

MORAL THEOLOGY (I)—TOPIC SESSION

Convener: Daniel J. Daly, Saint Anselm College  
Moderator: Ramon Luzarraga, Benedictine University, Mesa, AZ  
Presenters: Emily Reimer-Barry, University of San Diego  
Dana Dillon, Providence College

Emily Reimer-Barry began the session with her paper, “Unity and Fragmentation: A Comparative Analysis of the Theo-Ethical Methods Employed by the U.S. Catholic Bishops and the Nuns on the Bus.” At the outset she expressed the concern that the desire for unity often becomes a desire to silence some voices. The paper analyzed the political action of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in response to the Affordable Care Act (ACA). It then presented the response of NETWORK, the first Catholic social justice lobby led by women, to the ACA. After presenting the reasons that the bishops opposed the ACA and the reasons NETWORK supported it, she located various points of methodological unity among the two groups. She noted that both the USCCB and NETWORK relied on the Gospel and church teachings as their primary theological sources. Specifically, both groups privileged the principles of Catholic social teaching. Both groups attended to the messy sphere of politics in order to witness the social obligations of Christian discipleship. Finally, both groups saw the ACA as flawed. The paper then turned to the fragmented relationship of the nuns and the bishops. Reimer-Barry noted that NETWORK’s disagreement with the bishops was a matter of prudential judgment regarding public policy, and was not a disagreement of a doctrinal nature. She argued that this is evidence of an uncomfortable, but ultimately healthy intra-Catholic theological diversity. Given the existence of intra-Catholic conflict, the paper concluded by suggesting rules “for fighting fair.” Reimer-Barry drew on the work of marriage scholar John Gottman to articulate six strategies which aid couples in healthy conflict resolution: building a culture of appreciation; listening generously; and practicing mutual vulnerability. She argued that Gottman’s strategies analogously could serve to guide the management of conflict among the nuns and bishops.

In the first part of her paper, “Toward Truth as One: The Spirituality of Unity in a Divided Guild,” Dana Dillon drew upon the life and writings of Chiara Lubich in order to argue for a way to bridge the divides in contemporary Catholic theology. Lubich, a founder of the Focolare movement, lived and taught a communitarian spirituality that emphasized Jesus as the definitive expression of God’s unifying love. Dillon argued that even though Jesus was forsaken by the Father on the cross, his ultimate unity with the Father demonstrates that divisions can be overcome. Dillon used the metaphor of musical harmonization to capture the fact that unity can exist within diversity; however, she also questioned how much theological diversity the guild is capable of harmonizing. At a certain point, she argued, it may be the case that theologians cease to talking about the same God, Jesus, and Church. Part two of the paper proffered practices, in the tradition of Lubich, to foster unity amid diversity. She called for theologians to seek out marginalized members of the guild, and to learn how to engage in conflict while working toward Catholic unity. Further, Dillon noted that the “New Wine, New Wineskins” group of young moral theologians can serve as a model for building unity across lines of theological difference. During their

conference the group schedules relationship-building into the program. They understand that some prior, non-theological unity must be present in order for diverse perspectives to be heard and respected. She ended the paper by calling theologians to adopt Lubich's principle that one should be the first to show love, and should show it concretely. This can be done by asking, "Whose voices am I muting?"

Due to the interesting synergies between the two papers, many of the comments were addressed to both presenters. First, audience members pointed to the power dynamics that exist between nuns and bishops, and within the guild theologians. Second, members questioned the role of conflict in "surfacing the truth." Finally, they initiated an extended discussion of the need for groups engaged in conflict to find a way to "play" and foster social interaction. Both presenters agreed that the nuns and bishops, as well as "liberal" and "conservative" theologians should find non-theological ways of interaction, in order to build relationships capable of sustaining theological conflict.

Members both supported and questioned Reimer-Barry's use of marriage as a metaphor for the relationship between the nuns and bishops. A fruitful dialogue ensued in which Reimer-Barry acknowledged the limits of the metaphor while still maintaining that it served a useful purpose in beginning to demarcate the rules of right conflict between nuns and bishops. The topic of unity surfaced in reference to Dillon's paper. Audience members discussed the relationship of the divisions within the Church to the divisions within the theological guild. Members questioned the presumption of unity in the Church and discussed the ways in which the fragmentation within the Church realized itself in the guild of theologians.

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