

ANTHROPOLOGY—TOPIC SESSION

Topic: “Abundant Life? Ecology, Subjectivity, and Conversion”
Convener: Natalia Imperatori-Lee, Manhattan College
Presenters: Colleen Carpenter, St. Catherine University
Michele Saracino, Manhattan College
Respondent: Elizabeth Johnson, C.S.J., Fordham University

This session investigated the relationship between humanity and other species. The presenters explored different facets of interspecies relationality, including notions of ethical eating, the problematic subjectivity of the nonhuman animal, and the broader question of how humanity can properly understand itself in relationship to the rest of creation.

Colleen Carpenter, in her paper, “The Abundant Life: Eating Humanly in a Hungry World,” poignantly described the tension between humans’ need to eat and the perils of doing so in a North American context of overabundance and waste. Carpenter noted that as embodied beings, humans must eat to live, and yet that eating requires death: of animals, plants, insects, and other humans. Our lives are in many ways predicated upon the death of others—a fact that is not unique to the human species. This inherent relationality reveals God’s own trinitarian life. Carpenter suggested a fourfold path to a more sustainable and theologically responsible relationship between humanity and food, grounded in the notions of knowledge, creativity, love, and joy. She then examined the idea of “abundance” as a category in the North American context, concluding that our society’s notion of abundance wreaks death on creation, including on other human beings through scarcity and environmental degradation. As an alternative, Carpenter proposed that we reconfigure abundance as a communal concept, where we understand abundance not as having an excess of goods but as having enough for all.

Michele Saracino’s paper, entitled “Animals as Subjects?” challenged the group to move beyond the question of the subjectivity of nonhuman animals, ultimately a reduction to anthropocentric claims about these creatures, and instead embrace the varied ways in which nonhuman animals, while similar to us, are nevertheless profoundly and irreducibly other. Rather than insist on casting animals as subjects, Saracino urged that we emphasize the otherness of animals such that the profound emotions these animals provoke in humans can be aired. This, in turn, invites new ways of thinking about subjectivity and otherness, allows us to mourn the end of our anthropocentric lifestyles and be converted to a new, inclusive notion of creation. She outlined several affectively charged stories of animal-human care, concern, and affection. Using Immanuel Levinas’s notion of the third party, Saracino focused on particular examples of queer love between humans and other animals where the nonhuman animal draws the human into subjectivity: a subjectivity-for-the-other.

In her response, Elizabeth Johnson noted the radical theological heart of this session: namely, how to address the demise of the anthropocentric approach to theology, and the emergence of a wider notion of creatureliness and *imago dei*. Johnson observed that both Saracino and Carpenter’s papers invited a profound rethinking of received categories about the nature of Christ and the Incarnation, as well as the notion of sacrament, Trinity, and cross. She posited that the otherness of

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animals might be a sacrament of God's otherness, and the centrality of the cross when considering the eucharistic implications of ethical eating. Johnson also observed the difference made by demographic changes in the theological academy, as more theologians are also responsible for running households and raising children, these concerns naturally bring a paradigm shift to theological investigation.

A lively discussion followed. Questions and comments focused on reframing essential theological categories in light of ecological awareness and a broadening of our notions of human creatureliness-in-relation. Sacramental theology, spirituality, ethics, and Christology must all be converted in light of these insights.

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