

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

Topic: Resurrection of the Body and the Social Mission of the Church
Convener: Brian D. Berry, College of Notre Dame of Maryland
Moderator: Margaret R. Pfeil, University of Notre Dame
Presenters: Susanne M. DeCrane, College of Notre Dame of Maryland
Jozef D. Zalot, College of Mount St. Joseph

Susanne DeCrane (“Feminism, Resurrection, and the Common Good”) proposed a feminist theological interpretation of Aquinas’ principle of the common good. First, she observed that Christianity has had an ambiguous relationship with the fact of embodiment almost since the beginning. This is strange given that the reality of the resurrection of Jesus implies a ratification of the goodness of bodily and material existence, making it a privileged meeting ground between God and creation. Rather than calling for a devaluing of embodiment, resurrection faith makes the moral claim that bodily life ought to be protected against those things that make it less possible for a person to encounter God through their embodied, material existence.

Second, DeCrane argued that women of all ages form a constituency of those who cross-culturally and throughout history have known in their flesh the devaluing of embodiment and materiality. They bear a unique and arguably greater proportion of the world’s suffering, their experiences of being violated in the privacy of their own homes have only recently been officially recognized as human rights abuses, and their situation along with that of their children among the displaced peoples of the world is especially horrific and even deadly. A feminist ethic will insist that particular attention be paid to the reality of women, the constituency that is most excluded from participating in the goods of creation in the societies in which they find themselves.

Third, DeCrane explained that for Aquinas, while God is to be understood as the ultimate good of the person, the temporal good of the person is also extremely important. Embodied, material existence is not only a privileged means by which a person may grow in apprehension of and response to God, but valuable in itself for providing a setting in which a person is able to grow in perception of the good and have the opportunity to respond to the good that is perceived. Thus, in *De Regnum (On Kingship)*, after stating that a “sufficiency of the material goods that are necessary for virtuous action” is required if one is to lead a good life, Aquinas charges the king with protecting the common good by seeing to it “that there is a sufficient supply of the necessities required to live life well.” We can see here, suggested DeCrane, a precedent for what we today are calling a “preferential option for the poor.”

Jozef Zalot (“Structural Adjustment in sub-Saharan Africa: A Critique from the Catholic Social Tradition”) offered a criticism from the perspective of Catholic social teaching of structural adjustment programs in sub-Saharan Africa. First, he explained that, since the 1980s, the World Bank and the International Monetary

Fund have imposed structural adjustment programs on sub-Saharan African nations as a condition for them continuing to receive development aid. The assumption has been that the huge budget deficits of these countries have been caused by excessive government spending, and that the solution is to reduce the size of government and to make the private sector the dominant player in African economic life. Investment, job creation, and income generation will then increase and governments will be able to generate sufficient resources to both service their debts and provide the necessary social services.

Second, Zalot appealed to statements by the Catholic Bishops Conferences of Cameroon and Zambia to argue that structural adjustment policies have in fact had devastating effects on the poor in sub-Saharan Africa. These include massive unemployment; increased cost of living forcing many people to forego food, basic education, and health care services; lack of drinking water and sanitation systems; the neglect of ecological concerns; higher rates of infant mortality; and growing numbers of street children and prostitutes. Based on such analysis, the bishops have recommended that human capital improvement (including health care and education), job creation programs, small-scale entrepreneurial promotion, and regional cooperation be included in future structural adjustment programs.

Third, Zalot noted that a number of recent policy changes in World Bank development lending are consistent with the principles of Catholic social teaching. Among these are calls for country ownership and greater popular participation in the formulation of government policy (participation and subsidiarity), as well as a focus on long-term rather than short-term programs, such as strengthening health and education policies (common good, solidarity, option for the poor). He also noted that the Commission for Africa has made similar recommendations in its recent report, *Our Common Interest* (2005). Zalot concluded by urging Christian social ethicists in the United States to support such recommendations and to work towards their implementation.

In the discussion that followed, a number of issues were raised: the need to supplement Aquinas's teleological language of the common good with deontological human rights discourse, what the practical implications of a feminist interpretation of the common good might be, for example, for displaced and raped women in Darfur; the importance of the virtues of solidarity and self-sacrifice for alleviating poverty in Africa, as well as the need for conversion from racism; and the degree to which Catholic social teaching is actually affecting economic institutions such as the World Bank in its theory and practice.

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