

DIALOGUE AS SACRAMENT—SELECTED SESSION

Topic: Dialogue as Sacrament
Convener: Aimée Upjohn Light
Moderator: John Borelli
Presenters: Monsignor John Radano
Eric Ranstrom
Aimée Upjohn Light
Respondent: James Fredericks

In this selected session, praised by one attendee as “the most exciting panel he had heard at CTSA,” three of the most senior scholars in dialogue interfaced with two junior scholars to create a panel on dialogue as sacrament. Three thought-provoking presentations were bracketed by remarks from John Borelli and James Fredericks, two scholars who have long worked to establish dialogue as a field. In his presentation, “Ecumenical Dialogue according to the Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*,” John Radano reflected on how ecumenical dialogue, like sacraments, contributes to mutual understanding and the overcoming of divisions, bringing moments of grace and healing in the Body of Christ. In his paper, “Dialogue as Sacrament of Eschatological Communion,” Erik Ranstrom reflected on how an eschatological understanding of communion challenges ecclesial triumphalism and opens the possibility of dialogue as communion. Aimée Upjohn Light argued that contemporary Roman Catholic interest in dialogue is part of the developing paradigm shift to panentheism or the quest for the living God, identified in Elizabeth Johnson’s book of the same name.

Monsignor John A. Radano, who was head of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity’s Western Section, began the panel with a short introduction to the profound work in ecumenical dialogue engaged by the Roman Catholic Church since Vatican II. Though dialogue is not an instituted sacrament, Radano’s paper focused on the elements of John Paul’s *Ut Unum Sint* which can be described as sacramental. Prayer is dialogue’s basis and support. Dialogue serves as an examination of conscience, involves acknowledgment of sin, the need for conversion and forgiveness, and cannot take place merely on a horizontal level but “has also a primarily vertical thrust, directed toward the One who, as the Redeemer of the world...is himself our Reconciliation.” This vertical aspect “lies in our acknowledgment, jointly and to each other, that we...have sinned,” which creates in separated Christians “that interior space where Christ, the source of the Church’s unity, can effectively act, with all the power of his Spirit, the Paraclete.” Monsignor Radano’s paper then segued into current attempts to place dialogue on the same plane with instituted sacramentality.

Erik Ranstrom’s presentation asked, “What reality does interreligious dialogue sacramentally mediate?” and subsequently explored the thesis that interreligious dialogue is a sacrament of the eschatological communion alluded to at the outset of *Nostra aetate*, “when the elect will be united in the Holy City, the city ablaze with the glory of God, where the nations will walk in His light.” (Rev 21:23). Ranstrom advanced the idea of an eschatological ecclesiology wherein the Church looks beyond itself and its reifications in expectancy for the new age of communion already breaking through in dialogue. Dialogue as sacrament of proleptic communion was also explored by John Paul II, the 1986 Assisi Day of Prayer for Peace, and Raimundo Panikkar. Emphasizing that proleptic communion is not only a gift but a task and, therefore, missional, Ranstrom reconsidered the Church’s role as “sign and instrument of unity.”

He closed by reflecting on the complexity of enacting this sacramental reality amidst salvation-historical liminality and the often tragic history shared between Christianity and other religions.

Aimée Upjohn Light concluded the presentations with her paper, “Pluralism, Panentheism, Presence,” focusing on the paradigm shift that Elizabeth Johnson holds is fueling the great momentum in Christian and especially Catholic interreligious work. Explaining what Johnson calls “the quest for the living God” as part of what is, in other venues, known as panentheism, Light explained how this focus on God’s pervasive presence makes possible the understanding that everything is sacramental work. When the totality of the creation is understood as existing within the being of the divine, the “problem” of other religions disappears in favor of the recognition that the problem is how anything could be left out of God’s absolute presence. As Catholics come to inhabit this ontological paradigm, interreligious work proliferates, as do other liberative theologies such as black, feminist, womanist, *mujerista*, *minjung*, LGBTQ, and ecotheologies. Each of these specializations works out of the understanding that our being is the being of God. Light’s paper concluded with the suggestion that the work of Peter Phan, which uses the Christology and commitments of first-wave theologies of liberation to affirm multiple religious belonging, is part of a current move to return interreligious work to its roots in liberation theology. This return most effectively and consistently ensures that we perceive and experience the omnipresent God who mysteriously finds a privileged place at the margins.

Following the presentations, James Fredericks posed significant questions to each of the panelists, including how one retains a sense of God’s otherness. He and John Borelli then opened the session up to a lively discussion focusing on John Paul II’s Assisi Day of Prayer for Peace and events taking place that day. Also raised was the problematic typology of exclusivism/inclusivism/pluralism and the widespread shift in methodology to comparative theology among those who work in interreligious circles.

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