

INVITED GROUPS

MISSION IN THE UNITED STATES

- Topic: Evangelization and the North American Context
Convener: Robert Imbelli, Boston College
Moderator: Robert Imbelli, Boston College
Presenter: Francis Cardinal George, O.M.I., Archbishop of Chicago
Respondent: Paul Baumann, Executive Editor, *Commonweal* Magazine

Approximately eighty participants gathered to hear Cardinal George relate the Convention theme, *Missio ad Gentes*, to the North American context. Drawing upon his own scholarly background in philosophy and theology, as well as his pastoral experience as priest and bishop, the Cardinal presented a stimulating paper.

He began by posing the key question: "How can authentically Catholic theology help to announce the Good News to and within a culture shaped by a complex and uniquely American set of assumptions, values, symbols, prejudices, practices, and convictions?" He then proceeded to underline the ambiguous quality of every culture in the light of the Gospel. Hence, American culture offers both "rocky ground" and "fertile soil" for the Word of the Gospel.

The Protestant inspiration of the first settlers has fostered in the United States a characteristically subjective and experiential approach to religion that "renders extremely difficult the proclamation of a revealed and doctrinally textured faith." Moreover, "when subjective experience is the source, measure and criterion of truth, any and all authority is seen as arbitrary and invasive."

In the political realm the American experience also owes much to a Hobbesian "social ontology" that is individualistic and antagonistic, rather than communal and participatory. Individual rights often trump concern for the common good, while freedom becomes disengaged from issues of justice and truth.

Such are some of the pitfalls of American culture; but, on the other hand, that culture also offers receptive soil for the Gospel. Noteworthy is the vision enshrined in the national motto: *e pluribus unum*. From a rich diversity of peoples and cultures something genuinely new has emerged. Cardinal George underscored "the vibrant analogy between the secular national *communio* of the United States and the sacred, transnational *communio* of the Church." And, though a Hobbesian conception of right and freedom falls far short of an adequate vision of the human, the Declaration of Independence reaches back to the biblical heritage to root citizens' inalienable rights in the design of the Creator.

Cardinal George concluded by invoking the saints as the primary evangelizers of a culture. They embody the Gospel in the accents and rhythms of a particular culture. In responding to the universal call to holiness, our task, then, is not so much to be "countercultural," as to love the culture sufficiently to work for its transformation in Christ. Those embarked on the way of holiness witness to American culture that "experience and subjectivity are most themselves, precisely when they are graciously overthrown by the revelation that surpasses them."

In his response, Paul Baumann wondered whether the Cardinal's critique of the American emphasis upon rights and freedom was one-sided. Drawing upon the thought of the philosopher Charles Taylor, Baumann suggested that "our ideas of autonomy and self-determination are also tied to powerful notions of self-improvement, moral responsibility, and respect for others." With regard to the contrast the Cardinal appeared to draw between "revelation" and "experience," Baumann stated that "if you eliminate experience, you also eliminate the possibility of God's ongoing revelation."

In the general discussion several participants broached this issue of the relation of revelation and experience. Others noted the increased impact of a growing hispanic population upon American culture, and pondered its implications both for American culture and for the manner of evangelization. The lively and good-spirited session continued well beyond the seminar's appointed close.

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