

## RENAISSANCE AND MODERN THEOLOGY

- Topic: Revisiting Americanism  
Convener: William McConville, Siena College  
Presenter: William Portier, Mount Saint Mary's College  
Respondent: Dennis Doyle, University of Dayton

William Portier divided his presentation, "In Search of a Public Theology: From Americanist Tradition to Evangelical Catholicism," into five parts. The first introduced the term "Americanism" by reviewing the historical context for *Testem Benevolentiae* and tracing the interpretation of the controversy by "phantom heresy" historians Ellis and McAvoy. In contrast to these scholars, contemporary revisionist historians judge the controversy in terms of an orchestrated attempt to export Church reform to Europe. The second section describe the historiographical passage from phantom heresy to Americanist tradition. Key to this move was Donald Pelotte's characterization of John Courtney Murray as an Americanist who carried on the work of Gibbons and Ireland in searching out the presence of Catholic principles in American social and political culture. More recently Scott Appleby has argued for the triumph of Americanism; it is the common ground for liberals and conservatives in the contemporary American church. In the third part Portier examined some of the historical and theological difficulties with the idea of an "Americanist tradition." Some of these difficulties include the following: the lack of "analytical mileage" provided by the term; the ease with which the religious and political descriptions of American culture can become ideological; the shift in the social location of American Catholics from the margins to the mainstream; and the dramatic changes in American political culture over the past forty years.

The fourth section took the phrase "building better [wiser] than they knew," used variously by Brownson, Keane, and Murray, and tracked the ways in which it was used to articulate, from the Americanist perspective, the harmony or providential fit between Catholicism and American political institutions. In the fifth and final section of the paper, Portier argued that the collapse of the Catholic subculture, the movement of Catholics into the political and social mainstream, the fragmentation of American public life, and the voluntary nature of ecclesial belonging demand moving beyond the Americanist tradition to a more evangelical style of Catholic presence. Given the pluralistic society in which we live, conversion, witness, and even holiness, in his view, have more public currency than natural law categories. Thus his conclusion: "In the absence of consensus, in a situation where the only boundaries between Catholics and other Americans are the ones we make, the church needs to be itself. Coming from within America's pluralistic mainstream, Catholic contributions to a public theology will begin from the church's holiness."

Doyle praised Portier for his insightful rethinking of the Americanist tradition and noted his agreement on issues relating to the evangelization of American culture and the importance of the changed social location of American Catholics.

Doyle argued for the retention of the natural law tradition as complementary to Portier's evangelical model. For him the natural law tradition can be construed as continuing the traditional Catholic emphasis on the goodness of creation. It can also function as a critique of culture, for example, in the work of Martin Luther King and nonreligious prolife activists.

In a lively discussion participants raised the following issues: the implications of all of this for the new immigrants; the viability or desirability of a Catholic counterculture; and concerns about the sobriquets "evangelical" and "voluntary."

WILLIAM McCONVILLE

*Siena College*

*Loudonville, New York*