

CONTINUING GROUPS

WOMEN'S SEMINAR IN CONSTRUCTIVE THEOLOGY

- Topic: The Cross, Suffering and Women:
Perspectives on *Embracing Travail*
- Conveners: Elena G. Procaro-Foley, Iona College
Jane Carol Redmont, Graduate Theological Union
- Moderator: Maura Ryan, University of Notre Dame
- Presenter: Cynthia Crysdale, Catholic University of America
- Respondents: M. Shawn Copeland, Marquette University
Donna Teevan, Seattle University

The seminar's focus was Cynthia Crysdale's recent book *Embracing Travail: Retrieving the Cross Today* (Continuum, 1999). Crysdale opened the session by highlighting five key insights in the book. (1) Victims and sinners: salvation involves not just the forgiveness of sins but the healing of wounds. (2) The importance of narrative and voice: the meaning of suffering depends on how you tell the story; all suffering is interpreted. Sociology of knowledge helps us reflect on who is designated as a knower—or not a knower—and who designates what sin is. Part of the redemptive process lies in telling the story itself; for the oppressed this involves the opportunity to redefine sin and suffering; for others (and for all people at various times) this involves the practice of silence and listening. (3) An ethic of risk: referring to Sharon Welch's *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, Crysdale distinguished between an ethic of risk and an ethic of control, placing Welch in dialogue—beyond the contents of *E.T.*—with Lonergan's notion of "emergent probability," which she related to Welch's "conditions of possibility." We are enmeshed in schemes of recurrence," Crysdale said, "and all we do in making choices is alter the web"—a key insight if we are to leave a behind triumphalistic theology of the cross assuming that Christ "fixed" something, even as we affirm that Christ's "shifting of the probability" created an enduring transformation. (4) Evil is radically unintelligible: Crysdale's chapter 6, addressing the subject of grace, conversion, and the Law of the Cross, appeals to the "inverse insight" (Lonergan) that there is no "solution" to the problem of evil, and that we need first to accept the nonsensical aspect of evil before we can accept its transformation. She raised the question of how this might alter our approach to social justice issues, citing the example of the South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Finally (5), Crysdale added that she rejects almost all transactional understandings of the meaning of the cross, but that a

substitutionary theology of cross is widely written into church practices: how much is it possible to alter hymns, penitential rites, and grass roots devotions based on the view of the cross articulated by Crysedale and others? What can or ought to be preserved from the existing tradition?

Shawn Copeland, in her response, cautioned against omitting the social dimensions of suffering. While noting that Crysedale does name her own social location and allude to matters of justice in *Embracing Travail*, Copeland pressed further the question of the social dynamics of suffering, reminding seminar participants of the neuralgic nature of this issue in Latin American, African, African-American, Minjung, and other theologies. Sin and suffering, Copeland stressed, are universal, but diverse in their concrete circumstances. The personal is in fact political, social, and economic. When white girl-children and black girl-children are abused sexually and physically in a putatively safe environment, both need healing. But in quoting Delores Williams on such matters, *Embracing Travail* slides over the structural factor. Consider, Copeland added, the structures of sin and suffering in institutionalized racism, as embodied the current Cincinnati race riots and in the lives—and in some cases deaths—of James Byrd, Abner Louima, Amadou Dialo, and Rodney King. How are such structures to be transformed? The cross was no metaphor for first-century hearers of the Gospel. Crucifixion is not an individualistic act. It aims for the widest possible social effect.

Copeland's second point focused on *Embracing Travail's* component, and indeed requirement, of a spirituality, noting the context of Lonergan's development of the Law of the Cross in the Ignatian Exercises. Finally, Copeland raised the question of appropriation and reciprocity, which has been under discussion in the American Academy of Religion and in the broader theological community, but not thus far in the CTSA Women's Seminar. The manner of appropriation—the use of intellectually and culturally oppressed people (and their cultural production) by members of the dominant culture—raises questions of accountability and of reciprocity, defined by Katie Cannon as “giving back in kind and quality.” This requires attention to full humanity of members of oppressed groups and critical self-examination (not guilt) on the part of white feminists. Copeland challenged: Even as you draw on the work of womanist theologians, “how many Black women undergraduates and graduate students, especially Catholic, have you taught this year? . . . invited into graduate study? . . . engaged in a conversation about white racist supremacy? This is not [simply] about the politics of citation.”

Donna Teevan's response focused on two areas of *Embracing Travail*: the attention the book gives to the workings of grace, and its contribution to our understanding of feminist theological method. Crysedale's emphasis on grace as transformative—not a state of being in or out of God's favor but a process of growth, and thus related to conversion—is crucial to her contention that, in Teevan's words, “the problem of evil must be reframed in terms that break out of the patterns established by systems of domination and that venture an ethic of risk.” Teevan referred to her positive experience teaching christology with *Em-*

bracing Travail, expressing appreciation for Crysdale's confidence in the reader and acknowledgment of her limitations. Crysdale's method is a rich and effective synthesis of personal story, narrative drawing from both fiction and nonfiction, the central Christian narrative of Jesus' story, and theoretical tools ranging from Lonergan's and Welch's thought to Walter Wink's analysis of systems of domination, Belenky et al.'s *Women's Ways of Knowing*, and Sebastian Moore's *The Crucified Jesus Is No Stranger*.

After a brief response from Crysdale, seminar participants took up especially the questions raised by Copeland, regarding structural moral evil and appropriation and reciprocity. Maura Ryan referred to a recent conference of human rights and peace advocates and to its discussion of the difference between public forgiveness and reconciliation. Jane Redmont pointed out the need for examining the theological anthropology present in Crysdale's and the seminar's discussion of the nature of persons, reminding participants of the African and African-American saying—and anthropological assumption—"I am because we are." Bob Lassalle-Klein noted that Crysdale has added affective conversion to Lonergan's model, and that if we are to use Lonergan's categories, we must include categories of social and political conversion and examine how the various kinds of conversions relate to one another. Latin American liberation thought articulated by Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino radically unifies and sublates all forms of conversion to the more radical demand of confronting and transforming historical reality with the message and the values of the Gospel.

In answer to a question from a participant, Crysdale offered a few thoughts about her own ecclesial location as an Anglican teaching at Catholic University and writing about sin, suffering, and redemption. Copeland raised again the question of the mystical dimensions of Crysdale's work and of the realities it addresses; this mysticism takes place in a social situation, and the traditional categories of purgation and illumination are both personal and social. They also interact with one another. So we return to the question of conversion Crysdale raises.

The Seminar concluded with the annual presentation of the Ann O'Hara Graff Memorial Award. This year's recipient was Susan Ross of Loyola University of Chicago.

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