

THE MORAL THEOLOGY OF POPE FRANCIS – SELECTED SESSION

- Topic: The Moral Theology of Pope Francis: An Invitation to Enact Social Salvation
- Convener: Conor M. Kelly, Marquette University
- Moderator: Daniel DiLeo, Creighton University
- Panelists: M.T. Dávila, Merrimack College
Laurie Johnston, Emmanuel College
Andrea Vicini, S.J., Boston College

The session began with an overview of the context that led to the papers. This session asked three contributors to a new edited volume on *The Moral Vision of Pope Francis: Expanding the US Reception of the First Jesuit Pope* (Georgetown University Press, 2024) to articulate the impact of Francis’s implicit approach to moral theology for the guild, with a special emphasis on moving from the particular to the universal, and how his moral vision provides an invitation to enact social salvation.

In the first paper, “New Sources and a Stronger Pastoral Impact: Moral Theology in Light of Francis’s Social Ethics,” M.T. Dávila developed observations from her chapter on the preferential option for the poor in Francis’s thought and identified encounter, listening, and dreaming as three key movements in Francis’s moral vision. First, encounter, invites genuine engagement with others, especially the marginalized, to help Christians realize what the call to love one’s neighbor demands in practice. Listening, in the synodal model, provides a way to transcend polarization and seek mutual understanding in pursuit of shared solutions to human crises. Dreaming, by asking everyone to imagine what a more hope-filled future can look like, inspires action that will make the social salvation God has promised a reality for all. In each case, Dávila stressed that Francis’s hopes for encounter, listening, and dreaming have still fallen short, particularly in a US context, due to an incomplete reception. This critical analysis provided the basis for the final portion of Dávila’s paper, which explored ambiguities and limitations in Francis’s own use of encounter, listening, and dreaming, as exemplified by his recent comments on the prospect of women deacons and his repeated use of a homophobic slur, resulting in Dávila’s call for a renewed commitment to working for the good of the church across contemporary society.

With the second paper, “From Where? For Whom? Tradition and Moral Theology in Light of Francis’s Ethics of War and Peace,” Laurie Johnston challenged the tendency to forefront the ethics of war and to treat peace as an afterthought by analyzing Francis’s contributions to the magisterial promotion of “positive peace.” Explaining that Francis champions peace with the image of a polyhedron (and providing her own visual aid!), Johnston noted that this shape contrasts with a sphere—in which a smooth surface is defined by all the points that are exactly the same distance from the center—to accentuate difference through the “sharp edges” connecting the facets. The implication for Francis’s ethics of peace and war is that uniformity is not the ideal resolution of conflict, but that tolerance of genuine difference makes peace a “continuing adventure” of journeying with those who may disagree. Johnston illustrated how Francis’s comments on war can be interpreted through this vision for peace, with nonviolent resistance emerging as a way to challenge injustice not simply

by avoiding conflict, but sometimes by accentuating it for the right reasons. Like Dávila, Johnston explored ambiguities in Francis's ethics, noting that he rejects the viability of a "just war" in today's context while simultaneously drawing on the just war criteria in certain circumstances. Additionally, Johnston highlighted how the pursuit of peace through nonviolent means can have limitations in practice, creating a productive tension for Catholic moral theology's efforts to explore contemporary challenges in constant conversation with the broader tradition.

Andrea Vicini, S.J., offered the final paper, "Broader Concerns and a Deeper Christological Focus: Moral Theology in Light of Francis's Bioethics," using recurring themes in Francis's comments on bioethics to explicate a threefold method underlying Francis's approach to moral problems. First, Francis emphasizes a spiritual relationship with Christ, who is shown in the Incarnation to be intimately connected to our deepest human concerns, yielding a bioethics that seeks new ways to address human needs. Second, Francis stresses discernment as a process for navigating ambiguity without denying complexity, generating a bioethics that is driven less by single issue concerns and more attentive to the overarching problems facing moral agents and their communities. Finally, Francis constantly attends to the experiences of the people, with a special emphasis on the marginalized, to forefront issues like the global impact of COVID-19 and the effects of the climate crisis. These issues are crucially important for those on the peripheries even as they are sometimes hidden from the privileged. With this analysis, Vicini gave a clear sense of Francis's priorities not just for bioethics but also for theological ethics more broadly.

The session concluded with a robust discussion among the panelists and attendees, exploring the continuities and discontinuities between Francis's approach and that of his predecessors along with potential reasons for Francis's most distinctive emphases.

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