

FUNDAMENTAL THEOLOGY/METHOD – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Social Salvation
 Convener: T. Derrick Witherington, Loyola University Chicago
 Moderator: Jack Pappas, Fordham University
 Presenter: Sara Hulse Kirby, DeSales University
 Christopher Cimorelli, National Institute for Newman Studies
 Joseph Ogbonnaya, Marquette University

This session explored the conference theme of “Social Salvation” from a variety of fundamental theological angles. Our first paper, by Sara Hulse Kirby, was entitled “The Social Aspects of Dogma: Henri de Lubac’s Catholicism in Trinitarian Perspective.” Kirby maintained, along with Joseph Ratzinger, that the understanding of the Trinity as unity-in-distinction is the hermeneutical key to understanding de Lubac’s conception of the church. The paper first generally introduced the context of Catholicism’s composition, then drew attention to the principle of unity-in-distinction de Lubac derives from the Trinitarian distinctions, and finally showed that this principle is the hermeneutical key to de Lubac’s vision of the church. This vision of the church, Kirby observed, corresponds to what social movements of de Lubac’s day (such as Marxism) were trying to achieve but failed to do, namely, establish a healthy and workable balance between collective unity and individual freedom. Catholicism is in its very essence “social” insofar as its self-understanding is grounded in the Trinitarian relations which maintain and express a unity in essence with a diversity of expression. The questions and discussion following Kirby’s paper centered on the distinctive operations of the persons of the Trinity in de Lubac’s oeuvre as well as how de Lubac’s understanding of the church serves as a corrective to contemporary forms of populism.

Our second presenter, Christopher Cimorelli, presented a paper entitled “The Fate of Original Sin in an Age of Social and Ecological Awareness.” When faced with scientific understandings of human origins, Cimorelli argued, before any meaningful discussion of “social salvation” can occur, it is first necessary to articulate a contextually plausible understanding of original sin which avoids either fideism or dismissing this concept altogether. After first introducing the scientific theories which problematize the classical doctrine of original sin and then reminding us of the history of this doctrine, Cimorelli analyzed constructive theological attempts (e.g. Elizabeth Johnson and Loren Haarsma) to find a model of salvation from sin as a “social-ecological” reality, thereby incorporating the insights of scientific theories while also safeguarding the essence of the doctrine of original sin and salvation. This presentation prompted a lively discussion with questions centering on the nature of the church’s initial rejection of the theories of evolution, contemporary expressions of fideism, and how developments in the understanding of sexuality could challenge and/or enhance the church’s understanding of original sin.

Our final paper was presented by Joseph Ogbonnaya and was entitled “Dei Verbum and Contextual Reading of the Bible in Africa.” Ogbonnaya’s paper first introduced early expressions of African biblical hermeneutics (e.g., Origen and Augustine) before then articulating the ecclesiological foundations of biblical

interpretation extrapolated from *Dei Verbum*. These foundations, Ogbonnaya noted, also encourage the development of contextual biblical hermeneutics. For this reason, Ogbonnaya argued that Western theologians trying to understand a contextual reading of the Bible from Africa, need not only to rely on formal-methodological approaches, but also the way the Bible is read and encountered by ordinary Africans. This would serve to further the work of decolonizing the way the Bible is understood in an African context, which continues to rely too heavily on methodological tools imported from the West. This would also enable the Bible to come alive for African Christians in a more existentially meaningful way, which would assist the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches in retaining members who are attracted to evangelical churches, which focus on individual believers' experience of the Bible while simultaneously preaching various forms of the "prosperity Gospel." The discussion of Ogbonnaya's paper centered on the role of evangelical churches in promulgating the "prosperity Gospel" and to what extent the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches were aware of and responsive to this issue.

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