

WOMEN'S CONSULTATION IN CONSTRUCTIVE THEOLOGY

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| Topic: | Art and Water: Sites of Sacramentality and Justice |
| Conveners: | Elisabeth Brinkmann, Catholic Theological Union Rosemary P. Carbine, Whittier College |
| Moderator: | Elisabeth Vasko, Duquesne University |
| Presenters: | Rebecca Berru Davis, Graduate Theological Union Colleen Mary Carpenter, Saint Catherine University |
| Respondent: | M. Shawn Copeland, Boston College |

In concert with the Annual Meeting's theme of "Sacrament/s and the Global Church," this session framed its conversation with the theme "Art and Water: Sites of Sacramentality and Justice." Rebecca Berru Davis began the program by introducing the resilience and creativity of Peruvian women in a presentation titled "Grace, Beauty, and Justice in a Peruvian Shantytown: Art as Sacramental Site for Memory and Creative Transformation." The women, displaced from their villages due to political and economic turmoil, have worked together to establish a small art cooperative in which they hand-stitch and sell *cuadros*, appliqued and embroidered fabric pictures, thus procuring a modest income to sustain themselves and their families. In contrast to the bleak, gray, and seemingly hopeless living situations of the shantytown of Pamplona Alta, these women draw upon a deeper reality, creating textiles which burst with brilliant dreams of color and vitality, hopes for flourishing families, and messages of resistance to oppressive and violent forces. Davis described her own experiences with these women and her work in coordinating travelling exhibitions of the women's textiles. Davis suggested that the women's *cuadros*, as expressions of women's experiences and their transformative interpretations of reality, were sacramental in character; the cooperative, hopeful initiative with creative media by the Peruvian women reflects the sacramental presence of God, inviting all to a community of grace, beauty, and justice.

Next, Colleen Mary Carpenter directed attention to matters of creation, focusing on the vital role water plays in global, ecological, social, and political justice in her paper, "Women at the Well: Sacramentality and the Search for Living Water." With more than one billion people lacking clean, safe water, the world of polluted, poisonous rivers starkly contrasts the sacramental understanding of water in the Christian life as grace-filled, sustaining, and renewing. Carpenter suggested that Christians take this symbolic import of water seriously and work to re-establish sources for clean, life-giving water. Acknowledging women's overwhelming global responsibility for collecting and carrying water, Carpenter noted how women play a crucial role in global initiatives for developing sustainable uses of water resources. For example, the Global Women's Water Initiative provides African village women with the training needed to develop rainwater harvesting systems or to build bio-sand filters. Carpenter described how such projects, which empower local women to solve local problems, require imagination, hope, and community commitment. Because these initiatives are grounded in embodiment, transformation, and restoration, she concluded that the work of these women resonates with a sacramental understanding of water and that such work might inspire others to allow the symbolic value of water to become a source for Christian discipleship.

In response, M. Shawn Copeland commended both Davis's and Carpenter's theological methods for engaging human experience, the "creative logic of the incarnation," and the deep human need for symbols and the sacramental to interpret reality and the presence of God in a

world belabored by sin. Copeland observed that both presenters told narratives of women with creative responses to adverse situations: women who worked with tools of justice, goodness, and beauty to transform their environment, thus tapping the potential of the “good and graced” world. Women, whose embodiment calls them to withstand political, social, and environmental injustices, stand as compelling witnesses to Christ, transforming their material situations with practical, caring responses and creative intelligence—a powerful antidote to a consumer culture which often calls for rapaciousness, destruction, and greed. Copeland also noted that more clearly differentiating various patterns of experience, rather than allowing “human experiences” to stand as a “raw, unthematized” whole, might allow for more robust descriptions in contextual theologies: (1) by identifying agency in human moral action in relation to human communities and creation; (2) by understanding the role which popular religious devotions, for example, play in constructing worldview and culture; and (3) by increasing the numbers of discrete sources for encountering theological content.

The ensuing discussion focused on other practical, creative methods with which women and men might alleviate situations of environmental, social, political, and economic injustice. Prompted by Copeland’s methodological critique, participants moved to a discussion of the importance of human experiences as starting points for theological inquiry.

Following the discussion, Elisabeth Brinkmann presented the Ann O’Hara Graff Memorial Award to Mary Catherine Hilbert, O.P., of the University of Notre Dame. Elizabeth A. Johnson, Barbara Hilbert Andolsen, M. Shawn Copeland, and Natalia Imperatori-Lee offered formal congratulatory comments for the occasion. Approximately 75 persons attended.

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