

TEACHING WOMEN, READING WOMEN

The ambitious design of this two-session workshop called for the identification of critical perspectives within selected woman-produced texts and curricula, which would lead to constructive reconceptualizations within systematic theology. This original twofold purpose was only partly accomplished, as participants reshaped the workshop the better to fit their common interests.

Prior to the CTSA meeting, panelists had studied women's theoretical and practical work in theological pedagogy with the help of a digest prepared by Marianne Sawicki, which examined the writings of five American Catholic women (S. Toton, M. Harris, M. Gerhart, M. Sawicki, and S. Ross) and the curricula of three innovative educational programs (Immaculate Heart College Center's M.A. in Feminist Spirituality, the Women's Theological Center, and the Institute for Pastoral Life). The following critical themes emerged as common to the work studied.

1. A concern to understand *human being* itself is common to all the work. Wary of mind-body and male-female dualisms, the women celebrate the variation and individuality of persons. Yet this differentiation finds its supportive context in "connectedness," the interdependence of men, women, and children with other living things and earth itself. Human being is actively receptive and responsible in this context. We are bodies who are both fragile and expressive. We lead one another to discovery of individual human powers, and this is a holy thing. Narrativity, or story-competence, allows us to embrace the meaningfully connected diversity of reality without the distortion of stereotype. Yet by resurrection God has breached the closure of human narrativity along with that of human bodiliness itself.

2. All of the work attends to *generativity*, production, creativity. Rhythm is favored over substance, and becoming over being. In fact, the meaning of "to be" is to be individual while remaining connected with what brought you into being. "To be" is also to give rise to other beings who, while resembling you, can be different as well. Human care for other people and the earth is a partnership in God's creative dominion over all. Humans initiate others into the ways of being human; tradition is process, not content. The church arises from ecclesial activities such as teaching and healing. Meaning is produced through metaphor and genre, when these function as patterns through which reality is read. Similarly, sacraments transform the world by transforming meanings.

3. *The aesthetic* and cultural dimension of human experience is taken very seriously in this work. For some of the women, logic itself is grounded in aesthetic apprehension. Artistic creation provides the fundamental paradigm for the teaching/learning relationship. The artistic image, that is, the symbol, is immensely powerful both for good and for ill: it can be a means of economic coercion or po-

litical oppression, but it can also function redemptively and sacramentally to transform worldly realities. Postmodern literary theories of textuality are tried out upon christological issues. For example, one preserves the distance between symbol and symbolized by observing that sacrament is not "the original" Paschal Mystery, but rather copy. The Logos himself is copy or text of the Father.

4. All of the women focus on *action* as a component, a result, or a topic of their work. The fundamental human stance vis-à-vis the world is "reception" or "reading," but these are described as quite active and creative rather than passive and automatic. A true act of "empowerment" is not to give one's own power to others, but rather to accompany the others in discovering their own power. In this vein, learning strategies are designed which engage learners in real-life situations and problems. Divine action, too, is understood as a reading, a reception, or an accompanying of the human, instead of an occasional interruption of human history from somewhere beyond. Knowing and acting are linked: analysis of action leads to further action. Narrativity and sacramental celebration also are intrinsically linked with action.

Workshop 1

SOURCES OF A THEOLOGICAL PRAXIS

Elizabeth Willems of Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans addressed the themes of the human person, creativity, and imagination in proposing a stance of "difficult hope," comprised of three moments. *The tense moment* is the disequilibrium which a teacher can induce by confronting students with a situation of injustice or other disorder. With the right nurture from a teacher, this becomes *the teachable moment*, thanks to the personal bonding of teacher and student which issues into freedom. Then in *the reconciling moment*, one embraces and confronts opposites and differences to gain a full vision of mature human life and of the kingdom of God. Both the lives of Christian heroes and the theories of developmental psychologists illustrate the lifestyle of the reconciling moment. Richard Gula lists five characteristics of this lifestyle: Hope in the power of good, trust that God supports our risks of nonviolence, forgiveness that entails the rewriting of our memories, conversion of our imagination of the world, and hospitality that welcomes the offender despite our vulnerability.

