

CATHOLIC THEOLOGY AND THE CONTEMPORARY UNIVERSITY –
INTEREST GROUP

Topic: The Human Person and the Catholic University
 Conveners: Edward P. Hahnenberg, John Carroll University
 Catherine Punsalan-Manlimos, Seattle University
 Moderator: Nancy Dallavalle, Fairfield University
 Presenters: J. Matthew Ashley, University of Notre Dame
 Craig A. Ford, Jr., Saint Norbert College
 Elisabeth Vasko, Duquesne University

The second year of the “Catholic Theology and the Contemporary University” interest group continued to explore ways in which theology can inform how our institutions respond to the challenges facing higher education today. Following the inaugural session’s emphasis on ecclesiology, this year’s panel took up theological anthropology.

J. Matthew Ashley began his paper “Teaching and Spiritual Direction: A Fruitful Tension?” by reflecting on the *perichoresis* between the objective-theoretical and the engaged-spiritual at play in his courses on mysticism and spiritual direction. How far can one go in imagining the university classroom on the model of spiritual direction? Pointing to wide-ranging research on the benefits of contemplative practices in higher education, Ashley argued that theologians have a special role to play in making such practices available to students. Moreover, rather than “disembed” these practices from their respective religious traditions, theologians teaching at Catholic universities ought to “re-embed” these practices within the larger schools of Christian mysticism out of which they emerge. Ashley illustrated the benefits of such contextualization with three examples. From the Cistercian tradition, Ashley noted how Thomas Merton’s “Fourth and Walnut experience” was experienced within a “mystical anthropology” that presents the spiritual life as an often arduous and gradual schooling of desires. From the Ignatian tradition, Ashley argued that the movement from the first week to the second week of the Spiritual Exercises avoids imagining contemplative practice as a “bubble” of serenity, sealed off from a suffering world. From the Carmelite tradition, Ashley pointed to Constance FitzGerald’s use of the Dark Night to help navigate the paralyzing impasse experienced in so many ways by our students today.

In “Catholic Theology and DEI Initiatives on Campus,” Craig A. Ford, Jr., argued that it is vital for Catholic theologians to engage in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion efforts on campus. He contrasted two approaches. The first (illustrated with essays by Matthew Petrusek and Justin Anderson) adopts an ahistorical, philosophical method that presents conceptual definitions of “inclusion” or “diversity” abstracted from the struggles on our campuses. In contrast, a second approach (exemplified in an essay by Teresa Nance) is autobiographical, contextualized, and data-informed. Nance offers an argument firmly grounded in the concrete reality of campus life today; however, what she does not provide is any theological analysis of these issues. Ford described a chasm between theological and philosophical analyses of Catholic identity, on the one hand, and on-the-ground efforts of DEI officers, on the other. Calling us into the breach, Ford challenged theologians to craft theological arguments that deliberately engage the

exclusions and inequities on our campuses based on race, ethnicity, ability, gender, and socioeconomic background.

In “Are You Brave Enough to Believe? Courageous Leadership in Catholic Universities,” Elisabeth T. Vasko drew on the mystic Julian of Norwich and the poet Amanda Gorman to awaken the moral imagination within our institutions. For Vasko, Catholic universities have lost touch with Christianity’s courageous origin story. Too many decisions are made out of fear instead of love. Starting with the abundance of love, Vasko argued, is neither sentimental nor naïve. It is the foundation for an alternative vision and for concrete, disruptive action that demands great courage. In a world of hegemonic violence, pandemic, natural disaster, economic inequality, and profound suffering—a world not unlike our own—Julian of Norwich saw an alternative to imagining a God of wrath. Her confidence that “all shall be well” was not a pious platitude; it was a radical call for inclusion. Julian’s disruptive insight reveals “the power of vigilant reflection within the context of myopic vision.” Many of us work in Catholic universities where all is not well. In order to unmask structural problems *and* disrupt a dysfunctional social order, people need creative space for healing and imagining afresh. Amanda Gorman suggests a path forward by asking two questions, “Whose shoulders do you stand on? What do you stand for?” Her poetry unearths the past in order to open up the future. We might do the same, Vasko suggests, by asking concrete questions at our own institutions: How did everyone arrive at their respective positions? How was the land acquired? How has money flowed over time? Doing so requires great courage and firm hope for the future.

Discussion among the thirty-seven participants ranged widely and fruitfully, touching on the communal nature of hope, false dichotomies, center versus periphery, the mental health crisis among undergraduates, the importance of building coalitions, and the need for a new theology of the university.

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