

CREATION/ESCHATOLOGY TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Creation, Eschatology, and the Sacramental Imagination
Convener: Colleen Carpenter, St. Catherine University
Moderator: Randy Sachs, S.J., Boston College
Presenters: Joseph Flipper, Marquette University
Daniel Scheid, Duquesne University

The Creation/Eschatology section explored aspects of the sacramental imagination through the presentation and discussion of two papers, one addressing eschatology and the other creation. Joseph Flipper's essay, "Eschatology in the Sacramental Imagination of Henri de Lubac," argued that de Lubac's sense of the sacred is situated within a dual tension: between realized and future eschatologies, and between mysticism and apocalypticism. These linked tensions, according to Flipper, run throughout de Lubac's work; examining them enables us to come to a clearer understanding of de Lubac's portrayal of the economy of salvation, the church, and the "sense of the sacred." Flipper began his presentation with an analysis of the theological and cultural context in which de Lubac lived and wrote. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw widespread awareness of and reflection on eschatological themes; Flipper pointed specifically to the French Decadent Movement and to a variety of competing eschatologies within Catholicism that came together in the rise of the *Nouvelle Théologie*. Eschatological reflection in the *Nouvelle Théologie* was central to discussion of topics as wide-ranging as the role of the church in the modern world, the relationship of human progress to God's kingdom, and sacramentality.

Once Flipper laid out this background, he turned to de Lubac's specific contributions to eschatological reflection and pointed especially to de Lubac's recovery of patristic exegesis. By recovering Origen's eschatology and relying on Origen's understanding of anagogy, de Lubac forged an integration of present mystical experience with future expectation of God's kingdom. This eschatological synthesis was central to de Lubac's work, and is the key to understanding his sacramental imagination.

Discussion of Flipper's work included questions focusing on sacrament, ecclesiology, anthropology, the vertical-horizontal issues implied in de Lubac's eschatology, and the relationship between de Lubac's understanding of nature and grace with respect to eschatological hope.

Our next presentation saw a turn from the eschatological concerns of the early twentieth century to the ecological concerns of the early twenty-first. Daniel Scheid, in "Alongside Waterfalls: Thomas Berry and the Sacramentality of the Universe," engaged the notion of a sacramental universe as central to a Catholic response to today's ecological crises. Scheid opened by pointing to *Renewing the Earth*, the 1991 statement by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops that specifically deploys the concept of a sacramental universe as a response to ecological degradation. Scheid notes that the bishops' description of a sacramental universe is quite helpful, but leaves open a variety of questions—including the disturbing question of how the Earth's sometimes terrifyingly destructive capabilities can be squared with a sacramental understanding of the world around us.

Scheid turns to the work of Thomas Berry, C.P., a Passionist priest trained as a historian but best known for his writings on ecology, and his promotion of the New Universe Story (a way of telling the story of creation that makes use of current scientific understandings of the origins

of the universe and the evolutionary origins of humanity). Berry's work provides us with two significant ways Catholics can better understand the sacramentality of the universe. First, Scheid points out, Berry emphasizes the revelatory power of the story of the universe, which (as a sacred narrative) discloses truths about the Creator. Second, Scheid argues, Berry's understanding of the threefold nature of all creatures (as marked by differentiation, subjectivity, and communion) deepens the Catholic sacramental appreciation of creation by linking human beings to all other creatures.

Scheid went beyond a straightforward explication of Berry's work, moving to a deeper consideration of how Berry's understanding of both creaturehood and the Creator can shape our sacramental imagination today. The notion of "wildness," especially the wildness of God, was particularly interesting, and provoked an animated discussion of whether wildness implies chaos or transcendence. Further discussion explored the status of story/narrative, the relationship between biblical and non-biblical narratives, and the significance of the violence of creation.

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