

SPIRITUALITY – TOPIC SESSION

- Topic: Migrant Spirituality and Social Salvation
 Convener: Axel M. Oaks Takacs, Seton Hall University
 Moderator: Michael Rubbelke, Saint John’s School of Theology and Seminary
 Presenters: Rafael Luévano, Chapman University
 Dorris Van Gaal, Calvert Hall College High School
 Respondent: Leo Guardado, Fordham University

The Spirituality Topic Session featured two papers and a response on the theme of migrant spirituality in the context of the convention theme, “Social Salvation.”

Rafael Luévano presented a contemplative reflection on the migrant caravans journeying from south of the US border to North America. In his “Hope and the Migrant Spiritual Pilgrimage: Accompanied by a Photographic Hymn of Praise to Migrants,” Luévano provided recent history and data regarding the caravans. For the last twenty years, Luévano has been interviewing and photo-documenting migrants who have made the journey north to the US–Mexico border and beyond. In reflecting on his conversations theologically, he notes the power of hope, the “manifestation of the middle theological virtue,” as the animating and communal force driving and sustaining migrants in their journeys. In migrant spirituality, hope is at once a driving force to live, the immediacy to act, a call from God, a communal experience and expression, and the interior transformation of “constant becoming.” This hope is framed through the religious practice of pilgrimage. His presentation was accompanied by stunning photos he has collected over the last two decades.

Dorris Van Gaal explored the role storytelling plays in spiritual development through the lens of first-generation African migrants to the US. Her paper, “A Call to Social Transformation: A Reflection on Spiritual Storytelling among African Migrants to the USA,” drew from her first-hand interviews with African migrants. To develop the latent spirituality within both the stories and the migrant experiences, she analyzed them through John of the Cross’ poem, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, along with his auto-commentary. Her presentation explored the transformation of faith and identity that took place between the departure and arrival of migrants. In applying the Carmelite friar’s mystical theology to the first-hand migrant stories, Van Gaal described the spiritual import of vulnerability, spiritual humility, and God’s transformative agency that was the undercurrent of the migrant stories. In brief, their “vulner-ability” (capable of being “wounded,” from *vulnus*) becomes “cope-ability.” Their faith, hope, and love enables them to journey through spiritual descent (departure) to spiritual ascent (ongoing arrival and settlement). Van Gaal then shared various stories that demonstrate not only this spiritual framing but also how storytelling transforms and sustains migrants and their communities by giving meaning to their otherwise harrowing experiences. This was all related to social salvation: when we become aware of the “spiritual capital” we possess, we are given the “freedom of spirit” not merely to survive and cope, but to flourish and boldly call and work for social transformation, a “subversive element of social salvation.”

Leo Guardado responded both through his professional expertise in mystical theology and spirituality and through his personal experience as a migrant. Noting that

mystical theologies conceptualize God as ineffable mystery toward which wayfarers perpetually journey (drawing on the case of Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*), there is no stable end to one's spiritual growth. This is reflected in the constant becoming of migrants's journeys. Even when migration is forced, one is compelled through an agential desire for freedom. While many migrants may be fleeing a lack of freedom (Egypt), they do not skip directly to the promised land but must survive, through God and the community, many hardships (the wilderness). This presents the paradox of spiritual journeys: hope is the surrender of the self to God and to the sustaining community when you recognize you are no longer in control of the journey. Like Gregory of Nyssa, you are always progressing and never arriving. The goal therefore is not attaining absolute stability—in God, in society, in community—but becoming “a friend of God.”

The discussions and questions at the end of each paper and then at the end Guardado's response were intellectually and affectively stimulating. Numerous members of the audience had either experienced forced migration themselves or had worked with migrant communities—in addition to being scholars of spiritualities and mystical theologies. For example, one noted the power of lament in social transformation, connecting it with how James Cone speaks of African American spirituals and the Blues. Another queried the liturgical setting of the storytelling. Finally, one drew from their own experience of forced migration to note how the desire to survive prompts a surrender to faith, which sustains the migrant in the worst situations.

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