

THE CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES

- Topic: Dialogues, Tensions, and “Seeds of Hope”
in the United States Church
- Convener: William A. Clark, College of the Holy Cross
- Moderator: Joseph Hartzler, Franciscan School of Theology
- Presenters: Mary Doak, University of Notre Dame
Timothy P. Muldoon, Boston College
Maureen R. O’Brien, Duquesne University

The general convention theme, “Theology in Dialogue,” was particularly meaningful for our developing group, which seeks to contribute to the dialogue between theologies of church and the dynamics of North American culture. The presentations engaged this theme by considering various aspects of the fragmentation presently so evident in the U.S. church.

Mary Doak’s presentation, “Beyond Fatalism and Fanaticism,” drew on the Second Vatican Council and on the theology of Johann Baptist Metz to establish the key importance of human freedom and diversity in the church’s witness today. Despite the rhetorical celebrations of these values in the United States, the reality in our increasingly complex public lives and in our ever larger Catholic parishes is widespread despair of the possibility of pluralism leading to common action. Instead, trends toward lack of participation and increased conformity encourage the apathetic fatalism and the anxious fanaticism that result from a sense of irrelevance on the part of individuals. Hannah Arendt has pointed out that both such responses arise from the same root and reinforce each other. Contrary to these current trends, Vatican II made “diversity in unity” a concept integral to all of its documents, drawing on the theology of Trinity and of Eucharist. The writings of John Paul II continually stressed the dignity of persons within communities. J. B. Metz insists that we are called to be a people united in God as subjects of our history, able to stand in solidarity with those subjects who are threatened. This theology should ground an ecclesial life that is a genuine alternative to the prevailing options of an increasingly triumphal church that eclipses subjects, or an increasing privatism that denies the communal connection among subjects. The church should make no apology for the dialogue which allows human persons to stand together as subjects with and in God.

Timothy Muldoon’s “Young Adult Catholics In Dialogue With Older Catholics” employed themes resonant with those that Doak developed: the pluralism characteristic of postmodern culture, the attractiveness to young people of both nontraditional spiritualities and apparently “ultramontane” traditionalism, and the possibility that the “fresh eyes” of the young might constitute “Seeds of Hope for American Catholicism.” While some 44% of Catholics in the United States are under the age of 40—that is, born after Vatican II—recent studies indicate that these Catholics do not show high levels of commitment to Church life, even though they remain firmly Catholic. In the context of postmodernity, which

has seen the relativization of truth claims, young people who encounter Catholicism often do so unencumbered by the “baggage” of years of experience in the church—experience which many older Catholics have taken for granted. Because of the breakdown of “cultural Catholicism,” the kind of Catholicism that is emerging in the postmodern era is one in which pluralism is the rule rather than the exception. Younger Catholics are apt to understand their Catholicism first as a kind of belonging, and only secondarily as a set of very specific beliefs and practices. While these younger Catholics need to be offered a greater exposure to the basic *kerygma*, older Catholics need to understand the extent to which their own approach to the church is governed by a narrative to which younger Catholics generally do not have access. For the ongoing dialogue between them, important resources present themselves in the contemporary world. First, there is an obvious correspondence between contemporary globalism and Catholicism’s longstanding global reach. Second, postmodern pluralism offers the church space to remain culturally relevant to younger people, provided that attention is paid not just to authority structures but to persuasiveness. Finally, the general contemporary interest in all forms of spirituality can be utilized to the church’s advantage.

In the final presentation, “Lay Ecclesial Ministry in the U.S. Church Today: Dialogues, Ambiguities, and Opportunities,” Maureen O’Brien posited that lay ecclesial ministers in the United States are engaged in implicit and explicit dialogues that highlight the ambiguities of their position. Important new research and church statements on lay ecclesial ministers (LEMs) underscore the crucial ongoing importance of dialogue on this aspect of U.S. church life. There are, in fact, four prevailing dialogues that illustrate both the ambiguities and opportunities of these ministers’ present situation. Dialogues focused on identity and vocation offer the opportunity for LEMs to discern their spiritual identity as ministers, but involve the ambiguity of their being both “lay faithful” and “pastoral leaders” at the same time. Dialogues focused on pastoral context allow LEMs to focus on the practical aspects of their ministry, but involve the ambiguity of important terms of that ministry being established by church regulations beyond local control. Dialogues focused on professionalization are moving toward the establishment of common certification standards, but without resolving the ambiguity between the terms “professional” and “lay.” Finally, dialogues focused on ecclesial teaching lead to clearer articulation of the meaning of lay ministry, but involve the ambiguity of bishops proposing theological perspectives on realities already being lived and reflected on by lay people themselves. Dialogue for lay ecclesial ministers requires a model that fosters a dynamic interplay between “margins and centers” in the church. Through acknowledging their multiple locations vis-à-vis ecclesial margins and centers, intentionally claiming these locations, promoting dialogical fluidity and open-endedness, engaging in communal self-naming, drawing on multiple sources as conversation partners, and aligning their efforts with God’s incarnational and creative activity, lay ecclesial ministers can more effectively live with ambiguity and become agents of ecclesial transformation.

The ensuing discussion among the approximately forty people in attendance dwelt on questions of developing a dynamic and prophetic vision of Catholicism in the United States that is responsive to the needs and ambiguities of contemporary culture.

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