

SELECTED SESSIONS

AVERY CARDINAL DULLES

- Topic: A Celebration of the Life and Work of Avery Cardinal Dulles.
From Conversion to Church to Witness
- Convener: Robert C. Christie, DeVry University
- Presenters: Robert C. Christie, DeVry University
Anne-Marie Kirmse, Fordham University
Robert Imbelli, Boston College

Avery Cardinal Dulles passed away on December 12, 2008 at the age of 90, after more than 60 years of service to the Church and to the Society of Jesus. To honor his long and illustrious career as arguably America's most prominent Roman Catholic theologian, this session, consisting of three short papers, reflected upon specific dimensions of his life and work, which serve as models for moving beyond impasses in theological and spiritual understanding.

"The Conversion Experiences of Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J." was the subject of the presentation by Robert C. Christie. This paper examined *A Testimonial to Grace*, Dulles's autobiographical account of his interpersonalist-driven conversion to Roman Catholicism during his days as a Harvard undergraduate. Dulles struggled through intellectual and spiritual impasses to an ultimate conversion to belief in the living person of Jesus Christ as ultimate truth, the ground of his subsequent theological development. Dulles's conversion experiences underscored the highly interpersonal encounter with God at the core of the experience of faith, which was the foundation for his conversion and all subsequent intellectual development.

The presentation by Anne-Marie Kirmse focused on "The Ecclesiology of Avery Dulles." The name Avery Dulles is almost synonymous with the term, "models of the Church," as this is the title of the book in which he presented the rich teachings of *Lumen Gentium* and the other ecclesiological pronouncements of Vatican II. In his now classic portrayal of the church as institution, communion, sacrament, prophet, and servant, he opened our eyes to the multi-faceted mystery that is the church. Dulles's insights on ecclesiology are as valid today as they were when the book was first published.

In his talk titled "The Ignatian Tradition in Theology: The Witness of Avery Dulles," Fr. Robert Imbelli addressed the Ignatian principles and sensibilities that governed Cardinal Dulles's theological work. Foremost among them was the

ongoing need to discern the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel and within the ecclesial community. Among the major elements of Dulles's witness were "the radical sense of the transcendent mystery of God, who is *semper Major*—alone worthy of adoration and praise," discernment founded on "the Ignatian principle: *sentire cum ecclesia*—to discern with the Church," and "the reality of the Eucharistic Christ, the Traditus," who "forms the heart of his teaching as it does his priestly existence."

The session served to highlight three essential aspects of Avery Dulles's religious pilgrimage, from initial conversion to the Roman Catholic Church, to his groundbreaking work on ecclesiology as one of the major expressions of that ongoing conversion journey, and finally to the development of his original conversion experience as he came to understand it in the Ignatian tradition of the experience of Christ.

The ensuing discussion explored, among other subjects, the relationship between Dulles's spiritual experiences and their influence on his subsequent theology, particularly his ecclesiology and Christology.

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