

HISTORICAL STUDIES II—TOPIC SESSION

- Topic: Patristic, Medieval, and Reformation Perspectives on Justification and Conversion
- Convener: Helen Ciernick, Mount Marty College
- Moderator: Kristin Colberg, St. John's University/College of Saint Benedict
- Presenters: Kimberly Baker, St. Meinrad Seminary
Shawn Colberg, St John's University/College of Saint Benedict
Stephen Gaetano, University of Notre Dame

What does it mean to experience conversion, particularly through Christ, and how do Christian thinkers understand the roles of divine and human agency in this experience? This session engaged the theology of conversion from the perspectives of Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, the Council of Trent, and the important conciliar fathers Domingo de Soto and Andreas de Vega. It explored what it means to “put on Christ” as part of conversion, and it further probed the roles of grace and human action as they unfold through conversion. Points of important difference emerged among the thinkers under review, yet all the papers underscored the transformative experience of moving from a state of sin into a state of justice/grace, arguing that the justified are healed and raised to a new ontological plane of life and Christian practice.

Kimberly Baker initiated this conversation with an exploration of the meaning of conversion for Augustine in her paper, “A Heart Transformed: Augustine on Christian Conversion.” Baker grounded her discussion of conversion with specific reference to Augustine’s personal conversion, and she glossed Augustine’s understanding of conversion as one of “putting on Christ.” The paper then explored what appropriating a christological identity might mean for those who experience conversion. To that end, Baker expounded a series of homilies by Augustine in which it became clear that conversion implied a lifelong process of configuration of the recipient to Christ. Such transformation is made possible through sacramental action that cultivates and directs the central virtue of love; just as divine love makes the Incarnation possible, so regular acts of love gradually conform the actor to the image and person of Christ, making it possible for her to say that she has “put on Christ.” Baker argues that Augustine describes this as a transformation of the heart, a transformation central to human identity and meaning.

In his paper, “Thomas Aquinas, the Council of Trent, and Preventive Grace in the Act of Justification,” Shawn Colberg continued this conversation through a comparison of Aquinas and the Council of Trent on the nature of justification and the specific role of free human action. Colberg began with a query asking whether Aquinas’s position on the “operative” nature of justification seemed to conflict with Trent’s “Decree on the Doctrine of Justification,” Canon Four, which anathematizes views that see the human will as passive in the act of justification. After outlining Thomas’s understanding of operative helping grace and Trent’s understanding of preventive grace, the paper argued for important agreement on the effects of grace on the recipient, claiming that Trent’s concerns about the freedom of the will properly pertained to Lutheran conceptions of freedom in conversion, something distinct from Aquinas’s position.

Stephen Gaetano's paper, "Meriting Conversion after Trent: A Dispute between the Council Theologians Andreas de Vega and Domingo de Soto," extended the consideration of Trent and its understanding of justification for conceptions of human action and merit in the thought of two central Catholic thinkers from the 16th Century. Gaetano explored the positions of Vega and Soto in a set of writings preceding or contemporaneous with the Council as well as in a set which followed it. Gaetano examined the specific question of whether "congruent merit" (*meritum de congruo*) in the act of justification was promoted by either theologian while using the well-known theological maxim *facientibus quod in se est* to test the way in which both thinkers conceived of human action preceding the act of justification. While noting a clear differences among both figures—with Soto restricting notions of merit and human action and Vega advocating for a wider sense of merit—Gaetano demonstrated that neither position devolved into the kind of Pelagian or semi-Pelagian caricatures that were offered by Protestant reformers and their modern historical interpreters. Gaetano argued, moreover, that, while Vega retains a wider appreciation for *meritum de congruo*, he seems to further limit the way in which this concept can be understood in light of Trent's decree.

All three papers elicited lively questions from listeners. Questions explored the way in which sacramental action was crucial for Augustine's notion of putting on Christ; the way in which Aquinas regarded divine efficient causality as important for denying human free action in justification, and the specific conception of congruent merit for Soto and Vega. Responses by the presenters demonstrated the ongoing vitality of certain theological questions as they pertain to conversion; those include the roles of grace, sacramental experience, and human action in sinner's movement from a state of alienation to one of communion with God.

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