

## DISABILITY THEOLOGY – INTEREST GROUP

- Topic: The Present: How do we envision and measure progress?  
 Conveners: Miguel J. Romero, Saint Louis University  
 Mary Jo Iozzio, Boston College  
 Moderator: Stephanie Edwards, Boston Theological Interreligious Consortium  
 Presenters: Anne Masters, Archdiocese of Newark  
 Mari Rapela Heidt, University of Dayton  
 Mary Jo Iozzio, Boston College

This second interest group session of three began with a welcome to fifteen attendees, overview of the group’s purpose, and work thus far. Stephanie Edwards opened and chaired the session, examining the status of people with disability today (last year considered the past, next year the future). We strive for disability consciousness, holistic understanding, and better appreciation of an intersectional reality, transcending binary conceptions that deem persons “other.” The presentations recognized progress in understandings of disability as intersectional with an inventory of inclusion in Catholic theology and the study of religion. Disability Studies/Disability Theology recognizes the complicated lives of People with Disabilities in a world that no longer assumes hegemonic normativity in spite of hegemony’s persistence.

The session included three papers and a lively question-and-answer period. Megan Hopkins was scheduled but unable to attend for health reasons.

In “Disability, Freedom, and the Growing End of Human Dignity: Challenges of Co-Responsibility for Social Salvation,” Anne Masters, Director of Pastoral Ministry with Persons with Disabilities, Archdiocese of Newark, presented on “rupture” exposed in the meta-narratives of normalcy. These narratives invariably dismiss experiences of disability as part of the human condition; the cult of normalcy denies the experiences of people who have been marginalized on account of their race, gender, and disability, including their intersectional identities and experiences of oppression in social, ecclesial, and political arenas. Masters refers to Pope Francis’s advocacy for people with disability and his explicit recognition of their dignity when, at the April 2024 conference on “Disability and the Human Condition,” he taught “Persons with disabilities are fully human subjects, with rights and duties ... and everyone has the right to live with dignity and to develop integrally” (Merlo, “Pope Francis advocates for Inclusion,” *Vatican News*, April 11, 2024). The church’s social teaching is clear: active co-responsibility points immediately to access and inclusion in the commons and the church. As *Dignitatis Infinita* affirms: “every effort should be made to encourage the inclusion and active participation of those who are affected by frailty or disability in the life of society and of the Church.”<sup>1</sup> This affirmation points to a common theological anthropology for all and an inclusive way to be church.

In “Profit and Loss: Disability and the Minimum Wage,” Mari Rapela Heidt exposed the scandalously low wages that workers with disabilities earn legally under today’s Federal Minimum Wage standard of \$7.25 per hour. However, “Section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act authorizes employers ... to pay subminimum wages –

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<sup>1</sup> Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitatis Infinita* (March 25, 2024), § 53, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2024/04/08/240408c.html>.

wages [that are] less than the Federal Minimum wage—to workers who have disabilities for their work.”<sup>2</sup> Rapela Heidt noted that these rules were established in the 1938, when non-disabled workers were guaranteed a minimum wage of \$0.25 per hour, workers with disabilities earned less than \$0.07 per hour. Today some workers with disabilities are paid less than the \$0.25 of the 1938 nondisabled workers! New Hampshire led the way in 2015 to remedy this injustice; today sixteen states have abolished this subminimum wage for people with disabilities.<sup>3</sup>

In “Disability’s Span of the Humanities and the Sciences,” Mary Jo Iozzio offered a review of recent work in Disability. Today, disability justice movements can be found across the globe. Arguably, the movement started in England before the UN *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (1975), the US *Americans with Disabilities Act* (1990), and the WHO *International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health* (2001). With a fully embraced liberation theology, we are far from the Medical and Religious models of disability. Iozzio offered five texts: William C. Gaventa’s *Disability and Spirituality* (Baylor University Press, 2018), Erin Raffety’s *From Inclusion to Justice* (Baylor University Press, 2022), Devan Stahl’s *Disability’s Challenge to Theology* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2022), Julia Watts Belser’s *Loving Our Own Bones* (Beacon Press, 2023), and Lisa D. Powell’s *The Disabled God Revisited* (Bloomsbury, 2023). With more than thirty years of Disability Theology engaging multiple disciplines from the humanities to engineering, we are poised to break the once narrow concern of a few for the many. “Nothing about Us Without Us’ reminds us—in the CTSA, in our church, and in our communities—to envision mainstreaming in place of the marginalized past.

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<sup>2</sup> US Department of Labor, Wage and Hour Division, “Fact Sheet #39: The Employment of Workers with Disabilities at Subminimum Wages,” rev. July 2008, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/fact-sheets/39-14c-subminimum-wage>.

<sup>3</sup> “Subminimum Wage: Which States abolished the subminimum wage,” *Marca*, Lifestyle, December 2, 2023, <https://www.marca.com/en/lifestyle/us-news/personal-finance/2023/02/12/63e8aa0d268e3ebf7a8b45cc.html>.