

SEMINAR ON THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

The continuing seminar on Theological Anthropology held two sessions. The first, entitled "Faith and Experience: *Hommage à William F. Lynch, S.J.*," discussed a previously circulated paper by Mary Aquin O'Neill of (University of Notre Dame). Louis Roy (Boston College) offered a response to O'Neill's paper which served as a discussion catalyst. Ann O'Hara Graff (Institute of Pastoral Studies at Loyola University, Chicago) served as moderator.

The book, *Images of Faith: An Exploration of the Ironic Imagination* by William F. Lynch, S.J.,¹ has had considerable impact on Mary Aquin O'Neill's thinking and teaching with respect to the convention theme, "Experience and Theology." Since the theological anthropology seminar has been discussing this theme for the past few years (with particular concern for how "women's experience" informs theological anthropology), O'Neill offered Lynch's ideas as a theoretical base. Lynch's intentionally ambivalent use of the notion of "images of faith" offer important "correctives" for an understanding of faith and experience and their importance for theology. For Lynch, faith is prerequisite to what is ordinarily called "knowledge." First, faith enables one to "risk the new" in terms of having further life experiences (*knowledge follows faith, temporally*). Second, faith necessitates trusting the word of another (*faith is not just vertical, but horizontal*). Third, faith is not separate from experience (*faith is a way of experiencing and experience is a human reality which "tames" faith*). Lynch's corrected images of faith also yield corrected conceptions of *theology*: (1) that theology is faith *and* experience seeking understanding; (2) that faith, on which theology depends, is not only God's gift, but a gift of human truth-telling and fidelity; and (3) that theologies must be appropriate to various stages of faith.

Lynch's argument, that experience always involves the imagination (not just what "happens to us" but includes how we understand and interpret what happens to us) in such a way that it directly influences what happens to us, can be seen in O'Neill's encounter with a man on a lonely road whose hand was encased in a bag (later discovered to be a construction crewman, who was holding a piece of pie) and a white person unknowingly riding down a one-way street in Los Angeles during the recent riots, meeting crowds of gesticulating people of color, making faces at her. Both cases illustrate that we do not have all the evidence needed to be sure of an interpretation, yet we must make a decision.

¹William F. Lynch, S.J. *Images of Faith. An Exploration of the Ironic Imagination* (Notre Dame: IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973). The preparatory reading for the seminar was from Chapter Two.

In theological anthropology, the pattern of sex complementarity is an example of an "image" (interpretation) which does not correspond to the realm of "fact" in many cases. Another example might be family planning. Why is it that natural child birth and breast feeding are considered good, but natural control of conception is dismissed out of hand? Where an issue seems to involve a conflict between faith and experience, perhaps a more accurate description (as Lynch suggests) would be to speak of a "conflict of authorities." O'Neill sees Lynch's "images of faith" as offering a challenge to both the traditions of faith and the dogmas of culture within the continuing struggle of faith and experience.

Louis Roy was sympathetic to O'Neill's paper, but called for greater precision in language and an assessment of the methodological consequences of Lynch's view of the relationship between faith and experience. Can experience "correct" faith? What aspects of Christian belief are likely to be contradicted and revised by the evidence of living? He suggested a more differentiated language which would offer methodological guidelines for the use of experience in theology. Distinctions between "faith," "belief" and "experience" must be made by introducing another layer of meaning to those terms. Without precision in terminology, we will not be able to determine (for the sake of illustration) when Church authorities or secular feminists are more "believable" or "unbelievable."

The discussion raised the following issues and comments: Roy's separation of two senses of the various terms (faith, belief, experience) is interesting, but is different than what Lynch was doing. How would M. Polanyi's work compare with Lynch's? Shouldn't one distinguish between "concept" and "interpretative framework" more than Lynch did? Robert Doran's work on the psychic levels of conversion, using Lonergan's framework, is relevant to this discussion; what about *embodied* experiences (especially women's) as offering resources in the tradition (Patty Jung's insight that "Jesus feeds us with his body")?

At the seminar's conclusion it seemed apparent that certain categories had been explored: "experience," "faith," "image," "concept," "faith tradition." Though problematic issues were seen to remain (i.e., What regulates the imagination—tradition? Which stories should be seen as narrating the faith tradition? If narrative mediates "truth," a discernment of spirits is needed, but how? by whom? Shouldn't "experience" be accompanied by "intelligence"?), William Lynch's insight was recalled: "'There is one right way!' is the beginning of all mental illnesses."

The Saturday seminar was comprised of a structured discussion concerning the publication project on "Foundations/Issues for a Feminist Theological (Christian) Anthropology." Contributors present (or through written expression of interest) included: Anne Clifford, Shawn Copeland, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, Ann O'Hara Graff, Mary Catherine Hilkert, Mary Ann Hinsdale, Mary Aquin O'Neill, Sally McReynolds, Susan Ross, Patricia Wismer, and Mary Ann Zimmer. After sharing the basic outline of their essays, the participants reviewed the topics in order to assess gaps in themes, social location and manageability. A discussion

of elements necessary to fashion a book proposal (audience, length/outline, market, timeline, etc.) and possibilities for editor/coeditor followed. Those who volunteered to coedit will let Mary Ann Hinsdale know of their decision by the end of the summer. Mary Ann will contact each contributor for a refined five-sentence description to pass on to the coeditors. One of next year's theological anthropology sessions will be devoted to the publication project. Robert Ellsberg, editor-in-chief of Orbis Books, was present and offered some helpful suggestions about the focus of the book and for working with publishers.

A brief business meeting determined that the second seminar session at next year's convention would be held in collaboration with the Comparative Theology seminar. Further details will be worked out by the convenors in consultation with the seminar steering committee.

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