

SEMINAR ON THE AMERICAN CATHOLIC EXPERIENCE

In this, its fourth year of life, the seminar on "The American Catholic Experience" continued its effort to reflect theologically on important components of the history of American Catholicism. Seminar members are persuaded that American Catholic theology has been shaped too strongly for too long by European experiences and perspectives. It is time to discern and articulate what our own history has to teach us. Then, perhaps, we can share the lessons of our history with other regions of the world church.

In the first session, we discussed "The American Catholic Church and the Southern Experience: Is Integration Possible?" by Prof. William D. Lindsey (Xavier University of Louisiana). Lindsey argues that "we cannot speak of the American identity, or call for creative dialogue between Catholicism and American thought, unless we see that identity and thought in much broader terms than we have traditionally done." He marshalls a considerable body of evidence to show that the paradigm which Catholics tend to take as "the American experience" actually reflects only the New England Puritan facet of that experience.

The project of inculturation, as advanced by the 19th century Americanists and their contemporary intellectual descendants, seeks a happy marriage between Roman Catholicism and the American ethos. The latter is taken to include values such as freedom, progress, and individual autonomy, as well as a sense of the United States as a "novus ordo seculorum" with no less than a global mission. In fact, Lindsey argues, these are liberal values and convictions which overlook significant components of the American experience.

The "Southern experience" is, of course, a major ingredient of the American experience, but its contributions to American self-identity are still largely unasimilated by American Catholicism. In Lindsey's view, the experiences of poverty, of guilt for the crimes of slavery, of defeat in the War Between the States, and of the importance of kinship and community remain untapped resources for rethinking American identity because these experiences run counter to central elements of the dominant national myth. For instance, Americans think of their land as one of plenty, not of poverty, and of themselves as innocent, not involved in the terrible crimes against Black slaves and Native Americans.

Lindsey admits that much more work remains to be done in this area. Yet it is clear that, if he is correct, our task as American Catholic theologians is nothing less than "re-imagining American Catholicism" in a direction quite different from Eugene Kennedy's (even though Kennedy coined the phrase).

In the second session, we discussed "Social Concern and Religious Commitment: What Can Orestes Brownson Teach Us About Catholicism Today?" by Prof. Patricia O'Connell Killen (Loyola University of Chicago; in August, 1989, Pacific Lutheran University).

Killen has observed that Brownson scholarship tends to fall into two camps. One considers Brownson a significant critic of American culture who became unimportant and uninteresting once he joined the Catholic Church. The other sees Brownson as a confused mind and lost soul till he finds and embraces the perennial light and truth of Catholicism. Both interpretations miss the essential links between his social concerns and his conversion. Thus, they fail to understand adequately both Brownson and the church he joined. They also miss the light which Brownson's work throws on 19th century American life and on our present dilemmas.

Brownson agreed with many of his contemporaries about industrialization's corrosive effects on American life and democratic ideals. Yet he considered the solutions which they offered as inadequate to all the dimensions of the problem. Some proposals were simply escapist. Others minimized the power of material reality and social structure to skew awareness and distort consciousness. Brownson came to see that only Catholicism could meet the challenges of "industrial feudalism."

In his view, one submitted to the authority of the church when one became a Catholic. This was necessary therapy. It overcame the distortions of consciousness reflected in the isolation and self-interest characteristic of American life. As a member of the church, one belonged to a "community of discourse" which taught principles and provided a language for genuine, public ethical discussion. The church's sacramental system mediated the grace that empowered one to live according to the principles of Christianity in the midst of a culture that structurally negated them in many ways.

Killen would be the last to claim that Brownson had all the answers, but her paper shows him grappling with the right questions. Brownson identified cultural and theological issues which are central to the viability of American Catholicism and American ideals. Killen convinced us that he has much to teach us still.

For the 1990 CTSA meeting, the seminar plans to advance the convention theme, "Inculturation and Catholicity," by two panel presentations and general discussions. One session will assess the four-volume bicentennial study of American Catholicism (Christopher J. Kauffman, ed.). The other session's focus is still being determined.

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