

CATHOLICITY & MISSION

Topic: When Basic Values Collide: Impasse in the Praxis of Mission
Convener: Colleen Mary Mallon, Aquinas Institute of Theology
Presenter: Robert Schreiter, Catholic Theological Union
Respondent: Susan Abraham, Harvard Divinity School

The Catholicity and Mission topic session looked at moments of impasse in Christian mission presented by situations where basic values are in collision with one another. Robert Schreiter (Chicago Theological Union) presented a paper with two case studies. The first had to do with the arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court in the Hague against Omar al-Bashir, the President of Sudan, for crimes against humanity in the Darfur region. While the warrant was welcomed in human rights circles and among some Western governments, it was opposed by humanitarian groups, aid agencies, and countries in the African Union. The arguments for the warrant emphasized effectively indicting a sitting head of state who was behind gross human rights abuses; the understanding was that such an action would serve as a deterrent to authoritarian leaders in the future. Those opposing the warrant said that it would interfere with peace negotiations going on (so argued the African Union), and that al-Bashir would retaliate by expelling major foreign aid agencies, thereby endangering the survival of hundreds of thousands of displaced persons. Al-Bashir is still at large, and has even visited a number of foreign countries with complete impunity. He has expelled ten aid agencies. The impasse: what happens when different levels of justice (political human rights versus survival ("second-generation" human rights) collide?

The second case was the participation of Archbishop Petero Mataka in a council convened to change the electoral process in Fiji. The council had been convened by Commodore Frank Bainimarama, who had overthrown the legitimate government in a coup in 2006. The Archbishop's participation was controversial from the beginning, but had become increasingly so as it became clear that there was no immediate end to the illegitimate military rule. How are the boundaries between religion and politics—set with the Westphalian arrangement in mind—shift today, especially in light of the fact that the Church is often called to participate in public politics as one of the sole credible public institutions in civil society?

In her response, Susan Abraham (Harvard Divinity School) explored the relation of religion and politics from a postcolonial studies perspective. As the world becomes increasingly desexualized, how must the role of religion in politics be rethought today, especially in light of intrastatal conflict? The areas of mission where these impasses are occurring constitute the growing edge of the catholicity of the Church today.

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