

WOMEN'S CONSULTATION IN CONSTRUCTIVE THEOLOGY

- Topic: Generation after Generation: The Changing Shape of Family Relationships
- Conveners: Colleen Carpenter Cullinan, College of St. Catherine
Phyllis Kaminski, St. Mary's College
- Moderator: Elisabeth Brinkmann, College of New Rochelle
- Presenters: Anita Houck, St. Mary's College
Dawn Nothwehr, Catholic Theological Union

In light of recent statistics indicating that more than half of U.S. households are headed by single adults, single adults—whether always single, divorced, or widowed, whether living alone or not—might be said to constitute the new majority in the U.S. In her paper, Anita Houck explored the lives and insights of adults who are legally defined as single in what one interviewee called “a world controlled by the concerns of the coupled.” Houck drew both from theological literature and from interviews with more than ninety single adults, most of them members of three Chicago congregations (two Roman Catholic, one Protestant), the majority white professionals in their 20's through their 70's. The central question examined by Houck's presentation was whether the single life could be understood as constituting a vocation or whether, in the case of singleness, vocation amounts to a “theological claim pasted onto a demographic category.” Houck surveyed elements of vocation in classical and contemporary discussions. Fruitful in this survey were the views of Evelyn Eaton Whitehead and James D. Whitehead, who propose seeing singleness not as a vocation but as a lifestyle, the context in which a person discerns and lives a vocation; and Francine Cardman's insight that singleness is the universal vocation, the fundamental way of being in the world, since all persons are born into singleness. While most adults interviewed believed that single life can be a vocation, very few considered themselves called to single life. Some saw the language of vocation as a powerful affirmation of the dignity of single life; for others, choice was crucial to vocation and unchosen singleness was less a vocation than a denial of vocation, usually to marriage. Overall, while single adults frequently described experiences of exclusion and longing, most saw their lives as fulfilling, sometimes even characterized by gifts characteristic of vocation, such as flexibility and time for prayer and service to the community. By paying attention to the notion of universal vocation of discipleship and recognizing that “living out the universal requires attention to the particular,” single life may be conceived less as a vocation in itself than as the context in which a diversity of vocations may be lived out.

The second part of Houck's presentation examined how the concept of sacrament could contribute to understandings of single life. She drew on the RCIA, a gradual, formative process, as a model for understanding singleness in its varied forms. For instance, single adults who desire marriage might see their experience as part of a continuum, with single life at one end, sacramental marriage on the other, and a variety of ways of living possible in between. She

also noted that single life might be sacramental in several ways, as revelatory of a single-minded commitment to God in solitude and service, as eschatological in nature, or as indicative of the dignity of the individual in the context of the community.

In her presentation, Dawn Nothwehr offered a theological reflection on her experience of journeying with her mother through Alzheimer's disease. Citing important statistics about Alzheimer's in the United States today, with the moral and theological challenges it presents, Nothwehr suggested that much of the sparse theological literature addressing Alzheimer's disease focuses on the themes of suffering, loss, and lament and fails to address the powerful and graced moments of Christian witness experienced while accompanying a friend on the journey of the "Long Good-bye." Part one of the paper narrated the experience of such a journey of accompaniment in which the mutual relations of mother, daughter, and God were sustained by the knowledge that "We love, no matter what." Nothwehr reflected theologically on this narrative in the second part of her paper, through the lenses of the work of Elizabeth A. Johnson on "Friend of God" and the "Communion of Saints" and the work of Paul Wadell to contextualize the "moral formation" that she received from her mother's friendship with God, lived in fidelity to her everyday life. According to Nothwehr, these lenses in no way romanticized the illness, nor denied the painful and strenuous duty of care giving over the course of many years. However, they accentuated that, in the midst of the distress and difficult decisions that accompanied the journey, "it was possible for Beata and me to endure . . . because we were both on the journey with a friend, and a Mutual Friend."

A thoughtful discussion followed each presentation.

The 11th Ann O'Hara Graff Memorial Award was presented to Barbara Hilkert Andolsen of Monmouth University. Christine Firer Hinze, Mary Catherine Hilkert, and, *in absentia*, Jane Redmont, offered congratulatory comments for the occasion.

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