

SPIRITUALITY

Topic: Popular Devotion and Creative Activity in Spirituality
 Convener
 and Moderator: James Wiseman, The Catholic University of America
 Presenters: Wendy Wright, Creighton University
 Patrick Kelly, Seattle University

The first of this year's two presenters, Wendy Wright, has for many years been recognized as a leading scholar of Christian spirituality, known especially for her fine studies of Salesian spirituality. Her paper focused, however, not on Francis de Sales, Jeanne de Chantal, or any of the other "classic" figures who have come to comprise a "canon" of texts and practices seen as constitutive of Christian spirituality, but rather on popular devotion, specifically the Marian devotion in the archdiocese of Los Angeles that Professor Wright has been studying as both a scholar and pastoral minister.

She began her paper (titled "Meister Eckhart Meets the Blue Army: Reflections, Ruminations, and Questions about the Relationship between and Study of 'Spirituality' and Catholic Devotions") by referring to the way in which spirituality is now commonly understood by those working in the field, namely as "an interdisciplinary, self-implicating field studying lived experience as it actually occurs and as it transforms its subject toward self-transcending life-integration." Up to now, the above-mentioned canon has had little place for popular or traditionalist devotion. After discussing some of the ecclesial and theological prejudices against devotion, Wright surveyed the work of scholars in various disciplines who view Catholic devotional practice either positively (for example, as functioning to affirm identity for oppressed groups or to provide a corrective to Western theology or a materialist cosmo-vision) or negatively (as legitimating patriarchy or encoding a reactionary ecclesial agenda). She interspersed her reflections with a number of stories about persons she has met in Los Angeles who are deeply committed to one or another kind of Marian devotion, as well as stories about pastors who, at least at first, have looked askance at such practices. Toward the end of her paper, Wright listed about ten questions that scholars in the field should ask themselves about the place of devotions in Christian spirituality, and she suggested that popular visual piety and expressive religion be taken up into the canon.

The other presenter, Patrick Kelly, addressed the question posed in the title of his paper: "How Can We Understand Play and Artistic and Creative Processes as 'Spiritual'?" Basing his reflections on the flow theory first proposed by the social scientist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, he began by describing some of the characteristics of the "flow experience" that is regularly undergone by artists, athletes, and other creative persons, some of these characteristics being one-pointedness of mind, a sense of egolessness, living fully in the present moment, having an altered sense of time, and experiencing union with one's surroundings. Because Csikszentmihalyi's research gives sustained attention to the *experiential*

dimension of participation in artistic, athletic, or creative activities, Kelly argued that such research opens up ways of understanding how one can “find God in all things.”

Kelly proceeded to highlight the similarities and differences between these dynamics and the way in which the spiritual life has often been described by writers in the Christian tradition, one important similarity being Thomas Aquinas’s description of contemplation as itself being an experience of genuine joy. Kelly illustrated many of his points with PowerPoint slides that he had taken while living and teaching in Nepal or with ones showing that even in medieval manuscripts there was an awareness that playful activity and Christian spirituality can go hand-in-hand.

Both presentations elicited many comments and questions from those in attendance. In a brief business session at the end of the period, various possible topics were suggested for next year’s session, all of them related in some way to the overall theme of “impasse . . . and beyond.”

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