

SANCTIFYING SOCIAL STRUCTURES: INTERDISCIPLINARY RESOURCES
FOR CATHOLIC THEOLOGY – SELECTED SESSION

Topic: Sanctifying Social Structures: Interdisciplinary Resources for Catholic Theology
 Convener: Vincent Birch, University of Saint Francis (Indiana)
 Moderator: Nicholas Hayes-Mota, Santa Clara University
 Presenters: David Cloutier, The Catholic University of America
 Christina McRorie, Boston College School of Theology and Ministry
 Vincent Birch, University of Saint Francis

In light of the convention theme, “Social Salvation,” David Cloutier, Christina McRorie, and Vincent Birch proposed this session in order to investigate both the ways in which social structures can contribute to personal holiness and how social structures might be transformed in and through the holiness of the persons inhabiting them.

In a paper entitled “Social Structures, Alienation, and Self-Gift,” David Cloutier sought to overcome the tendency to interpret the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity competitively by outlining how they can be situated as complementary principles ordered toward the fulfillment of the human person as a social being. Cloutier began by observing that Catholic social teaching presents the human person as ordered toward self-gift and that this ordering, because it is meant to be fulfilled in the various social dimensions of human life, can provide a foundation for social ethics. With continued attention to Catholic social teaching as well as to the thought of Luigi Taparelli, Cloutier argued that the principle of subsidiarity, rightly conceived, is concerned with the realization of goods proper to particular social bodies such that the human persons comprising them give of themselves to each other in manners appropriate to those social bodies. Cloutier concluded by arguing that critical realist sociology, with the tools it offers for irreducibly relating persons, social structures, and systems, is helpful for spelling out how particular groups can seek their goods (according to the principle of subsidiarity) in a manner that is conducive to the attainment of goods by other groups (according to the principle of solidarity), under the aspect of the human ordering toward self-gift.

McRorie’s paper, “Some Implications of the Claim that Social Contexts Can Sanctify,” was concerned with both the theological presuppositions and consequences of the idea that sanctification may be mediated through human social formation. McRorie began by noting that accepting this idea depends on an understanding of human freedom as consisting in being oriented toward the good rather than in autonomous choice; otherwise, social formation constitutes a threat to human agency. Furthermore, the claim that social structures can sanctify, McRorie argued, entails that grace leaves a discernible impact on the character of human persons (since social structures do) and that sanctification can occur unconsciously (since much social formation does). She noted that although socially mediated sanctification is in a sense the flipside of the concept of social sin, it comes with a particular challenge: the implication that human beings are subject to “spiritual moral luck,” given the wide variability in the degree to which social contexts encourage good character and thus aid sanctification. After acknowledging the difficulties this prospect generates,

McRorie proposed that it also gives rise to the imperative that Christians strive to shape social structures to make it easier for all to be holy.

Birch's paper was entitled, "Divinized via Social Construction?: A Semiotic Analysis of the Relation between Social Construction and Holiness in Revelation and its Reception." The central question he sought to address was how revelation can contribute to human deification if it partly consists of social constructions (inclusive of social structures, semiotically conceived). He began by drawing on the semiotic thought of John of St. Thomas, Charles Sanders Peirce, and John Deely in order to define social constructions as entities consisting of socially founded relations of reason that shape human perception, knowledge, and action. Birch then attended to various social constructions incorporated into God's public revelation and concluded that while God did employ social constructions in divine revelation, God also transfigured those constructions, stripping them of the ideological content they possess as human social constructions, in founding them as sign-vehicles bearing a relation to God's inner mystery. In concluding, Birch employed semiotics to gesture toward how the reception of divine revelation, including the social constructions employed in it, can, first, effect the deification of the human person by bringing about the invisible divine missions in the person, and, second, transform the social structures the person inhabits by virtue of the reconstitution of his or her perception, knowledge, and action by the Word.

The session saved time for discussion until the conclusion of all three papers. This allowed for rich interaction between ideas in the papers precipitated by questions on nature and grace, on when social structures might need to be destroyed rather than transformed, and on the relation between the capacity of human agents for free choice and the fact that they are subject to the influence of social context.

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