

ZEN–IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY INSIGHTS ON “PASSING THE *KOAN*”
OF THE THIRD DEGREE OF HUMILITY – SELECTED SESSION

Topic: Zen–Ignatian Spirituality Insights on “Passing the *Koan*” of the Third Degree of Humility
 Convenor: James T. Bretzke, S.J., John Carroll University
 Moderator: Judith Merkle, S.N.D.deN., Niagara University
 Presenter: James T. Bretzke, S.J., Niagara University
 Respondents: Judith Merkle, S.N.D.deN., Niagara University
 Ruben Habito, Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University

Because of a travel difficulty due to a flight cancellation Ruben Habito appeared via Zoom for this session, and while he therefore could not simultaneously see both the presenter and other respondents, as well as the attendees, they all could see and hear him, so this proved to be more of a minor difficulty rather than a critical obstacle.

The presenter, James Bretzke, had prepared a handout with his PowerPoint slides for each attendee (which proved helpful since, due to a miscommunication, there was no projector available). A fuller version of the “written” version of the paper had been circulated several weeks earlier to the two respondents. Links were also provided to the attendees for the script for the PowerPoint presentation, the fuller article, as well as the texts of each respondent (provided with their permission). These files can also be found online on Bretzke’s academic webpage and at <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-slnIMBhaxOi1gzgAcAn5NP13XsqQPJ8/edit?usp=sharing&oid=103519537108777764442&rtpof=true&sd=true>.

Bretzke’s presentation centered around using the Zen *Koan* as an interpretive key for a new understanding of the Ignatian Third Degree of Humility. The Zen *Koan* (公案) is often (mis)understood as an esoteric non-rational puzzle such as “the sound of one-hand clapping.” While these riddles can guide practitioners to overcome the subject-object duality, real potential exists for inter-religious cross-fertilization leading to deeper insights into difficult problems in Christian spirituality, such as St. Ignatius’ Meditation on the Third Degree of Humility proposed in the Second Week of his *Spiritual Exercises* (cf., #164-68). This insight is probed using the critical moment of “apostasy” in Shusaku Endo’s well-known 1966 novel 沈黙 (*Silence*) to break open the key grace of the Ignatian meditation.

In his response Ruben Habito took up the concept of the *Koan* and said,

To practice with a Zen *Kōan*, it is often emphasized, is to be “faced with a matter of life and death.” If one misses the appropriate response, being saddled with an attachment, or with a distracting thought, or with a hesitation to respond out of cowardliness or fear, one loses one’s life. If one responds at the right moment, one gains Life, and overcomes Death, and awakens to one’s True Self—a True Self that embodies wisdom and compassion, and, in Ignatian terms, becomes a person for others, or one who lives no longer for oneself,

but utterly at the service of others, toward the alleviation of the pain and suffering of the world, toward the fullness of well-being of all.

In her Response Judith Merkle reflected on the deeper understandings of religious experience provided by Vatican II which

described religious life as a witness to grace and charity. It shifted this focus and image of the transformation involved in the lifestyle...yet language to express religious life remains part of the unfinished business of the council. However, we can appreciate the transformation required of Rodriguez before “the passing of the *koan*” when the heroic image of witness in times of persecution would have been the measure of faithfulness. Neither his spiritual culture nor the Japanese culture affirmed him. He lived in spiritual silence. People today do search for a re-enchantment which responds to modern sensibilities, and is centered in the faith of the Christian tradition. Is the *koan* facing the church today one to be a kenotic church, to depart from its previous triumphant stance, in order to witness to the kingdom?

The subsequent discussion by all those in attendance was a helpful elaboration on these presentations in light of the overall conference theme of “Thinking Catholic Interreligiously.”

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