

## MORAL THEOLOGY (II) TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Sacramentality in Moral Theology  
Convener: David Cloutier, Mount St. Mary's University  
Moderator: Lisa Sowle Cahill, Boston College  
Presenters: Maureen H. O'Connell, Fordham University  
Charles Camosy, Fordham University

In “Confessing Complicity: Catholic Moral Theology and White Claims to Moral Goodness in Racial Justice,” Maureen H. O’Connell focused on a series of events surrounding incidents of racial hate that unfolded throughout the Spring 2012 semester at Fordham University. She used these to unpack Barbara Applebaum’s claim in *Being White, Being Good: White Moral Complicity, White Moral Responsibility, and Social Justice Pedagogy* (Lexington Books, 2010) that an inflated sense of white moral goodness and innocence obfuscates effective responses to racial injustice. O’Connell explored the sins of complicity and ignorance—familiar moral categories in the Catholic tradition—through what sociologist Joe Feagin calls by a less familiar term “white racial frame.” She suggested ways the Sacrament of Penance can be both perilous and promising when it comes to confessing sins of complicity and ignorance; she proposed the Church integrate an examination of culture, narratives of people of color, and embodied liturgical gestures into private and public sacramental practices of confession.

Participants in the discussion raised questions of the inevitability of the Sacrament of Penance as it is commonly construed and practiced in reinforcing among whites a limited sense of one’s racial identity, as well as despair that the sin of racism will never be fully overcome, both of which can also work against commitments to racial justice. Questions regarding the relationship between the Sacrament of Penance in its private and public rites and the political processes of reconciliation were also discussed.

In “Peter Singer and Catholic Moral Theology on Non-Human Animals and Ecological Concern: The Difference Sacramentality Makes,” Charles Camosy observed that Christians do not appear to have much to say to Peter Singer. Singer has criticized a Christian ethic as incoherent and dependent on pretense. Indeed, he claims that the West needs an ethical “Copernican Revolution” to fully extricate itself from the stranglehold of the Church’s unjustified, speciesist focus on *Homo sapiens*. Camosy, though, believes there may be another way ahead. If only the adherents to both approaches would engage each other in the spirit of intellectual solidarity, he argues, they will not only find significant common ground but also that their differences are quite narrow—whether we are talking about poverty, nonhuman animals, euthanasia, or even abortion and ethical method.

Perhaps the most timely and even “hot” topic to consider is that of ecology. In the recently-released third edition of his wildly influential *Practical Ethics*, Singer includes a new chapter on ecology and climate change. Roman Catholicism, it turns out, has an intensified focus on these topics as well—and this presents a golden opportunity for what Pope Benedict called in *Caritas in Veritate*: “fraternal collaboration with nonbelievers in the service of justice and peace.” Given the current stakes in the very dangerous ecological game we are playing, it may be that precisely this kind of collaboration is necessary to preserve life as we know it on this planet. In his paper Camosy highlighted areas of overlap and common ground but then delineated a

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small disagreement and a larger disagreement—the latter dealing with “the difference sacramentality makes.”

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