

HISPANIC/LATINO THEOLOGY

- Topic: Hispanic/Latino Theology as a Challenge
to the Public/Private Dichotomy
- Convener: Roberto S. Goizueta, Boston College
- Presenters: Michelle González, The Graduate Theological Union
Christopher Tirres, Harvard University

In the first presentation, entitled "Transcending the Convent: The Theological Contribution of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz," Michelle González examined the life and work of the seventeenth-century nun, the first woman theologian of the Americas. Arguing that Sor Juana's work should be retrieved for contemporary theology, González described how this great thinker's writings challenged a traditional worldview in which theological reflection was reserved for men, while the more affective realm of "feeling mysticism" was reserved for women. Sor Juana, noted González, was not a mystic. In a world where the public theological voice of the clergy regulated the private spiritual voice of women, Sor Juana dared to engage theological debates of the time. Though she never developed a systematic critique of patriarchy, she did critique the exclusion of women from the theological arena. Sor Juana's first attempt to transcend the limits thus imposed on her and other women was a critique of a sermon delivered by the Bishop of Puebla.

González suggested that one should not attempt to interpret Sor Juana's life and work in isolation from other women of the period. Too often, for instance, scholars interpret her very act of writing as the transgression that evoked opposition from clergy (despite the fact that many other women were also writing). Instead, what made Sor Juana controversial was the fact that she challenged the male clergy's feminization of ignorance. Though some women held political positions, they were excluded from "truth activities." Sor Juana dared to locate rational reflection in the realm of women's "private" concerns, the realm which U.S. Latina/o theologians have called "*lo cotidiano*" (the everyday). This insistence on the rationality of everyday experience is reflected in Sor Juana's famous dictum: "Had Aristotle cooked, he would have written a great deal more."

In the second presentation of the morning, Christopher Tirres spoke on "The *Via Crucis* as a Challenge to the Public/Private Dichotomy." He began by noting the increased attention that Christian theologians are giving to the theme of "aesthetics." Contemporary philosophy has broadened the realm of aesthetics to incorporate not only art but ritual and human experience itself.

Focusing on the *Via Crucis* that takes place every Good Friday at San Fernando Cathedral in San Antonio, Texas, Tirres observed that this religious practice is aesthetic by virtue of (1) its appeal to the senses, (2) its connection to historical tradition, and (3) the participation of its members. Taking the *Via Crucis* as an example, a Latino/a aesthetics breaks down the public/private dichotomy, as well as the dichotomy between the sacred and the secular. This reflects the holistic

worldviews of the cultures at the origins of Latino/a culture, namely, the Spanish Baroque, African, and indigenous cultures.

Tirres then showed a segment of the video entitled "Soul of the City," which depicts the *Via Crucis* celebration in San Antonio. This stirring video showed the power of this dramatic reenactment of Jesus' Passion. After the video, Tirres concluded by posing three challenges for U.S. Latino/a theologians: 1) expand the scope of what constitutes aesthetics; 2) attend more honestly to the dangers of "aestheticization"; 3) avoid the danger of a vulgar historicism.

Numerous participants raised questions of both presenters, and a lively discussion developed. The questions helped the group to draw out some of the nuances of the San Fernando rituals, as shown on the video. Several questions helped us probe the significance of U.S. Hispanic popular religion for sacramental theology, as well as the significance of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz for contemporary theology.

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