnerabilities, and poor and unhoused voters. Meanwhile, revised electoral maps diluted the power of Black and minoritized voters. Atlanta is a city in which the ongoing struggle for the franchise is widely understood as inextricably spiritual and political, both pious and public work. Where, Reynolds asked Jackson and Flores, are Catholics in this holy struggle? And what should Catholics learn from the faithful activism of those in other denominations and faith traditions?

Flores responded by posing a question. Catholic social tradition prompts us to address myriad social, political, and economic challenges facing our world. Why should voting rights be considered an especially urgent priority among these many problems? Flores framed her response through a political theology of Guadalupe and Juan Diego, interpreting their encounter as one concerned, in part, with political empowerment of Juan Diego in colonial society. In a society riven by social, political, and economic inequality, she argued, we are called to lift up those most marginalized.

Jackson began her response by tracing key moments in the history of Black Americans' struggle for the franchise from Reconstruction through the present, emphasizing the role of the church as the organizing organ of the movement for voting rights. After Reconstruction and before Jim Crow, she noted, a number of Black men were elected to legislative office, a fact of which few in attendance at the session were aware. After the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Black churches took up the mantle of voter education; the ballot box, Jackson observed, was understood as a site of liberation. Tracing her own vocational path, Jackson emphasized the examples of those pastors, friends, and community members whose examples paved a path of activism and civic engagement motivated by faith and love. Emphasizing the ecumenical and interfaith dimensions of this work, she detailed how anti-death-penalty work placed her into relationship with Catholic communities, while campaigning against the Confederate Flag in South Carolina during her undergraduate years involved collaborative work with Black and Jewish faith leaders. Ultimately, she emphasized, her pastoral and legislative work are inextricably linked.

Next, DeCosse and Reynolds moderated a conversation between Jackson and Flores. Both shared formative stories from their own vocational work. Flores discussed the local response to the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, VA, while Jackson recalled how pastoral relationships with people experiencing homelessness grounds and motivates her legislative work. In response to a question about who they view as "patron saints" of the voting rights movement, Jackson lifted up educator, activist, and citizen-school founder Septima Clark; Flores cited the witness of organizer and activist Ella Baker. Turning the conversation to those in attendance, we rearranged our chairs into a circle to invite more organic discourse. The wide-ranging and probing conversation that followed dug into issues from contradictory voter identification laws to the creative roles of parishes and congregations in the struggle today. The session concluded as DeCosse collected the contact information of those in attendance, all of whom committed to remain in conversation about advancing Catholic participation in voting rights work.

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