NORTH AMERICAN CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY

Topic: The Body of Christ:
The Claim of the Crucified People on U.S. Theology and Ethics
Convener: John J. Markey, St. Mary's Seminary and University
Moderator: Jamie Phelps, Catholic Theological Union
Presenters: Robert Lassalle-Klein, Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley
William O'Neill, Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley

Robert Lassalle-Klein proposes that the historical reality of the crucified people of El Salvador places an undeniable claim on theology and ethics as they are done in the United States. The first part of his presentation explains the idea of the crucified people, grounding the concept in the historical reality of the crucified people of El Mozote, El Salvador. Lassalle-Klein interprets the meaning of this concept, and its grounding event, in reference to the governing theological concept of the Kingdom of God. He then proceeds to offer the entire discussion as a soteriological narrative exemplifying what he calls "the overarching horizon of Christian historical realism." In the second part of the presentation Lassalle-Klein develops the outline of a formal philosophical and theological concept of the Christian historical realism which has produced the important new concept of the crucified peoples. He then proceeds to use this concept of Christian historical realism to interpret the important claims which the crucified peoples place on U.S. theology and ethics.

Lassalle-Klein believes that this "Christian realism" is best exemplified in the work of the El Salvadoran philosopher and martyr, Ignacio Ellacuria. Ellacuria uses the term "historicization" to refer to those historical realities which display the unifying role of grace in history, and which place the radical claim of the crucified people at the center of the theological enterprise. For Ellacuria, "historicization" suggests the incorporative and transformative power which human praxis exerts over the historical and natural dimensions of reality. "Historicization" then refers to a process whereby praxis simultaneously appropriates concepts, values and practices from historical realities, and shapes and transforms these realities. This understanding of "historicization" as the ground of theology and ethics implies that both are subject to validity tests which prevent abstraction and idealization. "Historicization" offers a helpful new procedure for insuring that theological and ethical reflection are rooted in genuine historical realities and are directed to changing these realities in direct and concrete ways. Lassalle-Klein points out the profound parallels between Ellacuria's procedure of historicization and the pragmatic method of the

philosopher C. S. Peirce. Lassalle-Klein comments on these parallels to clarify and adapt his own method of theological inquiry. He concludes by demonstrating that the crucified people of El Mozote are a profound symbol of the historical reality of the Kingdom of God. As such, this symbol has a radical claim and presents itself as a profound starting point for the thought and work of U.S. theologians and ethicists.

William O'Neill presents the Rwandan genocide of 1994 as offering a similar claim on U.S. theologians and ethicists. The specter of the Rwandan genocide and the U.S. and other Western nations complicity in this historical reality challenges the adequacy of our normal ethical and theological rhetoric. O'Neill argues that the standard Western liberal motifs of abstract formalism, individualism, and voluntarism culminate in a morally attenuated description of genocide. O'Neill shows that the kind of ordinary "rights" language that we often employ to discuss the ethical dimensions of historical realities completely pales in the face of the horror of the Rwandan genocide and similar atrocities. But it is precisely the inexpressibility of these terrifying events that should cause us to evaluate, critique and reformulate the procedures by which we "do" ethics and the language we employ to facilitate this type of analysis. In the light of this reality, O'Neill offers an alternative, rhetorical reading of nonwestern rights' discourse which seeks to remedy the hermeneutical lacunae embodied in these radical atrocities. O'Neill argues that the discourse of rights is finally neither a formal, metanarrative displacing local narratives, nor one of many incommensurable "petits recits," but the grammar of our narration: our imagining, remembering and redressing evil.

O'Neill shows how our imagination and remembrance compel us to redress the evils they reveal. He shows how the rhetorical structure of human rights discourse exhibits the prejudice of equal respect for moral agents as the backing of particular claims or warrants. The relation of these claims or warrants to backing, in turn, determines the interpretation of rights, and, in particular, of our basic human rights to civil liberties, security, and subsistence as the prerequisites of exercising agency. Social obligations deriving from these basic rights entail duties to protect and defend the most vulnerable and deprived. These duties are generally mediated structurally and it falls to all citizens to sustain and support the particular social structures which bear this responsibility. This responsibility will appear most vivid, and its claim will be most persuasive when the actual face of the victims appear and are represented in narrative and provoking manner. Theology and ethics must help citizens to truly "see" the face of victims, and take seriously their historical reality in all of its tragic pain and suffering. Abstract reflection devoid of such clarifying data will not only be irrelevant to history, but contrary to the will of the crucified God.

JOHN J. MARKEY, O.P.
St. Mary's Seminary and University
Baltimore, Maryland