

THE CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES

- Topic: Body, Community, and Resurrection:
 Challenge and Hope for the U.S. Church
- Convener: William A. Clark, College of the Holy Cross
- Moderator: J. Michael Byron, St. Paul Seminary School of Divinity,
 University of St. Thomas
- Presenters: John O'Brien, Calvary Retreat Center, Shrewsbury, Massachusetts
 Phyllis Zagano, Hofstra University
 Eileen Burke-Sullivan, Creighton University

This developing group, now in its second year, explored the convention theme, "Resurrection of the Body" from the specifically American ecclesial context.

John O'Brien opened the session with "Take and Eat, Take and Drink: Feasting and Fasting the Body in a Consumer Society." Situating the discussion within the contemporary milieu in the United States, O'Brien appealed to an essay by Patrick T. McCormick which identifies dispositions toward food in "Diet America." Eating, he noted, has become a radically individual and even shameful activity, increasingly divorced from notions of communal dining. This stands in stark tension with a prophetic, Eucharistic vision of table fellowship, in which all human senses are attended and bodiliness is fully engaged. O'Brien then traced the evolution of toxic attitudes toward consumption in America, referencing the work of Elizabeth Cohen. Sketching a portrait of the "Consumer Republic," he discerned that an "ethos of having" is characterized by the notion of greed as virtuous, indulgence of desires, and a rapidly widening disparity between rich and poor.

Given these phenomena, O'Brien analyzed the language of Eucharistic prayers as corrective. Liturgical texts shape a disposition toward communal eating/drinking that emphasizes Eucharist as a gift to the church, evocative of gratitude among believers. Moreover, the character of sacrifice embedded in sacramental language compels participants toward a Christ-centered communion with one another and with humanity beyond ecclesial boundaries. The sharing of bread is a test both of right worship and of fraternal love. In conclusion, O'Brien posited guideposts for advancing a responsible Christian food ethic. Noting that eating is an inherently moral act, a community building act, and an act of justice, several probing questions were put forward as indicators of Eucharistic fidelity: Who is present or absent at table? What sort of worker justice is operative in the cultivation, transportation, and processing of agricultural products? How do particular foods of choice impact the environment?

In her paper, "How the Church can Rise Again," Phyllis Zagano appealed to recent crises in the church as evidence of a collision between an entrenched clerical culture and the Body of Christ. Acknowledging the resultant trauma and suffering, she perceives a new Pentecost at work, the product of a grassroots impulse that is moving forward with or without the complicity of traditional structures. Zagano called for a retrieval of pneumatology in ecclesiological discourse, together with a

recognition that the church is human as well as divine. Scandal has shown the tension inherent in this dual assertion.

Essential to the renewal of the American church is attention to institutional structures and ministries. Here too is an operative tension between a fundamentally juridical model and a model of communion. The former, she stated, is the model advanced by the Pope, which supports clericalism and posits a false dualism in ecclesiology between the ordained and the laity. Among the tragic consequences of such a model is a pattern of public unaccountability among bishops, a dynamic perpetuated even in the 2002 Charter produced in Dallas. In contrast, a communion ecclesiology such as that outlined by retired Archbishop John Quinn of San Francisco, must serve as a corrective balance, so that legitimate reform may erupt “from below.” Zagano stated that the recovery of the permanent diaconate may be crucial, for here is found a freedom from ecclesiastical careerism and the illegitimate trappings of clerical privilege. More specifically, the restoration of the female diaconate holds vital importance. Zagano argued that the Vatican clearly desires to deter the juridical empowerment of women, but that there is no theological warrant for precluding the reinstatement of women deacons. Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox churches, she noted, have made recent, uneven moves in this direction. Summarizing, Zagano stated that the US church can rise again if greater attention is given to the imbalance of ecclesial models presently in place. The role of the faithful in a communion ecclesiology (“participation”) is quite distinct in emphasis from the role of the faithful in a juridical conception (“cooperation”). Ministry is what will facilitate a resurrection of the ecclesial body.

Eileen Burke-Sullivan drew on the methodology of the late Dominican Yves Congar in presenting her paper, “Examining a Sign of the Times in the US American Church Under the Influence of Congar.” She identified the dialectical quality of his approach as revealing the tensive nature of all doctrine. Religious speech of any kind is inherently inadequate to its subject, she noted, which counsels humility to both the theologian and ecclesiastical leaders. Institutional structures, too, stand inevitably in a certain dialectical dissonance with the lived experience of the church at any given historical moment. This requires that the social apparatus of the ecclesial community be subject to the principle of *semper reformanda*. Ultimately this is reflective of the dialectic between Christology and pneumatology in ecclesiology.

A specific “sign of the times” in the US church is the change in both form and function of three particular ministries since Vatican II, that is, parochial leadership, spiritual direction, and professional theology. In each of these, the shift from an essentially ordained-centeredness to an increasingly lay-centeredness has been significant. This phenomenon has unfolded despite strong hesitations articulated by the magisterium. Congar might cast the operative American dialectic today in a variety of possible ways, Burke-Sullivan contended, but he would maintain the tension in dialogue in any case. In the end, the adequacy of any given ecclesiological formulation is determined by the criteriology of its fruitfulness. What Christian virtues are nourished? What sort of holiness is resultant? To what extent

are the poor attended to? These cannot be answered in any singular, universal, and perpetual way. Rather, ongoing pastoral-theological dialogue must displace illusory certitude at the heart of ecclesiological reflection.

In the exchange following the three papers, discussion focused upon what Edward Schillebeeckx has distinguished as “legitimate vs. illegitimate” diversity in ecclesial ministry, as well as the ambiguous status of consecrated religious life in church and world.

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