

LITURGY/SACRAMENTS – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Freedom
 Convener: Kimberly Belcher, University of Notre Dame
 Moderator: Thomas McLean, KU Leuven
 Presenters: LaRyssa Herrington, University of Notre Dame
 Bruce Morrill, S.J., Vanderbilt University
 Erin Kidd, St. John’s University (Jamaica, New York)

Flora X. Tang, a Ph.D. student at the University of Notre Dame, read LaRyssa Herrington’s essay, “Baptism as Mystical-Political Engagement? Exploring the Rite of Baptism in African American Slave Narratives During the Antebellum Period,” in her absence. The presentation explored the meanings and freedoms afforded by baptism, eagerly sought by many enslaved persons. African American slave narratives and the spirituals associated with them demonstrate that despite the fact that Christianity served ambivalently in the antebellum South as a tool of coercion and a force for liberation, baptism was experienced as a mystical-political force for liberation for many enslaved people. Herrington analyzed the baptismal theology implicit in slave narratives that described hymns based on the Jordan image of Christ’s baptism and the idea of new birth and adoption by the Holy Spirit. She recorded a stirring reading of an excerpt from Nat Turner’s *Confessions*, which proved a uniquely enlightening source. Turner’s apocalyptic imagery marks his understanding of baptism as a mystical-political engagement of the memory of the crucified Christ, which was “dangerous” to the system of slavery. Baptism and the Holy Spirit, then, became a primary force for Turner’s resistance, even unto death. Herrington proposes that this mystical-political meaning of baptism is a fifth possible “image” of baptism along the four Maxwell Johnson has described in the early Christian period.

Bruce Morrill’s presentation, “Taking Liberties with Liturgy: Consistency and Conflicts in Principles, Legal and Theological,” considered the recent incidents surrounding the use of “we baptize you” instead of “I baptize you” in the baptismal formula. Reviewing the events against the backdrop of the ever-unfolding sexual abuse crisis, Morrill focused on the voice of lay people, who freely advised their bishop and objected to the removal of Fr. Andres Arango. Their comments rely on a theology of priesthood marked by moral exemplarity and relationality, and they appealed to the merciful authority of Jesus himself as a higher example than the bishop. This theological frame contrasts with that of the 2020 decision (reversing a 2003 ruling) that “We baptize you...” renders a baptism invalid, which is part of a Vatican strategy “to shore up its ideology of the priesthood” and likewise of the sacraments in ontological terms. This sacramental theology runs up against a predominantly moral and personal understanding of the sacramental life in American Vatican-II-formed Catholics.

Erin Kidd, in “Is the Feminist Free to Pray on Her Knees?” also interrogated liturgical practice in the context of the clergy sex abuse crisis. 4E cognition examines the way that thought is “embodied, embedded, enacted, and extended” in human physical posture. “Vertically oriented gestures” like kneeling and standing operate in many cultural systems as orientations to the divine (up) and human (down). Kidd summarized psychological studies that associate higher vertical positioning with both

moral superiority and power differentials. Downward, constrained postures like kneeling are associated with submission to God, but also with “authoritarianism and fundamentalism, low arousal, negative affect, and aggressive and vengeful images of God.” This difficulty is exacerbated by the fact that such postures, in a liturgical context, are often proximally directed at the priest, and by the different experiences of such postures by women and abuse survivors. Even though kneeling poses risks, Kidd argues, not kneeling also poses risks: “The practices of our submission to God will always be entangled with the powers of this world. ... The dangers of kneeling will only be alleviated when we live in a world that embraces all people standing up for themselves.”

The presentations were followed by a lively conversation on authority, embodied practice, cultural differences, and other topics, ably facilitated by Tom McLean.

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