

CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Sacraments and the Global Church
Convener: Judith Merkle, Niagara University
Moderator: Tobias Winright, Saint Louis University
Presenters: Robert Gascoigne, Australian Catholic University
Dawn M. Nothwehr, O.S.F., Catholic Theological Union

The session began with Robert Gascoigne's paper, "Can Catholic Social Thought Help to Alleviate Liturgical Tensions?" He immediately noted that, while the liturgy is fundamentally a divine site where the inadequacies of our ethical strivings are offered in hope for the Kingdom, it is also a work of humankind affected by tensions between the Church and contemporary secularity manifested in, for example, the decline in participation in the Eucharist and controversies over translation. He drew upon Catholic social thought to understand these tensions and perhaps alleviate them. His paper tapped into the work of Charles Taylor and José Casanova to explore two aspects of the liturgical question: first, individual motivations for participating—or not participating—in communal liturgy; second, the broader socio-political context of liturgical celebration. In relation to individual motivations, Gascoigne suggested that Taylor's writings give good grounds for the judgment that a number of traditional motivations for participating in liturgical worship no longer hold for many members of secular societies. Further, Gascoigne demonstrated that the studies of both Taylor and Casanova emphasize that the relationship between the Church and secularity need not be understood in confrontational terms. Although the conditions of secularity do mean that the foundations of socio-political life need to be deliberated on and negotiated between citizens with different worldviews, the most accurate and effective understanding of secularity is in terms of social differentiation and accommodation of diversity rather than as the marginalization of organized religion. Finally, Gascoigne's explored implications of these insights for the purpose of liturgical worship and for its relation to the Church's mission to the world. In affirming the fundamental character of the liturgy as a gift of God that makes a claim on us, wherein worship is not about what we "get out of it," the character of the liturgy is oriented to mission, so that the community of faith brings its gifts to the service of the world.

The session continued with Dawn M. Nothwehr, O.S.F., presenting her paper, "Kenan B. Osborne's 'Postmodern Sacramentality': A Critical Resource for Catholic Environmental Ethics." She critically explored the claim, which has become more pronounced in Catholic Social Teaching, that "creation is a sacrament." When hearing the words "sacrament," "sacramentality," or "sacramental," many Catholics think of the Seven Sacraments of the Church, according to Nothwehr, but they rarely know the patristic or medieval Christian tenet that salvation history began with creation itself and, therefore, that all creation can be said to be sacramental. Nor are many Catholics aware, furthermore, that the Seven Sacraments were interpreted as the high manifestations of God's presence in the whole cosmos. Yet, one of the themes of Catholic Social Teaching that John Paul II noted in *Sollicitudo rei Socialis* (1987) and that the U.S. Catholic bishops emphasized in *Renewing the Earth* (1991) is "a God-centered and sacramental view of the universe, which grounds human accountability for the fate of the earth"

(*Renewing the Earth*, 5). To this claim, Nothwehr linked the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*'s teaching that only divine action and human response in a concrete situation form the basis for *possible* sacramentality (CCC, 1077–1092). She then drew on Osborne's *Christian Sacraments in a Postmodern World: A Theology for the Third Millennium* (Paulist, 1999) to examine the basis for stating that "creation is a sacrament."

Two presumptions govern the response to this question: first, the belief that God creates the world; and second, the belief that God is a self-revealing God and present in this world. We thus need to distinguish "creation events" from "sacramental events," while showing the relationship between them (138–39). The same God is present in both, but differently. Nothwehr held that Osborne shows how: "In sacramental *Ereignis*, the creating God and the self-revealing, sacramental God are identical but distinct" (145). Without a relationship between sacramentality and creation, however, sacramentality becomes "epiphenomenal," a by-product, or magical. A relevant and adequate environmental ethics, Nothwehr argued, requires that we distinguish *panentheistic creation theology* from *sacramentality*. As Osborne maintains: "The world itself is not a sacrament, but it is a place in which sacramentality is possible." Nothwehr also suggested ways Osborne's framework for postmodern sacramentality can be a resource for teaching and preaching about Catholic environmental ethics, connecting it in particular with the several steps in training for sacramental sensibility in Jame Schaefer's *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics* (Georgetown University, 2009).

The ensuing discussion focused on possible points of agreement and disagreement between Gascoigne's and Nothwehr's papers while also digging into the theological claims that were made in each (e.g., whether Benedict XVI would have a problem with the sort of panentheism that Nothwehr identified in her paper).

TOBIAS WINRIGHT
Saint Louis University
Saint Louis, Missouri