

## FIELDWORK IN THEOLOGY – INTEREST GROUP

- Topic: Encounters in Fieldwork  
 Conveners: Lorraine Cuddeback-Gedeon, Mercy High School  
 Jaisy Joseph, Villanova University  
 Layla Karst, Loyola Marymount University  
 Moderator: Susan Bigelow Reynolds, Emory University  
 Presenters: Emma McDonald, Boston College  
 Jonathan Metz, Marquette University  
 Jaisy Joseph, Villanova University

This session foregrounded the distinctive ways that fieldwork contributes to theological knowledge by attending to the topic of “Encounter.” Each of the scholars in this session presented original fieldwork that engaged populations that often exist on the margins of theological and pastoral accounts of the church and offered conclusions that encouraged a more substantive theology rooted in the experiences and practices of living communities of faith.

Emma McDonald kicked off the session by presenting insights emerging from her research with Catholic women who have experienced infertility and with Catholic physicians who treat them. Her paper, “Catholic Women and Physicians’ Moral Decision-Making Regarding Infertility Treatments,” stands on the shoulders of previous studies that have demonstrated the minimal impact that magisterial teaching has had on the way Catholic laity make choices about their reproductive health. McDonald used a series of in-depth interviews to deepen our understanding of how women experiencing infertility make choices about their treatment and the relationship between these choices and their Catholic identity. McDonald identified two different understandings of Catholic identity that emerged consistently in her interviews: those (relatively few) who absorb and adhere to magisterial teachings regarding reproductive technology and those who have a selective disregard for magisterial authority. These identities in turn shaped how these women exercised moral agency—obedience for the first group and freedom to choose for the second. Through a rich array of women’s voices, McDonald revealed the complex decisions that Catholic women navigate in pursuing treatment for infertility. Despite the diversity of views and practices among Catholic women around treatment choices, McDonald also noted a striking consistency among her informants: the sense of isolation, shame, and guilt these Catholic women experienced within the church. This isolation and stigma has deep implications, she suggested, both for the church’s membership and the church’s ability to meaningfully contribute to moral formation.

In his paper, “Called By their Gifts: A Phenological Study of the Parish Director of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee,” Jonathan Metz presented the conclusions of his study of eleven lay and deacon parish directors in the archdiocese of Milwaukee. Metz argued that the parish director model seems to be working well throughout the diocese. In parishes led by deacons and lay persons, he found consistent evidence of parish renewal in the form of increasing engagement and better financial stability for the parish, parish leadership that is proactive rather than reactive, and healthy partnerships between parish directors and partner clergy. Metz situated this encouraging narrative

in the context of an archdiocese in which episcopal enthusiasm for this form of parish leadership has seemed to wane over the last 40 years. During this time, the archdiocesan seminary closed its doors to lay students and lay preaching has been increasingly restricted while increasing resources were devoted to recruiting young men to the priesthood. Parish directors feel this devaluation acutely. This emphasis on ordained leadership has come at a time when trust in this leadership has been challenged by the clergy sexual abuse crisis. Rather than seeing parish directors merely as a stop-gap measure for parish leadership, Metz argued that Catholics should be open to the possibility that this shift is a work of the Spirit that is breathing new life into the church.

Jaisy Joseph of Villanova University challenged prevailing assumptions about who is engaged in Catholic-interreligious encounters by first revealing and then challenging the ongoing racialization of perceived religious difference in the United States. Her paper, “The Racialization of Religion in the US: Eastern Catholics from Predominantly Muslim and Hindu Contexts,” grows out of her fieldwork among second generation Melkite and Syro-Malabar Catholics in the United States. Joseph shared stories of how two Arabic speaking Melkites navigated their own religious and cultural identities amidst the post-9/11 Islamaphobia and she discussed the different responses among first- and second-generation Syro-Malabar Catholics in Boston to the murder of George Floyd in 2020. The everyday experiences of these Eastern Catholics revealed consistent patterns of bias against perceived religious differences that were based on skin color, language, and cultural dress, which suggest that in the United States perceived religious difference is often confronted with racialized attitudes and behaviors. While some of her informants interpreted these experiences as a negation of their religious and cultural identity, others saw themselves as bridge builders with a unique investment in the ongoing work of interreligious dialogue and racial justice. Joseph concluded her presentation by exploring the consequences of these insights for the ongoing work of Catholic theologians striving to think interreligiously. The recognition and inclusion of Eastern Catholics who are frequently perceived as Muslim and Hindu, Joseph argued, can offer an important interruption to theological claims to supremacy and universality.

After the presentations, participants were invited to engage in conversation with one another over emerging themes and insights. The substantive discussion that followed noted the challenges of conducting fieldwork in ecclesial settings and discussed the implications of this theological method.

LAYLA KARST  
*Loyola Marymount University*  
*Los Angeles, California*