

PUBLIC THEOLOGY – INTEREST GROUP

- Topic: Envisioning and Enacting a Multifaith, Multiracial, Multicultural Democracy
- Convener: Rosemary P. Carbine, Whittier College
- Moderator: David DeCosse, Santa Clara University
- Presenters: Kathleen Dorsey Bellow, Xavier University
 Rosemary P. Carbine, Whittier College
 Jennifer Owens-Jofré, Loyola Marymount University

This session was the second of the three-year plan for the Interest Group in Public Theology, an initiative begun in the hope of fostering Catholic theological reflection and praxis in response to these challenging political times. In the first year, the Interest Group session at the convention focused on freedom. At the 2025 convention, the focus of the Group will be on voting. This year the theme of the session was “Envisioning and Enacting a Multifaith, Multiracial, Multicultural Democracy.” Political theorists like Danielle Allen have persuasively argued that the great convulsion running through the United States reflects the emergence—and the fierce resistance to such emergence—of a democratic society in which no one ethnic or religious or cultural group is in control of the levers of political power.

The Interest Group says that public theology “offers critical theological perspectives on public life...and constructively imagines and concretizes more just alternative visions of the common good.” Thus, the approach to public theology here includes attentiveness to a wide range of communities in which public theology is done and to a wide range of practices by which theological insight is deepened and social change is made. Three excellent papers reflected this spacious, praxis-based approach to public theology.

Kathleen Dorsey Bellow in her paper, “Full, Conscious, and Active Participation: In Liturgy and Life,” reflected on the connections between participation in the liturgy and the Black Catholic experience of public life. In the background were hard facts: the historic and ongoing efforts in the United States to suppress the African American vote and the rise of a casual, pervasive racism in U.S. political culture. For Dorsey Bellow, the Catholic liturgy coming from the Second Vatican Council offers a vision of community that stands in sharp contrast to the racist-infused conflict coursing through US political society. Moreover, the conciliar call for “full, conscious, and active participation” of all in the liturgy poses a challenge to the exclusion of the fullness of Black Catholic life from the liturgy and offers an analogue for how Catholic public theology might imagine Black Catholic inclusion in public life. Crucial for Dorsey Bellow’s thinking is the noted 1989 speech to the Catholic bishops of the US in which Sister Thea Bowman, F.S.P.A., said: “What does it mean to be Black and Catholic? It means that I come to my church fully functioning. That doesn’t frighten you, does it? I come to my church fully functioning. I bring myself; my black self, all that I am, all that I have, all that I hope to become.”

In her presentation—“Nevertheless We Persist: A Feminist Public Theology”—Rosemary P. Carbine continued an exploration of public theology in the key of praxis. Based on her book (Orbis Books, 2023) of the same name as her presentation,

Carbine's talk called out the way that usual models of public theology "perpetuate exclusionary ideologies and dehumanizing practices." By contrast, she drew on feminist and womanist theologies of "ekklesial work" that focus less on introducing "religious claims into a multireligious public square in a widely intelligible way... and instead [pivot] more around how diverse praxis of religio-political participation signifies and realizes a more just vision of common life." In Carbine's vision, public theology plays a mediating role insofar as it informs and emerges from the rhetorical, symbolic, and prophetic praxis of women in social movements and community organizations. "Political efficacy—the power to motivate and begin to effect meaningful political change—arises" from such practices, Carbine says.

In her paper, "A Public Theology from the Ground," Jennifer Owens-Jofré focused on the powerful witness of women at Dolores Mission Parish in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles. First, Owens-Jofré said, public theology in such a context starts from *lo cotidiano* or the daily lived experience of the hopes and injustices that mark the world of the Mexican and Salvadoran immigrant parish. Second, this public theology "from the ground engages faith as a public act with a political imperative to help in building... the *kin-dom of God*." Third, a public theology from the ground involves "faith in witness to an eschatological future that is safer, more just, and more equitable than what we see in our own time and place." And, finally, a public theology from the ground "contributes to public debate of issues, making the core beliefs of the faith accessible and articulating them with a critical edge."

Some twenty persons attended the session. A robust discussion followed the presentations.

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