

2023 CONVENTION THEME – FREEDOM

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, who has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor and has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,” (Luke 4:18, based on Isaiah 61:1-2; 58:6)

The gift and challenge of freedom are central to the Christian faith. The Triune God creates, redeems, and sustains human freedom, which, in turn, reflects and manifests divine freedom. Biblical narratives of God’s action on behalf of Israel in the Exodus and Jesus’ public ministry recount and summon liberation from oppression and exclusion. Grace and sin precondition human choices without canceling freedom. Christian theological traditions have debated the relationship between freedom, grace, and the law, and philosophical reflection has parsed connections among freedom and human dignity, rational self-governance, and power. Whereas freedom remains a constitutive dimension of agency and a necessary condition of moral responsibility, it has suffered from an individualistic conceptualization; emphases on negative immunities or narrow notions of autonomy often overshadow the significance of social context, contingency, and freedom’s costs. Recent social movements for recognition and accountability underscore the pervasive threats to freedom that persist in our day, from white supremacy to gendered violence to the global rise of authoritarianism. Tensions between individual liberty and the common good resurged during the pandemic, yet Catholic theology has long articulated a more robust understanding of freedom than mere license; the tradition has emphasized the personal and social responsibilities freedom entails. The time is ripe for renewed theological reflection on freedom.

These dimensions of *freedom* will serve as the focus for the 77th annual convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America, which will be held June 8-11, 2023 at the Hyatt Regency hotel in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Confirmed plenary speakers include Andrew Prevot, who will address the freedom of God and human freedom; Darlene Weaver, who will take up the relationship of freedom to moral agency, with Melissa Pagán responding; and Leo Guardado, Stan Chu Ilo and Mary Mee-Yin Yuen, who will address threats to freedom along with modes of resistance and agency in different international contexts. Francis Clooney, S.J., will deliver the presidential address.

A variety of our theological subdisciplines can help to illuminate freedom and its relationship to fragility, community, discipleship, identity, and the common good. Here are a few initial ideas, and I look forward to seeing your own creative applications:

- In light of our 2022 theme, how might we consider the meaning and grounding of freedom across world religions: whether as related to *geulah* in Judaism, in tension with surrender in Islam, in light of the multiple meanings of *moksa* and *nirvana* in Hindu and Buddhist traditions? How might the Southern African concept of Ubuntu or experiences of dispossession among the First Peoples of Africa, Australia, and the Americas inform understandings of the limits of freedom?

- How do insights from the Hebrew Bible shed light on the gift and task of freedom: whether in terms of liberation for covenantal relationship or release of those captive or in the shadow of exile/exilic mindset even after exile ends? How might freedom from enslavement to sin and death in the Pauline tradition do so, as well? How do other biblical narratives sustain those who must ‘make a way out of no way’ (Delores Williams), given barriers to their freedom?
- How might we reflect upon freedom and determinism in early Christian theology, from Christian attacks on gnostic determinism, to early Christian rejection of ancient notions of cosmic fatalism, to the question of the possibility of freedom from sin raised in the Pelagian controversy, or the question of the freedom of Jesus’ human will in later Christological reflection?
- How might turning to divine freedom and the immanent Trinity along with the relationship of freedom to creation, sin, Incarnation, redemption, grace, desire, and reason inform theological reflection on the subject? How do insights from liberation, political, and decolonial theologies likewise illuminate God as a source of freedom or modes of struggle for emancipation?
- How do Rahner’s fundamental option, von Balthasar’s ‘dramatic encounter’ between infinite and finite freedom, and Cone’s gospel agitation for Black freedom deepen our understanding of liberation? How do queer, feminist, womanist, Latinx, Asian American and disability theologies do so? In more practical ways, how can Christian communities recognize and respond to those inhibited by unfreedom(s)? How can they help unmask false freedoms?
- How might post-conciliar debates over ‘freedom in the church’ inform contemporary questions around participation, authority, disagreement, and dissent? How might Pope Francis’ call for free and honest speech (*parrhesia*) guide processes and shape structures for discernment and decision making within a synodal church? What role does freedom play in the relationship between individuation and communion? between ecclesial identity and ecumenical inclusion? between the ecclesial periphery and the ecclesial center?
- How do resources from pneumatology, mysticism, and spirituality serve to cultivate interior freedom? How are we to understand freedom against the backdrop of nature (physical and metaphysical) and eschatological destiny?
- What does it mean across different global contexts to confess that through his redemption, Christ has set us free (Gal 5:13) and this freedom is a foretaste of our own future freedom in glory (Rom 8:18-23)?
- How might reflection on the relationship of freedom to embodiment and relationality influence or challenge atomistic conceptions of autonomy? How might findings in neuroscience and moral psychology or medical and technological advancements impact understandings of the relationship of freedom to finitude and theological anthropology more broadly?

- How can framing the moral life in terms of the cultivation of virtue shape considerations of freedom and our capacity to take moral responsibility for ourselves and others?
- How do undemocratic political structures, economic precarity, hyperincarceration, trauma, legacies of slavery, internalized logics, and idealized social norms constrain freedom, and how can other structures and cultures liberate? How do we understand freedom as constitutive of agency, conscience, and self-determination in light of such contextual realities? How do forms of oppression circumscribe not only freedom but also responsibility?
- What does our theological tradition have to offer contemporary debates around freedom of expression and its limits (e.g., hate speech, ‘cancel culture’)? How can the legacy of *Dignitatis humanae* inform religious liberty debates, particularly in light of the relationship of human dignity to the freedom of the Church? More broadly, how has Catholic social doctrine developed *vis à vis* negative and positive freedoms and related human rights?
- How can the sacramental life of church foster freedom for discernment and pursuit of the good in response to God’s summons? How do Jesus’ promise of abundant life (John 10:10) and Christian discipleship invite conversion from certain captivities and coopting forces? How can sacramental and other religious practices empower agency? How might art, community organizing, and social movements do the same?

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