

CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Freedom
Convener: Jens Mueller, Notre Dame of Maryland University
Moderator: Phyllis Zagano, Hofstra University
Presenters: Christopher Welch, Rivier University
Nicholas Olkovich, St. Mark's College

This session comprised two papers, each approximately twenty-five minutes, followed by a question and answer session and a business meeting that filled the remainder of the allotted time.

In his paper, “Work and Human Freedom in Consumer Culture and Higher Education,” Christopher Welch addressed the issue of college undergraduates’ more extensive work for pay habits to maintain a lifestyle formed in a culture of consumption. Welch argued that such attitudes and practices limit one’s human freedom. Although Catholic Social Teaching promotes work as co-creation with God and as a vocation, such work, “good work,” is often partial in paid employment. Catholic institutions of higher education must respond attentively to those constraints of consumer culture and promote a broader definition of vocation that includes paid employment and productive leisure. Welch suggested that college students, who free themselves from consumer culture, are more likely to have time also to explore vocation in the “good work” of communities of creative leisure through activities like making and crafting.

In his paper, “The Politics of Religious Freedom: Revisiting the Murray Project for a Polarized Age,” Nicholas Olkovich discussed John Courtney Murray’s juridical argument for religious freedom considering his critics like David L. Schindler. Olkovich contended that Murray’s approach can be strengthened by complicating his unsystematic appeal to the classicism/historical consciousness distinction in the work of Bernard Lonergan. Moreover, he argued that Schindler’s soft integralism has potentially given cover to a particular brand of postliberal Catholicism which is less inclined to trust in the “power of truth” or to affirm freedom for all. Olkovich began by posing Murray’s juridical argument against the backdrop of pre-conciliar church teaching, followed by Schindler’s critical project, which is centered on exposing the false neutrality of Murray’s juridical argument. Central to Schindler’s critique, Olkovich suggested, is the postliberal claim that negative conceptions of freedom are dependent upon positive conceptions of freedom’s substance and purpose. After discussing Bernard Lonergan’s classicism/historical consciousness distinction concerning John Courtney Murray’s juridical argument of religious freedom, Olkovich concluded with Pope Francis’ political vision *ad extra* and his *ad intra* call for a synodal church as the background against which an updated argument for the right to religious freed as both immunity and empowerment might be developed but also expanded to intra-ecclesial realities.

The discussion that followed prompted both presenters to move beyond their points. First, both panelists were given a few minutes to respond to each other’s presentations and conversed for a few moments about the genesis of their respective projects. Among others, the questions discussed were on the nature of freedom and

work. For example, one question specifically asked about the nature of gang violence and its relation to freedom. Another question brought up the nature of volunteer work as an example of “good work.” No unanimous verdict was reached.

In the end, the Catholic Social Thought Topic Session had a business meeting discussing on the future of this session for the annual CTSA meetings. The context of this discussion was the dwindling number of proposal submissions over the last few years. Possible reasons for the lack of submission were the submission deadlines, the lack of interest in the previous few years’ overall themes, and, most concerning, a lack of interest or overgeneralizing sentiment of what Catholic Social Thought entails. Given next year’s theme of “Social Salvation,” Kevin Ahern suggests clearly explaining how this session exemplifies social salvation. He concluded the business meeting with the important phrase, “If everything is Catholic Social Thought, then nothing is Catholic Social Thought.”

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