

COMMITTEE FOR UNDERREPRESENTED ETHNIC AND RACIAL GROUPS
(CUERG) DISTINGUISHED SCHOLAR-LEADER AWARD

Chair: Stephanie M. Wong, Villanova University
Committee
Members: Leo Guardado, Fordham University
Byron Wratee, Loyola University Baltimore

During the 2024 CUERG Luncheon, the Committee for Underrepresented Ethnic and Racial Groups inaugurated a new award, presenting it to Dr. C. Vanessa White. The purpose of the award is to honor a member of the CTSA whose work as a scholar-leader has carried forward the theologizing of underrepresented and underrecognized communities in the academy, church, and/or wider society.

The CUERG leadership committee found it fitting to create the award at this time for two reasons.

First, CUERG has now existed for several decades as a consultative, advisory committee to the CTSA Board and as a network of intellectual and professional support for CTSA members from underrepresented or under-recognized ethnic and racial backgrounds. In the early years, the committee strove mainly to create possibilities of presence and thriving for minoritized scholars in the Catholic theological community. While this remains a key priority, CUERG is no longer new nor simply trying to find a place at the discursive table. Through the concerted efforts of past leaders, CUERG has developed into both an institution within the convention (for instance, the annual CUERG Luncheon) and a professional community with a deepening sense of its particular history, struggles, and contributions to the Society as a whole. As CUERG continues to mature, it is valuable for CUERG to take stock and recognize all that has and is still unfolding in the Society's efforts to theologize en conjunto (together), in a truly inclusive way.

Second, the CUERG committee desired to joyfully highlight the contributions of under-recognized teacher-scholars, noting their work as a gift to the wider academy and church. Theologians working at the ethnic and racial margins of theological discourse have often tackled sobering and lamentable topics (for instance, the horrors of slavery, colonial campaigns, forced migration, systemic racism, etc.) and wrestled with the legacies of such structural inequities in the history of our own church and academic discipline. Nonetheless, these and other myriad scholarly reflections should not be perceived as an encumbrance on the theological enterprise, but rather an aide and gift to Catholic theological thinking. Insofar as church and academy can holistically address the realities facing racially and ethnically minoritized Catholics, we are able to theologize better. This unfolding honesty and proficiency are a gift to treasure and celebrate!

The chosen inaugural awardee, Dr. C. Vanessa White, has been instrumental in calling for and modelling a more inclusive church and academy in numerous settings.

During the academic school year, Dr. White serves as an associate professor in at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, teaching in spirituality and ministry and serving as director of the Certificate in Black Theology and Ministry. As her nominator wrote, "Vanessa has dedicated her life to leading important conversations in the fields

of spirituality and pastoral theology, lifting up theological subfields that do not always receive the affirmation they should in contexts like the CTSA and other similar academic guilds.” During her summers, she serves as the associate director for the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University—a program that has run for more than forty years with a mission to form disciples for more effective ministry in the Black Catholic community, the church, and the community at large. Her work with college professors, Catholic clergy, and Black Catholic parishioners actively advances the CTSA’s mission of developing a mature understanding of faith among Christian communities.

In addition to this teaching and administrative service, Dr. White has been a leading voice in challenging both church and academy to a fuller witness to God. Her nominator wrote of her role in conversations with the USCCB, she “speaks with prophetic voice and ecclesial love, embodying the type of theologian that Pope Francis has encouraged during his pontificate: close to the people of God, attentive to those who live in the peripheries, and writing scholarship for the entire church, not just the learned minds.” Dr. White has been a formative guiding presence in the CTSA and CUERG, serving in key leadership roles in the Society and mentoring members who self-identify with underrepresented communities. She can be seen year after year accompanying junior scholars in different settings: sessions, plenaries, conversations, and mentorship initiatives. Leading in all these ways through her teaching and scholarship, formal administration and personal example, Dr. White has been a strong advocate for underrepresented communities and their theological reflection.

After receiving the award (an engraved charcuterie board), Dr. C. Vanessa White gave a speech reflecting on the history of CTSA and CUERG and issuing a charge to members to continue their work.

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