

DOING THEOLOGY FROM THE PERIPHERIES – SELECTED SESSION

- Topic: Doing Theology from the Peripheries: Roundtable Discussion and Analysis from the North American Working Group for the Dicastery for the Promotion of Integral Human Development Project
- Convener: Bradford Hinze, Fordham University
- Moderator: Meghan J. Clark, St. John’s University
- Panelists: Stan Chu Ilo, DePaul University
Jennifer Owens-Jofré, Saint Louis University
Darren Dias, University of St. Michael’s

Stan Chu Ilo introduced *Doing Theology from the Existential Peripheries* as a research project undertaken by the Migrants and Refugees Section of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development of the Holy See. Drawing its inspiration from the teachings of Pope Francis with the aim of renewing theology, this project enlisted theologians and pastoral agents from around the world to initiate listening sessions with marginalized people. Their objective was to listen to and record the *sensus fidei fidelium* of those often excluded from conversations in the church and society to elicit the conversion of people at all levels of the church and society.

Three ideas inspired this project. First, at the inception of his papacy Francis urged people to listen to and learn from those at the “existential peripheries” of the church and society. Second, people were encouraged to reach out to denigrated people, such as migrants and refugees and others shamed and shunned in popular, public, and political discourse. Third, this project calls for collective deliberation with these marginalized persons and communities to search for ways to address these issues.

This project provides a staging ground to develop a different way of doing theology in colleges and universities, ministerial programs, and in the life of dioceses, parishes, and base communities. It calls upon theologians to cultivate a method of “spiritual ethnography” that encounters others within their own cultures, histories, and religious contexts as the bases of pastoral accompaniment. Such a process provides an innovative way of enacting a synodal process that incorporates voices that are often muted in the church and at centers of power.

Jennifer Owens-Jofré introduced this method by reflecting on her encounter with a second-generation Cuban American man living in Orange County who struggled against racism and the violence of neo-Nazis and as one who left the Catholic Church. She commented on the larger project by describing how each theologian interviewed two or three groups and three to five individuals. These pastoral ethnographers selected topics from a variety of the teachings of Francis that might elicit the lived experiences of those interviewed: Revelation and Joy, Dialogue and Encounter, Leaving Clericalism Behind, Hope and Trust, Christians in the Public Sphere, Women’s Perspectives, Wisdom from the Margins, Ecological Conscience, Welcoming the Stranger, and Vulnerability and Tenderness. Those interviewed were asked to speak briefly about their joys and grievances within the church or society. They commented on their experience of God’s presence or absence and how they name God, struggle with God, and how they experience God in communities of faith.

In many cases those interviewed felt alienated from the church and in society. They experienced hostility because of the color of their skin, their primary language, their context of origin, their gender, their sexual orientation, who they loved, and their own journey of discovering and claiming the gift of who they are.

Based on her experience, Owens-Jofré reached the conclusion that by promoting right and just relationships with those on the margins she discovered a way to promote the delicate dance between applying her expertise in practical theology, especially from Hispanic/Latine perspectives, with cultural and epistemological humility, while remaining rooted in practices of individual and collective discernment promoted by synodal process models.

The third presenter, Darren Dias, raised observations about the challenges posed by reaching out to those at the periphery about polarization and the exercise of power. Marginal groups were interviewed, but inevitably some were overlooked. How can theologians engage these people so that their voices can shape how theology is done? Classical approaches to the interpretation of scripture and doctrinal and theological traditions in theological disciplines must be interrogated based on these kinds of experiences with the marginalized. How can we consider God's mercy and compassion for those at the borders and the role played by the ordained and other pastoral agents, including educators? How can our approach to encountering life and the world be reconsidered and refashioned by our engagement with those at the margins? How can the marginalized set the agenda for theology?

It must be recognized that those conducting the interviews had a great deal of agency. Interviewers sought to listen and learn, but they were the ones asking the questions. What questions would the marginalized have asked those interviewing or interviewed? The group from North America interviewed people in or near Chicago, Ciudad Juárez, El Paso, New York, Toronto, and San Diego. These included groups of the poor, circles of women, people of color, LGBTQ people, and groups of migrants. Those interviewed seemed to welcome the interviewers as representatives of the Catholic Church, which can also be an obstacle. As Dias concluded, theologians are increasingly aware that theologians are engaging in critical border thinking with those marred by colonial and imperial wounds. We can't be naïve about the need for theologians to reform their discipline informed by these new levels of encounter and engagement.

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