

CATHOLIC THEOLOGY AND THE CONTEMPORARY UNIVERSITY –  
INTEREST GROUP

Topic: The Catholic University in Church and World  
 Conveners: Edward P. Hahnenberg, John Carroll University  
 Catherine Punsalan-Manlimos, University of Detroit Mercy  
 Moderator: Edward P. Hahnenberg, John Carroll University  
 Presenters: Erin Brigham, University of San Francisco  
 Michael E. Lee, Fordham University

Catherine Punsalan-Manlimos introduced the inaugural session of the “Catholic Theology and the Contemporary University” interest group as an invitation to explore ways in which theology can inform how our institutions respond to the challenges facing higher education in the United States today. This three-year project seeks to surface critical issues and encourage members to bring their theological expertise to bear in addressing these issues. This year’s panelists were asked to frame the conversation ecclesialogically by addressing the relationship of Catholic universities to the people of God that constitute the local church and to the social concerns of the local community.

Erin Brigham’s paper, “Service as Accompaniment: The Relationship Between the Catholic University and the Local Church” (read by Nancy Dallavalle), began by noting the diversity at the University of San Francisco, where she serves as mission officer. Despite the school’s commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, many members of the community experience the Catholic Church as exclusionary, particularly with respect to gender. A recent self-study revealed a tendency to avoid discussing the university’s role in “service to the church”—one of the characteristics of Jesuit higher education identified in the Mission Priority Examen. For Brigham, this offers an opportunity to reflect theologically on the meaning of both “church” and “service.” Here the ecclesial vision of Pope Francis helps. Envisioning the church as the whole people of God, as field hospital, as continually going forth to the margins provides an “illuminative ecclesiology” (Stan Chu Ilo) that is particularly appealing. Similarly, service is not action for others, but with others. Such accompaniment requires closeness and openness to transformation. Brigham noted the challenges of bringing Pope Francis’ vision to life in our Catholic universities. Few participated in efforts to engage in the synodal process at USF. Yet other initiatives—such as Black Catholic History Month and Faith and Justice Roundtables—have been more successful, offering concrete encounters with the local church as the people of God. Perhaps, Brigham concluded, the role of the theologian is to foster such spaces intentionally, reflect on them explicitly, and promote an ongoing and mutually transformative dialogue within the university and the church.

Michael Lee’s paper, “University of the Poor: The Catholic University and the Social Context,” began by acknowledging both the differences among Catholic universities and the difference between these universities and the church as a communion of faith. Still, much can be gained by drawing on contemporary ecclesiology to reflect on the mission of Catholic higher education. In doing so, we recognize that our institutions are themselves entangled in structural injustice. The

college degree is both decisive and deeply racialized. Universities are often in dialectical, and not just accidental, relationship to local communities—a fact that extends beyond town-gown tensions to include long histories of slave-holding, gentrification, exploitation, and extraction. Do we imagine our institutions as the Good Samaritan, the victim, the priest who passes by, or the robbers themselves? In other words, turning to images of church as people of God or communion can presume a reality that is more aspirational than actual. More fruitful reflection opens up from the image of the church of the poor found in Pope Francis and Latin American liberation theologians such as Ignacio Ellacuría. Adopting this image, what would it mean to speak of “universities of the poor”? This would require a double response: (1) How do universities open doors to poor and marginalized communities? (2) How do they make poverty and structural injustice the focus of knowledge production? The latter demands a standpoint epistemology in which research programs recognize that knowledge is socially situated and that marginalized people have a positional advantage in gaining certain forms of knowledge. For all their salutary effects, typical diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts can easily succumb to deferential approaches in which agendas are firmly controlled by a group’s most advantaged people. Drawing on Olúfémi O. Táíwò’s notion of elite capture, Lee argued that “universities of the poor” must developed constructive epistemologies oriented toward a coalitional politics that builds and rebuilds actual structures of social connection and movement.

Following the presentations, the twenty-five participants broke into small groups to take up a series of discussion questions. These conversations surfaced several themes: building trust with dioceses; the value of community-based learning models (rather than “service learning”); what our institutions do to train those who do the work of coalition building; theology’s ecclesial context; the dominance of exclusively ethical modes of evaluation; and the importance of Catholicism as a multifaceted form of life.

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