

## WOMEN'S CONSULTATION IN CONSTRUCTIVE THEOLOGY

- Topic: Fermenting Impasse: Women's Critical Communities and Ecclesial Transformation
- Conveners: Phyllis Kaminski, Saint Mary's College  
 Elisabeth Brinkmann, College of New Rochelle
- Moderator: Colleen Carpenter Cullinan, College of Saint Catherine
- Presenter: Kathleen McManus, University of Portland
- Respondent: LaReine-Marie Mosely, Loyola University of Chicago

In relation to this year's convention theme, Professor McManus described the spiritual suffering of impasse for women in the North American church. Women ministers and theologians have, over four decades, developed an inclusive praxis placing "the poorest and most vulnerable at the center of theological reflection and action for justice"; but it has made little impact on the wider Church consciousness or parish life. Experiments in "inclusive liturgy, preaching, and pastoral leadership" are being turned back by a growing neo-orthodox movement.

To illustrate the dilemmas and possibilities of this suffering and its "hidden ferments," McManus described representative members of a "Circle of Women Seeking Wisdom" she has accompanied in recent years, and used their particular hopes and frustrations in the Church to illuminate a larger pattern: "women who gather together in critical communities of resistance and hope" can indeed generate hope even through sharing their sense of outrage with all that is not right in church and world. They dare to believe that new possibilities beyond current imagination can be given.

She refracted these concrete examples through the lenses of Edward Schillebeeckx's words on "negative contrast experiences" and Beverly Lanzetta's descriptions of the "*via feminina*." Lanzetta coined the latter term in her study of women's mystical writings. It affirms the revelatory and prophetic in the experience of these women, and how they used the *via negativa* to purge away constricting images of the divine and the self. The *via feminina* has led many into a dark night of the soul which ultimately enables them to "unsay" the false self formed in them by patriarchy.

As Schillebeeckx says, positive experiences in the world are fragmentary and limited. Our outrage at what *should not be* discloses to us some glimpse of what *should be*. It invites an "open 'yes'" to what we intuit as possibilities.

With Beverly Lanzetta, McManus proposed that we practice "feminist contemplation," explicitly questioning oppressive church practices, to awaken and cultivate our deep longing for something new. As Lanzetta says, "women's soul wounds must be brought to consciousness," to uncover the divine depths of women's true selves. "God, experienced as mercy at the heart of all reality," will bring a healing restoration. The journey to these depths is deeply personal, taking unique turns; but it requires companionship and solidarity with other women.

These considerations brought McManus to conclude that "critical communities of resistance and hope" are needed, giving women strength to remain active

in the mainstream Church. These “cross-grained movements” (Schillebeeckx), though denounced by the official Church, sustain people to reinvigorate the Church. If members can “remain in the ferment” and “not split up the mystery”—meet as base communities while remaining in the official Church—they may constitute the Church’s only real hope for continuity into the future. McManus ended with a challenge to the theologians gathered: how can theologians help in this process?

Respondent LaReine-Marie Mosely highlighted some of McManus’s main points, and added three observations. First, African-American women can teach us something about enduring impasse, as Constance Fitzgerald acknowledges in her seminal article on impasse and dark night. While enduring the harshness of slavery and segregation, African-American women could imagine and work for a better future—planting bright flower gardens, or making beautiful quilts out of rags. Mosely agreed with Lanzetta that passing through impasse requires fully facing and entering into the pain, not repressing it. As Fitzgerald said, impasse means precisely that *no rational plan* offers a way out. We need, rather, an imaginative shock that will release energies of the right side of the brain.

Secondly, African-American women knew “negative contrast experiences” all too well. They did not let their minds be colonized or coopted by the unjust system. They waited for something better, as Alice Walker has described. They dreamed and rehearsed for a new world which they might not live to see, for the love of their children and grandchildren.

Third, as women in the Church, we have a host of allies: our African-American foremothers, lesbian and gay people, black Catholics in the United States—all of whom have suffered ecclesial misrepresentation and misunderstanding.

A thoughtful discussion followed the talks.

The twelfth Ann O’Hara Graff Memorial Award was presented to Anne Patrick, Professor Emerita of Moral Theology at Carleton College. Susan Ross, Shawn Copeland, and Mary Ann Hinsdale offered congratulatory comments for the occasion.

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