

CATHOLIC THEOLOGY AND THE CONTEMPORARY UNIVERSITY –  
INTEREST GROUP

Topic: The Social Role of the Catholic University  
 Conveners: Edward P. Hahnenberg, John Carroll University  
 Catherine Punsalan-Manlimos, Seattle University  
 Moderator: Catherine Punsalan-Manlimos, Seattle University  
 Presenters: Jonathan Heaps, Seton Hall University  
 Christopher Vogt, St. John’s University  
 Jaisy Joseph, Villanova University

The third and final year of the interest group continued to explore how theology can inform responses to the challenges facing higher education. Following past sessions on ecclesiology and theological anthropology, this year’s panel offered diverse perspectives on the social role of the Catholic university today.

Jonathan Heaps’ paper, “*Servus Servorum*: A Lonerganian Theory of Theology in the University and the University in Society,” drew on Bernard Lonergan’s scale of values to describe the university as a social infrastructure that supports a community’s cultural superstructure “according to its operative ideal of science for the sake of a more meaningful and worthwhile way of life.” In its attempt to cultivate a meaningful life, the university is hampered by a change in the “operative ideal of science” that occurred in the shift from the medieval to the modern university. The rise of the empirical ideal, through advances in the natural sciences, has not been met by comparable advances in what Lonergan called the “science of the human.” Thanks to lingering uncertainty about how such a science should proceed, technological and economic possibilities have been allowed to set the program unchecked. With the criteria of credibility for humanistic and moral beliefs muddled, the modern university is “ever more conceived as existing for the sake of technology and economy and not as sublating them for a higher end.” Rather than resolve this conundrum, Heaps suggested that theology might function as a “servant of the servants” of knowledge within the modern university by illuminating for scholars the conditions under which they sustain faith in their intellectual enterprises, perseverance in their research, and hope for future fruits of their labors.

In “Building Communities of Encounter for the Common Good,” Christopher Vogt brought together Pope Francis’ theology of encounter and the Catholic commitment to the common good in order to offer guiding insights for articulating the mission of Catholic higher education today. Vogt placed these themes within a larger vision of the Catholic university as rooted in the search for truth. The Catholic commitment to truth—a truth rooted in reality and accessible (though imperfectly) to us—is neither naïve nor monolithic. Nor is it realized in universal agreement on eternal verities. Rather, a Catholic university demands a commitment “to seeking truth and to recognizing that we need to be in conversation with each other to correct our misperceptions and expand our knowing.” As one dimension of this larger mission, Vogt cited *Fratelli Tutti* to highlight Pope Francis’ call for a culture of solidarity. This culture recognizes the importance of cultural and ethical differences, seeks the common good, and makes room for disagreement and ongoing dialogue. Catholic higher

education must play a role in bringing about this social and political vision concretely through: a core curriculum that pursues questions of meaning, purpose, and the common good; diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts that emphasize access for the racially, ethnically, and economically marginalized; and training for students, faculty, and staff in the skills of dialogue characteristic of the “processes of encounter” called for by Pope Francis.

Jaisy Joseph’s “Catholic Higher Education Sixty Years After King’s *I Have a Dream Speech*: Black Dignity and the *Telos* of Catholic University” lifted up the words and actions of Black Catholics working for racial justice in Catholic higher education over three historical eras. Employing Vincent Lloyd’s concept of “Black dignity” as a lens, Joseph focused on dignity not as an *achievement*, but as *achieved* in the very process of the struggle against domination. For the first of the three eras surveyed, the era of civil rights (1954-80), Joseph noted how Black Catholic sisters seeking degrees were the first to desegregate US Catholic colleges; how Black students Paul Ramsey and Arthur McFarland confronted discrimination at Notre Dame; and how Black Catholic priests organized in the aftermath of King’s assassination. During the era of multiculturalism (1980-2012), Catholic universities followed broader societal attempts to contain and control the struggle for justice by “managing diversity.” The stories of Tia Noelle Pratt and Maureen O’Connell growing up in Philadelphia highlighted the paternalistic “missionary sensibility” of the time. With the killing of Trayvon Martin, multiculturalism gave way to the era of #BlackLivesMatters (2012-present). This period has been marked by both conscientization, captured in the public protest of Bishop Mark Seitz, and backlash, seen in the rise in hate crimes on Catholic college campuses. Joseph ended her overview by (1) underscoring the notion of dignity as a way of engaging the world; and (2) calling non-Black Catholics to an examination of conscience that would expose how the idolatry of White supremacy replaces trust in God with the false promise of White safety and security.

Discussion ranged from the contested nature of truth to the challenge of forming lay faculty, staff, and administrators in the originating charisms of their institutions.

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