

CHURCH/ECUMENISM—TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Ecclesial Conversion, Ecclesiological Conversion  
Convener: Brian P. Flanagan, Marymount University  
Moderator: Cheryl Peterson, Trinity Lutheran Seminary  
Presenters: Richard Lennan, Boston College School of Theology and Ministry  
Gerard Mannion, University of San Diego  
Amanda Osheim, Loras College

This session explored the theme of the convention through three papers designed to consider conversion in the life of the church, particularly through considerations of methodology in ecclesiology and in definitions of the term ecclesiality.

The session began with silent prayer to call to mind three important absences: Margaret O’Gara, who fell asleep in Christ in the past year; Brother Jeffrey Gros, whose illness prevented him from attending the convention; and Richard Lennan, who was unable to present his paper due to the death of his mother.

In his absence, Brian Flanagan read Richard Lennan’s paper, entitled “Changing the Church: An Exploration of Methods in Ecclesiology.” Lennan explored the diversity of ecclesiological proposals for change within the church, and focused upon the “fundamental ecclesiology” revealed by each author’s “framing of the motive and dynamics of change.” Lennan focused upon two contemporary Roman Catholic theologians, Paul Lakeland and Gerard Mannion; two programmatic twentieth-century Roman Catholic theologians, Yves Congar and Karl Rahner; and two contemporary Protestant theologians, the Lutheran Vitor Westhelle and the evangelical Gary Badcock. Lennan presented some connecting points of similarity and distinction between these six theologians, and concluded not by attempting to synthesize their approaches, but by noting the inevitable diversity, and the space for creativity and imagination, that their approaches to ecclesial change open for further critical dialogue.

Gerard Mannion’s paper, “From *Metanoia* to Collective Witness: Embracing Ecumenical Pluralism in the Art of Magisterium,” began by drawing upon the reflections of the late Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini calling for the further conversion of the Roman Catholic Church. Mannion specified that call, focusing upon the need for conversion of the Roman Catholic Church’s magisterium, both in practice and in its self-understanding of the nature of magisterium. Contrasting such theologians as Charles Curran, Willem Visser’t Hooft, and Ladislav Örsy with Joseph Ratzinger and the International Theological Commission’s document *Theology Today*, Mannion argued for an expanded understanding of magisterium, rooted in attention to the *sensus fidelium* and the diverse sources of authoritative teaching within the history of the church. His paper highlighted ecumenical dialogues as underappreciated magisterial acts in the life of the church, calling them an example of plural magisteria in the life of the church, and a counterexample, among others, to a narrow definition of magisterium. The discussion raised important questions regarding the relation of conscience to plural magisteria, and the important institutional question of who speaks for the *sensus fidelium*, and whether it would be possible to measure the *sensus fidelium* in any meaningful way.

The third presenter, Amanda Osheim, in her essay, “The Kenotic Marks of the Church,” focused more specifically on the question of ecclesial conversion, constructing a framework for thinking about the conversion of the church from the biblical and Christological concept of kenosis and the traditional marks of the church. Osheim began with Yves Congar’s understanding of ecclesial conversion as presented in *True and False Reform in the Church*, and highlighted his pneumatological understanding of the church in need of reform and in process of being reformed. She then presented the Christological hymn of Philippians 2:5–11, as interpreted by the biblical scholar Michael Gorman, as a primary pattern of Christlike identity to be lived out in the church. In Gorman’s analysis, Pauline kenosis involves a recurring pattern of a self-emptying that is unexpectedly a greater expression of divinity than a display of power, rather than simply a renunciation of status. The church, therefore, is called to imitate Christ in its continual self-emptying, a self-emptying that appears to be a renunciation of power or divinity, but is in fact the greatest expression of its communion with Christ’s cruciform life. Osheim then applied this interpretation and this kenotic pattern to the oneness, holiness, apostolicity, and catholicity of the church. The following conversation further explored Congar’s understanding of the reform of the church and the collective discernment needed to understand the oneness of the church kenotically in relation to the *sensus fidelium*.

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