

SEMINAR ON CHRISTOLOGY

In the Christology Seminar we followed our practice of devoting the first session to a classical issue and the second session to a contemporary issue.

Thomas H. West (The College of St. Catherine) led our first session in a discussion of "classical models of soteriology." He reviewed the motif of Christus Victor, Anselm's theory of satisfaction, Abelard's motif of love, and Calvin's theory of penal substitution. In each case, West highlighted elements that might be of value today. For example, the Christus Victor motif may speak to our experience of evil within human institutions.

West also introduced the recent soteriology of Paul S. Fiddes (Regent's Park College, Oxford University), especially as articulated in his books, *The Creative Suffering of God* (1988) and *Past Event and Present Salvation* (1989). According to West, Fiddes' view is shaped by three convictions: (1) that the only obstacle to God's forgiveness of sin is our resistance, (2) that God's justice is not imposed from outside of human life but rather is God's active consent to the natural consequences of sin, and (3) that God's justice is united with a suffering creation in Jesus Christ; there exists an ontological unity between God and Jesus.

Guided by these convictions, Fiddes has proposed, to quote West, that "Jesus does not suffer as a substitute—but as the way by which he (and God) invite us to participate in self-offering to God." In this soteriology, Fiddes has recovered some elements from Abelard's motif of love and also from Calvin's theory of penal substitution. West noted, too, that Fiddes' thought has similarities with Karl Rahner's views, as expressed in "Following the Crucified," *Theological Investigations*, 18.

Discussion of West's presentation treated Fiddes's theology as well as classical soteriology. Among the points made were the following. Modern thought struggles with the question of God's relationship to human suffering. Fiddes has approached this topic by speaking about the mutability of God. An alternative approach is laid out by Gerald Vann in his book, *The Suffering of God*.

Further, soteriological theories stress to varying degrees the objective reality of God's saving work in Jesus Christ and the subjective reality of our response to God's love revealed in Christ. Fiddes has emphasized the subjective element. This emphasis has merit in that it illumines the importance of our participation in God's saving work. It also has liabilities. For example, it risks neglecting the value of God's saving work for lives in which there is no formal acknowledgment of Jesus as the Christ. It may help, therefore, to distinguish between an (implicit) acceptance of God's love and an (active) appropriation of God's love.

Another perspective on this matter sees the communal character of our redemption. According to the Epistle of the Hebrews, for instance, in Jesus Christ God has established a covenant with a people. Individuals who are members of this people are incorporated into the relationship between the Godhead and Jesus

Christ. It was pointed out, too, that West (and Fiddes) raised some issues that would look different within a more incarnational christology. Finally, it was noted that one way to strike a balance between the objective and subjective dimensions of redemption is to speak about (1) the Spirit's transformation of the humanity of Jesus Christ and (2) our acceptance of this same Spirit. This observation led into the seminar's second session.

In our second session, Robert P. Imbelli (Boston College) presented his views on "Jesus the Giver of the Spirit." He proceeded in two steps. First, he explained that there currently exists a general feeling of the loss of a center in our society and the church. This sense of malaise in society was recently expressed in the theme "Social Breakdown in the U.S.?" in the journal *Dissent* (Spring 1991). Regarding the crisis in the church, Imbelli noted both the growing gap between Christian discourse and the ordinary language of our day—cf. Luke Johnson, *Faith's Freedom* (1990)—and also the widespread concern regarding Catholic identity—cf. *The New Republic* (24 September 1990). In this complex situation, some theologians (e.g., John Bowden, Paul Newman, and G. W. H. Lampe) have called for a lessening of the Christ symbol and the pursuit of pneumatology apart from christology, tending toward what Imbelli termed a "unitarianism of the Spirit."

In his second step, Imbelli argued that christology and pneumatology are intrinsically connected. There exists an essential tie between Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, as argued by the Orthodox theologian, Jean Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (1985). This tie can be glimpsed, Imbelli said, from three perspectives. First, in the celebration of the Eucharist, Christians are united in Christ and are simultaneously empowered by the Spirit to live as church in the world. Second, if fear of death lies at the heart of our human predicament, as has been noted by such novelists as Walker Percy and John Updike—cf. *Commonweal* (17 May 1991), then the soteriological "remedy" must be commensurate with this "pathology." This fear can be overcome as we join our dying to the death of Jesus Christ, and therein we experience the strength of the Spirit. As Karl Rahner has put it, "There is an identity between experience of the Spirit and participation in the victorious death of Jesus" ("The Experience of Spirit," *Theological Investigations*, 18). Third, our human relationships are frequently characterized by deception and betrayal, yet our redemptive relationship with Christ provides us with a new foundation for our lives and relationships. Christ, who consecrated himself in the truth (Jn 17:19), gave his body for us, so that we might become his body sustained in the Spirit of truth (cf. Rowan Williams, "Trinity and Pluralism," in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered* [1990]). Imbelli summed up his views regarding "Jesus the giver of the Spirit" by observing that the Eucharist consists of both the recalling of Jesus' story (anamnesis) and the invoking of the Spirit (epiclesis). Hence, in the Eucharist the bond between christology and pneumatology is secure.

The discussion in response to Imbelli's presentation included the following questions. (1) What would happen if this theological reflection began with pneumatology and then moved to christology? (2) How would the relationship between Jesus and the Spirit appear within an explicitly trinitarian perspective? (3) To what extent can liturgy serve as a source for theology when the celebration of the eucharist is in fact problematic in many communities today? (4) In what ways would

an eschatological vantage point on Jesus and the Holy Spirit shed new light on their relationship?

This second session concluded with a business meeting, at which Michael Slusser (Duquesne University) agreed to serve as the seminar's new moderator, replacing Robert Krieg who has chaired the group for three years. Suggestions were then offered for the seminar's two sessions at the 1992 convention of the CTSA.

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