

SEMINAR ON NORTH AMERICAN THEOLOGY

The North American seminar followed the theme of the convention, "sources of theology," and examined "An American Classic Revisited: John Courtney's Murray's *We Hold These Truths*." Murray's collection of essays, written throughout the 1950's, signaled a coming of age of a largely immigrant Catholic Church and its willingness to enter the public political forum of America in responsibly creative ways. The seminar found Murray a timely consideration with the presidential elections coming this year, a celebration of the bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution, and the recent willingness of the U.S. bishops to enter into the public forum with pastoral letters on peace and the economy.

The first presenter, Drew Christiansen (University of Notre Dame), examined "Natural Law as Moral Consensus" in Murray. The paper first traced the problem of both natural law and moral consensus in Murray's time. Then the sources upon which Murray drew were evaluated and placed in their context. Among the issues presented, it was pointed out that natural law for Murray was based on the reasonableness of others to understand what should be done. This reasonableness cut across cultural barriers, a position that is difficult to substantiate. The acceptance of common natural law is out of favor. At the same time, moral consensus is a difficult term to identify in its concrete application. For Murray the question of "who decides" falls upon "the wise." Yet history has shown that "the wise" have often not been so. The argument was put forward that "the conscientious" might be a better choice because of their values, actions, and commitment. Two decades since Murray have shown that he underestimated the ability of the people. The significant "wise" people have become those who have moved to action and formed the U.S. consensus, e.g., race issues, Vietnam. Perhaps the conscientious people do not wait for theoretical reasons but ground themselves in action and move others to a consensus. When metaphysical arguments remain unalterably opposed to one another on the theoretical level, the people who hold these divergent views can often come together and agree, or form a consensus, on the action to be taken. Perhaps a retrieval of cases as a way of forming consensus needs to be done.

The discussion continued to probe the problem of forming consensus. Too many instances of disservice and dehumanization by "the wise" exist to let such a category go by unchallenged. To include "the conscientious" has merit, yet further delineation remains. Correlation with community, interdependence on many levels, and societal responsibilities were offered as possible corrections. Otherwise a vicious circle between consensus and "the wise" closes itself to others and justifies its own ideological actions. To form consensus across cultures remains a task. To unify people of different cultures through a common metaphysics does not seem possible. Concentration on human rights might provide a better starting point and a more concrete one in concerted action.

The second presenter, Betsy Linehan (St. Joseph's University, Philadelphia), specified the meaning of consensus in the case of "Is Committed Pacifism Morally Responsible?" Drawing upon Murray's work and the U.S. bishops' pastoral letter on peace, the question of the relationship of the ends and means holds an important place in both sources. The non-violent positions represent the clearest attempt to hold these two in relationship. Means may differ, and often do, and the criteria of effectiveness is invoked, but only when the goal is articulated. Effectiveness, however, remains an elusive criterion. A return to "virtue," e.g., honesty, love, can critically correlate claims to effectiveness.

The discussion continued around the question of how to build a consensus and the role of dissent. Violence erupts when conversation ceases. As a third world theologian pointed out from her experience in Argentina, holding to a "purity" of process brought frustration to all conversation. At some point, principles need to investigate creative possibilities in action.

The second day of the seminar continued probing the meaning and implications of consensus with an additional paper and the discussion of all three papers together in a longer conversation of our own. Stephen Rountree (Loyola University, New Orleans) presented a paper on "Consensus, Conflict, Conversation." Re-examining Murray's idea of consensus, the point was made that he emphasized political consensus without due attention to the economic arena. Murray's trust in business and its "wise" organizers has not solved the problem of consensus but, instead, it has become a major problem. Multinationals and globally interdependent economic forces which extend beyond national restrictions tend to run by their own logic. To bring a public opinion against such groups as a way of restraining them seems futile. To appeal to a public philosophy has not worked. Murray even admits that such people seem to have won the day. Nevertheless, the genius and contribution of Murray does reside in his willingness to go public, through lectures and writings, to argue his position in public, even if defeated. He entered into the public arena, just as the American bishops have done. A willingness to forge a consensus and to enter into conversation is no mean feat. Indeed, this process is a significant achievement and an act of responsibility. A belief in the dialogue, even with disagreement, points to a commonality for those who enter into the conversation. The conversation holds people together; thus the willingness to agree to disagree is possible and relevant to any true conversation.

The lively discussion that followed pointed to the U.S. bishops' pastoral on peace and the economy as models for forming consensus. As well, negative limits are viable options, i.e., agreeing on the issues that we all reject. There exists also a need to let questions be lively discussed, argued over, and left to simmer before calling the question. People need to be allowed to voice their positions and the debate to continue. What some consider "pluralism" in the Catholic Church today can be seen as a time of incubation wherein people are allowed to argue and come to a consensus on their own frame, not an artificially contrived deadline. Difficulties arise when some aspects of an issue are ruled out from the beginning of a conversation. Reasons why such issues should be ruled out need to be given and, indeed become part of the conversation (e.g., women's ordination). Finally, it was noted that Murray's concern for the political order, and consensus, has become supplanted by the concern for the economic order in our day.

The seminar papers and discussion agreed that the topic of consensus ran through the entire seminar. Murray was ahead of his time in his concern for it. It was noted that while Murray is historically and culturally conditioned by his time, nevertheless he flayed open the situation for our time. His appeal to conversation and consensus remains an alive and important task for our time. Although time-bound, Murray's work is a classic worth returning to for its grasp of the American spirit.

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