

CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT—TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Structures of Sin and Personal Conversion
Convener: Tobias Winright, Saint Louis University
Moderator: Tobias Winright, Saint Louis University
Presenters: David Cloutier, Mount St. Mary's University
Joy Galarneau, Siena College

This session included two papers exploring the convention's theme of "conversion" in connection with Catholic social thought (CST). Conversion usually is associated with one's response to God's invitation to a change of heart and a reorientation of one's life away from sin, evil, and injustice, with "one's" usually referring to an individual person, but it could also refer to social structures. This session probed the possible connections between conversion, individual persons, and social structures.

In the first paper, "Structures of Sin and Personal Conversion: Clarifications from Aquinas," David Cloutier addressed the conundrum of how precisely to describe the relationship between personal sin and sinful structures. On the one hand, there are those who basically reduce social sin to manifestations of individual sin and thus do not take structures seriously enough. On the other hand, there are those who emphasize structures in a way that minimizes individual sin. Hence, the relationship between voluntary individual agency and what Kristin Heyer has called "the nonvoluntary dimension of social sin" remains difficult and contested.

Cloutier argued that a retrieval of Aquinas' account of sin—even though it had no explicit category of social sin—provides a useful guide for navigating a course through this apparent impasse. Aquinas offers a complex account of the causes of sin: passion, ignorance, and malice. Cloutier suggested that those who assume that structures of sin cause individual sin either through inducement (e.g., advertising) or through ignorance (e.g., prejudice against a group of people) need to take into consideration the last category, sins of malice, which are not the direct willing of evil but instead involve a settled, habitual inclination of the will not properly ordered to the final end. Cloutier claimed that a more proper understanding of a sinful structure views it as habituating the person to rationally desire a disordered set of goods, a disorder that typically gives priority to immediate individual goods at the expense of the common good. Accordingly, self-discipline and intellectual consciousness-raising are insufficient for tackling sinful structures; rather, a conversion of the will is necessary whereby individual agents reject the disordered set of good presented and encouraged by the structure. Cloutier then turned to consumerism, illustrating how this social structure requires of agents a particular disorder of goods that they willingly adopt in their practice of buying and selling, and which, in order to be resisted, requires conversion.

In the second paper, "Pedagogy and Praxis of Conversion: A Theological Appraisal of Bystander Intervention Training Programs in Light of Catholic Social Thought," Joy Galarneau detailed bystander intervention programs at colleges and universities in the United States and how these educate students about health and social justice issues, particularly sexual violence, moving them to become "active bystanders" who challenge both the problematic behaviors they witness and the

social structures that encourage such problematic behaviors. Galarneau investigated ways that the bystander intervention model correlates with major principles of CST, and she proposed that the bystander intervention model can be appropriated theologically as a pedagogy of personal conversion to social activism or praxis of solidarity. Collegiate bystander programs—which include storytelling, mentoring, role playing, and more—aim to nudge students from inaction to action through a series of stages: 1) notice the behavior; 2) interpret it as a problem; 3) feel responsible for dealing with it; and 4) choose to act. Galarneau noted how this approach parallels the see-judge-act process associated with CST. At the same time, Galarneau pointed out tensions between the bystander intervention model and CST, especially in papal and conciliar documents, when it comes to the issue of sexual violence as a structure of sin. Nevertheless, she maintained that key principles of CST (e.g., addressing the underlying structures that create and sustain a culture of violence; realizing and protecting human dignity through community; etc.) a firm foundation for supporting and strengthening bystander interventions against sexual violence. At the same time, active bystander programs, she suggested, can help make CST accessible and relevant to students, while also possibly contributing to the further shaping of CST.

Both presentations employed many interesting, concrete examples that provoked most attendees to participate in and contribute to the discussion. The two papers went well together, with Galarneau's offering evidence of how conversion involving the will, as Cloutier proposed, can occur in order to address structures of sin.

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