

CONTINUING GROUPS

WOMEN'S SEMINAR IN CONSTRUCTIVE THEOLOGY

- Topic: *Ex Corde Mulieris: Insights into Catholicism and Public Life*
Conveners: Elena G. Procario-Foley, Iona College
Jane Carol Redmont, Graduate Theological Union
Moderator: Jane Carol Redmont, Graduate Theological Union
Presenters: Barbara Andolsen, Monmouth University
Frances Forde Plude, Notre Dame College, Cleveland

Frances Forde Plude and Barbara Andolsen addressed the theme of the convention through the perspectives of communication theology and Christian feminist ethics respectively. Plude's and Andolsen's presentations were preceded by a brief reflection from the moderator, Jane Carol Redmont, who provided a context for the seminar by speaking about "Catholic Women in Global Context: Who is the 'Public' in 'Public Life'?"

With David Tracy in the background, Redmont suggested that when considering the topic "Catholicism and Public Life," or "public theology" more strictly understood, one must ask the questions: "Which public and whose theologies?" and "Who defines the situation?" She illustrated the importance of her questions with descriptions of recent events in South and North America in which women played a decisive role.

Noting that communication constitutes and carries the cultural change process, Plude presents communication theology as a way to "keep the change process human, a way to care for people as if they mattered." With this in mind, Plude suggested that communication theology offers Catholicism a constructive discourse for its role in public life.

Plude challenged the members of the seminar to stretch their understandings of the connections between communication studies and theology. She argues that just as feminist and liberation theories once influenced theology to the extent that the new fields of feminist and liberation theologies appeared, so too communication theory has spawned an authentic communication theology. She is optimistic about the progress of the process thus far but she concedes that no seminal work has yet been published to define the content of the field. Therefore, Plude offered an overview of the emerging field by describing the structures that have supported its development as well as the methodological concerns that cohere with feminist theology.

Efforts to produce a communication theology date back two decades to biannual seminars sponsored by the Gregorian University in Rome at which theologians and communication studies theorists combined to consider the questions of

theology. In addition, Sheed and Ward publications, the recent CTSA continuing group in communication theology, course development and over two dozen doctoral students writing on the question are all supporting the development of communication theology.

Plude enumerated areas of shared interest between communication theology and feminist theology that require further development. Among these commonly held concerns are: efforts to articulate an alternative vision for humanity, the acknowledgment of experience as both source and criterion, the use of hermeneutics of suspicion and retrieval, an emphasis on mutuality in communication, analysis of language, and endeavors to promote authentic community.

During the question period, participants asked for a clarified definition of the field, if Plude were trying to highlight theologies that have not been communicated and if the vast literature in liturgical theology was being engaged by communication theology. Plude's general conclusion is that communication theology bears on all areas of theology and thus it is "pregnant for development."

Andolsen's presentation provided more familiar ground for consideration. She explored her working paper, "Feminine Names for God and Public Theology," as a way to provide a preface to the rest of the convention. Though time constraints did not allow an inquiry into her work on feminist solidarity, economic justice, and the Eucharist as presented in her book *The New Job Contract*, she urged participants interested in the connection between ethics and liturgical theology to begin a postconvention dialogue with her.

Andolsen suggested that the time had come to take the Christian feminist dialogue about female images for God into the realm of public policy. Two methodological moves are basic to her argument. Carefully acknowledging the rich contributions of the natural law tradition, Andolsen contended that so restricting the public discussion about God language to neutrally reasoned arguments accessible to all people *unintentionally* results in a male-only God; she described the resulting image as "God as the unchallenged Lord of the public square." The decision to avoid the natural law approach provoked a good deal of inquiry to which Andolsen consistently replied that she was not rejecting natural law out of hand but that its use in the case of the question about God language in the public arena inevitably shortchanged the discussion. In lieu of natural law, Andolsen grounded herself in a recovery of scripture.

Moving from the work of Sallie McFague, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and Elizabeth Johnson, Andolsen proposed that the images of God the Mother and Sophia-Spirit could be helpful when constructing a feminist public theology. The point of such a theology would be to create a consensus about the full equality of women, and therefore Andolsen emphatically maintained that her position was one of the *inclusion* of the Mother God image and not the *exclusion* of the Father God image. She clearly noted that the use of mother imagery alone in public discourse about God language would be "disastrous." In fact, the inclusion of the mother image would liberate the potential of the father image and free it from the

connotation of the solitary, patriarchal ruler. Further, it is crucial to recognize that there are some for whom the mother image would not be helpful and others who use it to support a theological anthropology of complementarity. Andolsen argued that a consistent feminist and Christian view calls for an authentic *multiplicity* of images. Therefore, introducing the image of Sophia-Spirit, admittedly a less well known image, may advance the discussion if it takes its place alongside other images. Andolsen acknowledged, though, that there is controversy about the interpretation of the image among biblical scholars.

Andolsen concluded with a related challenge and caveat. The challenge is to create a consensus within the churches about God language that promotes the full dignity of women and then to take that consensus to the public realm. Ironically, Andolsen quipped, the initial efforts to shift God images in the service of gender equality will have a grenade-like effect. Subsequent conversation primarily explored the disruptions that people have already encountered when engaging in this effort.

The seminar concluded with the annual presentation of the Ann O'Hara Graff Memorial Award. This year's recipient was Diana L. Hayes of Georgetown University.

ELENA G. PROCARIO-FOLEY

Iona College

New Rochelle, New York