

## ANTHROPOLOGY TOPIC SESSION

Topic: “Anthropology and Sacramental Praxis”  
Convener: Colleen M. Griffith, Boston College  
Moderator: Natalia Imperatori-Lee, Manhattan College  
Presenters: Roberto Goizueta, Boston College  
Rosemary Carbine, Whittier College

The theological anthropology topic session explored anthropological foundations for establishing strong connections between sacramentality and justice. Questions guiding the two paper presentations included the following: Is human engagement in the struggle for justice sacramental praxis? Is praxis presupposed when we use the term “sacramental anthropology?” Is there an aesthetic dimension to sacramental praxis?

In a paper entitled “Anthropology, Sacramentality, and the Social Nature of Praxis,” Roberto Goizueta addressed Hans Urs von Balthasar’s assertion that the fundamentally theodramatic nature of Christian faith safeguards the sacramental, interactive, and hence practical character of faith. In Goizueta’s view, the inherently social nature of Christian praxis is only implicit in Balthasar’s theological aesthetics. Goizueta claims that if Christian theology takes God’s own praxis as expressed in the crucified and risen Christ as its starting point, then human participation in the divine praxis, our own role in theo-drama, must be undertaken in solidarity with the victims of history.

Goizueta acknowledges that theological aesthetics represents a necessary corrective to rationalist theologies, but expresses concern for a theological aesthetics that could become as abstract and dehistoricized as the rationalist theologies it rejects. He argues that liberation theologies represent a necessary corrective, not only to rationalism, but to aesthetic theology. For him, the act of faith involves the embodied, historical human reception of and response to the embodied, historical gift of the crucified and risen Christ. The content of this gift, notes Goizueta, cannot be known apart from the reception-response through which our hearts, minds, and actions are transformed as we are drawn into an intimate participation in the life of the Giver who is also the Gift.

Human response to God’s love, according to Goizueta, demands participation in God’s loving activity in the world. As “beautiful,” divine love indeed stirs and attracts, and as divine action, God’s love compels our own action. Goizueta, pointing to Balthasar for this very point, asserts that the crucified and risen Christ invites us not only to fall to our knees, but to follow Christ. Seeking to flag any theological aesthetics that devolves into an aesthetic theology that fails to radically transform a believer’s praxis, Goizueta underscores that strong preferential option for the poor safeguards the theological character of theological aesthetics, preventing worship from slipping into idolatry.

In her paper titled “Birthing a New World: Sacramental Praxis and Subjectivity in the U.S. Public Church,” Rosemary Carbine explored the sacramental praxis of the U.S. public church, focusing on its rich implications for theological anthropology. Drawing upon feminist and womanist reinterpretations of sacramentality and upon specific examples of U.S. Catholic women’s justice praxis, including anti-war and peacemaking rituals by U.S. Catholic women religious, Carbine demonstrates how the U.S. public church bears sacramental significance when it births a new world with better conditions for a more just, loving, and peaceful body politic. Addressing what it means to “recreate the public” by breaking open a public space to witness to

an alternative political reality, Carbine offers a way of theologizing about sacramentality that eschews anthropologies that idealize women's bio-physical abilities to birth while neglecting women's capacities for creativity in the public sphere.

In her development of a feminist theology of the public church, Carbine urges women especially to revitalize the prophetic role of the public church, demonstrating their ability to be a sacramental sign of the body of Christ in public. She describes a prophetic praxis that both imagines and seeks to realize a just and participatory common life. The public sphere, in Carbine's view, serves as an important site of women's sacramental work. Women's socio-political praxis, not their non-clerical or maternal status, enables them to be "artisans of humanity" in the public realm.

Carbine recognizes the potential of the public church to challenge the privatization of religion. She acknowledges that in the present U.S. Catholic context, what counts as the public church is so often limited to the statements of institutional church leaders. She seeks a much broader understanding of the public church, one that stands in keeping with the robust description of the church's political mission and ministry found in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.

Lively discussion followed the presentation of the two papers. Session participants raised questions about whether present notions of sacramental praxis needed broadening. Many sensed a need to retrieve the religious dimensions of the political and the political dimensions of the private. It was suggested that the work of Catherine Bell could be of help in thinking through notions of ritual practice in social terms.

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