

- Topic: Doctrine in the City: Teaching Theology in an Urban Context
Convener: Thomas F. Ryan, St. Thomas University, Miami
Moderator: Mary Carter Waren, St. Thomas University, Miami
Presenters: Thomas F. Ryan, St. Thomas University, Miami
Kay A. Read and Dennis P. McCann, DePaul University, Chicago
Michael P. Horan, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles

For many it is a commonplace to speak of contextual and local theologies and of theologians who attend explicitly to their own and their audience's social locations. What about teaching? Should pedagogy in large metropolitan areas differ from pedagogies in smaller urban, suburban and rural areas? The assumption driving this session was that they should. This session's three presentations, therefore, addressed different aspects of teaching theology in urban contexts.

Thomas Ryan presented some successes and a failure, the latter of which is briefly enumerated here. In his introductory Bible course this year, he suggested that a group study and then present their findings on Afro-Caribbean religion in Miami, particularly their practice of animal sacrifice. The hope was that a comparative approach would not only bring to life issues related to ancient sacrifice but also shed light on Christian understandings of sacrifice and on the religious culture of south Florida. At the outset, the presenters showed a video of a highly ritualized but very real animal sacrifice. Repulsed and yet fascinated, the class was subsequently in no mood to hear commentary or think comparatively. In his introduction to a book of essays entitled *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape* (Indiana University Press), Robert Orsi supplies resources for explaining this phenomenon. Because of fantastic and varied prejudices about the city and because the city and its inhabitants oscillate between being objects of fear and objects of desire, Orsi claims that the city and its people become compressed and are made unidimensional so that they are no longer *seen* as complex, living humans with varied interests and concerns. This analysis holds true for Ryan, particularly in the case of his students who were alternately repulsed by and attracted to what they saw. What, then, are the pedagogical implications of this analysis? In the first place Ryan wants his students simply to *see* the complexity of the urban issues and prejudices that are woven through conversations in the classroom. Second, and where appropriate, he seeks to reframe those issues in light of course material to produce a more complex and theologically sophisticated vision of the city and its inhabitants.

In the second presentation, Kay Read and Dennis McCann described the ongoing collaboration between the Religious Studies faculties at DePaul University and the University of Birmingham in England. The latter is a public institution that places greater emphasis on research and graduate studies while the former is Catholic and tends to lay stress on undergraduate teaching. Both, however, find themselves in large cities—Birmingham is one of the most diverse in the U.K.—and interested in the question of how universities consciously

interact with their urban environments. The faculty from Birmingham was particularly impressed with DePaul's "Discover Chicago," a course required of every first-year student that begins with a one-week immersion in the city and continues with a ten-week seminar built around and in response to that initial experience. They also learned that in Chicago in 1993, sixty-five children died violent deaths and that these were recounted through the year in front-page articles in *The Chicago Tribune*. Moved by these deaths and their stories, the two faculties have begun work on a collection of essays studying the religious responses to them. Besides an exercise in collaborative urban research, the intense focus on responses to urban tragedy has had an important impact on their teaching. The city in general and these religious responses in particular have provided valuable resources for teaching about different religious communities, their faiths and practices.

If the first presentation could be characterized as introducing the question about teaching in the city and the second as describing the actual practice of teaching and research in the city, then Michael Horan's presentation could be characterized as surfacing the topic of praise in the city. He considered two expressions of pedagogy in an urban context. In his undergraduate course on contemporary ecclesiology, he invites students to attend a liturgy in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles that is outside of their cultural ambit, that is well planned and that has active congregational participation. Such opportunities often jolt students into an awareness of the phenomenon of liturgical enculturation so characteristic of postconciliar Catholic life. Students can also query the "text" of these liturgies resulting in a productive interaction between contemporary readings on Catholic liturgy and the experience of worship. Horan also screened a clip from the video *Soul of the City* (Orbis), which depicts public ritual at San Fernando Cathedral in San Antonio, Texas. In class, the film serves as a catalyst for discussion of the relationship between worship and witness in public, urban ritual. Students can then reflect on the public place of ritual in congregations with which they are more familiar. Horan concluded by distributing a colleague's syllabus for a course entitled "Faith and Ethnicity in Los Angeles: A Course 'On the Road.'"

A good discussion followed. Among the points made was the difficulty of studying cities in all their diversity from economically or educationally privileged positions, the challenge of managing time so that, besides doing everything else, one has enough of it to attend to the implications of one's location for pedagogy and theology, and the need to continue this conversation about teaching theology in an urban context.

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