Mary Aquin O'Neill, of the University of Notre Dame and Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem, identified in the work studied a search for a unitive and integrative vision of being human, and an emphasis on the revelatory capacity of feeling. Truth is known not by objectivity and distancing, but by a sympathetic connection with what is being studied, and indeed with those with whom one is learning. This implies that teaching be modeled after the face-to-face conversation, a model somewhat at odds with the emphasis upon textuality in Gerhart and others. Prior to text is the personally administered ability to read text. The teacher's ability becomes the student's. O'Neill noted the influence of P. Freire's educational theory in the work studied, but pointed out that other teaching models may sometimes be more appropriate; for example, that of parent/child or therapist/patient, which offer strong authority. Students need skills which are learned only from an authority; but the teacher's conflicting need to feel connected to the

learner can hinder this. One must also raise nuanced questions about the value of community building in education, which is uncritically espoused in the feminist agenda. Moreover, Harris's and Toton's refusal of the title "theologian," if not an indictment of theology itself, may be an instance of a troubling tendency among women who achieve a certain status of authority to abdicate it at the first opportunity. Daring innovations in syllabi, assignments, techniques for evaluation, and sanctions should be published and critiqued, so they can be improved and so they can alter the connotation of "theologian."

In the ensuing discussion, Willems and O'Neill both reported instances in which their personal care for students had diminished the students' respect for them and their effectiveness in the short run. Participants offered strategies for conveying a sense of credibility and authority, and made the following observations. Women teachers should model the skills of critical thinking, debate, and confrontation. Sometimes the topic of discussion should be the dynamics of the classroom discussion itself. Teachers must be alert to the particular needs and developmental stage of learners. If students are accustomed to deductive method, approach them in that way before introducing inductive method. One must know the Christian story before critically analyzing it. Conceptual analysis is often preferred by students who find it uncomfortable to analyze their own life experience. However, critical and creative methods are not mutually exclusive. Several participants remarked upon evil factors in the contemporary seminary learning situation: careerism among candidates for ordination; the imprisonment of an unliberated woman inside each man; unchosen celibacy which engenders spite toward women who have joy in their own freely chosen celibacy; devaluation of mothering as a model for teaching authority; devaluation of the dignity of the teaching vocation.

Workshop 2

IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATIONS

Regina Coll of the University of Notre Dame and Patricia L. Wismer of Seattle University led the session. They said that their original undertaking had been to "identify how the bodies of work under consideration suggest new channels of inquiry, understanding, and praxis in areas such as ecclesiology, christology, ethics, anthropology, revelation, and the doctrine of God." However in the wake of the first session they designed a participatory process meant to bring the work of all attending into dialogue with the work studied beforehand. The intention was to demonstrate interactive learning.

Each participant was asked to think of a particular course which she or he had taught. Four questions about the course then were to be proposed by the leaders. In response to each question, participants were to "free-write" their ideas for three minutes just as they occurred, summarize those ideas, and share the summary aloud. The leaders would then integrate the themes emerging. After all attending were invited to introduce themselves, the questions and the summaries of responses were given in sequence as follows:

1. "What are the most basic questions you want your students to wrestle with?" Coll noted that no one suggested anything like P. Freire's banking model of education, although some described the likes of E. Willems's "tense moment."

Wisner noted that many sought to ask their students, "What do you think?" (This first question was designed to tap into the critical theme of "generativity," identified in the prior study, and to bring to light "new channels of praxis.")

2. "What do you really believe about your students?" Wisner reflected that participants' remarks indicated sensitivity to a variety of audiences and a desire to discover what can make students more human. Coll remarked on indications that women are enculturated to avoid assertive behavior. (This question was meant to elicit the critical theme of "the human.")

3. "How might the questions formulated above facilitate the transformation of the students' lives?" Coll rephrased this as the question of what the two subjects in education—the learner and the content—might have to say to one another. Time constraints caused this discussion to be cut short. (The question was meant to connect with S. Toton's concern for the transformation of society and E. Willem's concern for conversion.)

4. "In light of the previous questions, what strategies might be most effective in engendering this transformation?" (This question was meant to evoke the critical themes of "the aesthetic" and "action.") Participants made many concrete suggestions and there was no way or need for the leaders to summarize them.

In concluding, the leaders asked the participants to evaluate the experience of this session itself. Many found it engaging and valuable, and felt that it had accomplished the objective of modeling the values proposed. It was also pointed out that the fourth question had elicited no aesthetic strategies, that curtailing discussion of the third question was a loss, and that the title of the session was not descriptive of what had transpired. Several people urged the leaders to publish an account of the metamorphosis of the project from theoretical analysis and theological construction into spontaneous sharing of pedagogical practices.

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