

CHURCH/ECUMENISM – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Freedom in the Church
 Convener: Natalia Imperatori-Lee, Manhattan College
 Moderator: Elyse Raby, Santa Clara University
 Presenters: Layla Karst, Loyola Marymount University
 Jaisy Joseph, Villanova University
 Jeannine Hill Fletcher, Fordham University

The panel began with twenty-minute presentations, followed by a short question and answer session. Additional questions and conversation took place following the third presentation.

Layla Karst’s presentation, “Bold Speech: Lay Liturgical Preaching and the Synodal Church,” began with a claim made in the 2022 Vatican Working Document for the Continental State of the Synod on Synodality, which identifies the Eucharist as the “‘source and summit’ of the church’s synodal dynamism.” Karst also noted that the report overall is quite critical of Eucharistic liturgies. Karst suggested that, despite its own claims, the report actually demonstrates that non-eucharistic liturgies are the true center of a synodal church. Drawing on her own research on pandemic Liturgies of the Word, Karst argued that the freedom provided by the pandemic for laity to engage in preaching constituted a concrete liturgical manifestation of the synodal church. Karst further suggested that such pandemic liturgies could inform Eucharistic practices and point toward reform. Karst concluded that, in their current form, Eucharistic liturgies “often fail to give expression to a synodal church and instead reinforce a clericalist ecclesiology that ritualizes and consecrates the voice of the clergy and the silence of the laity.” While acknowledging that “lay preaching in the moment of the Eucharistic homily faces significant structural barriers in the Roman Catholic rite,” such barriers have still not stifled the Spirit.

Jaisy Joseph’s presentation, “From Humiliation to Healing: A Mimetic Account of Finding Freedom through the Forgiving Victim,” examined the way “the color line” which divides the United States as a country has been reproduced within the confines of the US Catholic Church. Joseph cited Julian Robinson Moore to ask whether “racism against black people and other non-white people [could] be a by-product of internal rivalry between white people,” and the resulting unexamined, “unmetabolized” trauma of white-on-white violence. Drawing on the work of Resmaa Menakem, Joseph explained how “[t]he entire myth of race that necessitates the humiliation and dehumanization of entire groups of people according to skin color is based on the scapegoating mechanism that offers temporary unity between white people, helping them to manage their fears and rivalries with other white people.” Yet “the temporary relief of the scapegoating mechanism provides no actual healing of earlier trauma,” so that this trauma is merely “passed on to the next generation in an unmetabolized form.” Ultimately, Joseph proposed a solution grounded in James Alison’s mimetic understanding of the Eucharist. The presence of Christ, as the Forgiving Victim, in the Eucharist can enable the kind of truth telling required of white Christians to metabolize their “dirty pain,” of avoidance, blame and denial, in to the “clean pain,” of fully and honestly facing America’s racial history and trauma.

Jeannine Hill Fletcher's, "In Bondage and In Freedom: Intimacies of a Black and White Catholicism," focused on the South Carolina parish of Saint James the Greater, one of the longest standing Black Catholic churches in the nation. Hill Fletcher described the story of St. James as "a story of freedom and unfreedom in a Black and White Catholic Church," a story that must be reckoned with to achieve freedom for the American Catholic church in our current ecclesial moment. Specifically, the relationship between two parish matriarchs, Elizabeth Pinckney and Henrietta (Hetty), a white woman and the enslaved black woman she owned, was identified as rich site of analysis. Hetty is listed as co-sponsor for a number of parish baptisms, despite the misrecognition of Hetty in the 1850 parish baptismal roll as "slave of Mrs. E. P." Hill Fletcher noted that "this same American Catholicism that gave life to Henrietta [and other Black Catholics]...was the very same structure that took the freedom of their lives from them" as White Catholic leaders like Bishop John England authored passionate defenses of slavery from a Catholic perspective.

Hill Fletcher concluded that, within the interconnected histories of Black Catholicism and White Catholicism, white Catholics "used the bodies and breath of Black Catholics to build wealth" and that "the Catholic tradition provided resources to sustain Black Catholics to withstand the Catholic assault on their personhood." Following Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart's proposition that engaging historical trauma involves truth-telling about history, Hill Fletcher observed that American Catholics will only escape the unnamed bondage to the sin of white supremacy by telling the stories of communities like St. James.

KATHRYN L. REINHARD
Gwynedd Mercy University
Gwynedd Valley, Pennsylvania