

COMPARATIVE ECCLESIOLOGY AND GLOBAL CATHOLICISM

Judith Merkle (Xavier University) reported on a project for which she serves as a team member. The most recent General Chapter of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur commissioned a study of the experience of church among the members of that Congregation. It was felt that such a study of how religious women, working on five continents, were experiencing church would help in the discernment of future directions in the Congregation, and also form a better basis for coming together to discuss important issues of life and ministry together.

An international team was formed to carry out this project over the next several years. In meeting, the team noted four presuppositions that framed the project which needed to be clarified. The first was the perception of the locus of the Church. Did women see the Church primarily as the Congregation or the diocese? Clarifying this would be important for reading the results. Secondly, the relation of Church and sect (in the Troeltschian sense). This was especially the case in situations where women felt alienated from the official Church; how did they perceive what they call "church"? Third, many might feel that they belong to multiple churches, particularly where church is defined as community. Just as we have multiple communities of reference in the shaping of our general identity, so too we participate in multiple communities that call themselves "church." Fourth, there is a need to acknowledge and identify the difference created by pluralism and understood as pluralism. The differences that were being focused upon especially were those around authority and dissent, inculturation, and experiences of racism.

Methodologically, the various units of the Congregation would be asked to reflect on their experience of church, beginning with an analysis of the socioeconomic and political situation (using methods adapted from Joe Holland and Peter Henriot's *Social Analysis*) and moving into their understanding of their mission. Participants would have to reflect both on their negative experiences of church, arising from the processes of change and growth, as well as their positive experiences of how the Gospel is being expressed.

Jamie Phelps (Catholic Theological Union, Chicago) responded to the presentation. She focused her remarks especially on the experiences of difference and attending to them closely. She noted that expedience had dictated forming the research team from North Atlantic participants, but that the voices of Africa, Latin America, and Japan needed to be heard. Hearing those voices was important not only for the content of what was said, but also for how the research program itself would be shaped.

The discussion that followed centered especially on Phelps' remarks, dwelling principally on the difficulties of hearing a plurality of voices. Participants from many different parts of the world shared their insights into the problem of how questions are even posed. The difficulties are compounded by the fact that missionaries are often not native to the cultures in which they work, thus creating a more complex grid through which reality is read. Problems arising from racism were also mentioned frequently.

There seemed a general sense that this ambitious project would be worth following through to its completion, not only for the panorama of global Catholicism that it was likely to produce, but also for what might be learned about doing comparative studies across a variety of lines.

ROBERT J. SCHREITER
Catholic Theological Union
Chicago