

CREATION/ESCHATOLOGY —TOPIC SESSION

Topic: *Sensus Fidelium*
Convener: Brian Robinette, Boston College
Moderator: Mary Doak, University of San Diego
Presenters: Nichole Flores, University of Virginia
Christopher Cimorelli and Daniel Minch,
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

In her paper, “Beauty and Justice in the Anthropocene,” Nichole Flores draws upon, while critically advancing, the work of Alejandro Garcia-Rivera in order to develop a theological response to the massive ecological degradation that threatens present and future life on our planet. Noting that ours is an era in which human activity has reached a point of unprecedented influence upon the earth’s ecosystem, Flores argues that a theological response inspired by the Christian tradition must integrate an appreciation for the beauty of creation with a prophetic urgency that aims for the liberation of those who are most negatively affected by ecological degradation, namely, the poor and oppressed. If beauty is concerned with an aesthetic wholeness that moves the human heart, justice is no less crucial for its commitment to the common good—a good that emphatically includes non-human creatures. This integration of beauty and justice amounts to nothing less than a cosmological vision, and for this reason Flores finds Garcia-Rivera’s work particularly instructive. And yet, Flores argues that while Garcia-Rivera’s work helps us to rediscover the importance of beauty in our intuitions of wholeness, as well as our motivations for tending the “garden of God” with non-possessiveness and care, a more robust articulation of the role of justice, along with commitments to institutional mechanisms that help ensure it, are needed if we are to address the enormous task we currently face. Among other things, this commitment means that, as we come to a new understanding of ourselves as co-creators with God, we must also develop an ethical intuition that not only extends our conception of rights to indigenous persons, and their intergenerational relationships, but to the earth itself.

In their co-presented paper, “Repositioning the Doctrine of Original Sin: Contemporary Challenges and Historical Considerations,” Christopher Cimorelli and Daniel Minch identify the main obstacles to understanding the doctrine of original sin today while offering constructive insights that both retrieve and develop the tradition. In part one of their paper, Cimorelli outlines three major factors leading to contemporary confusion over the doctrine: an inadequate appreciation of how allegory functions in biblical narratives, the dominance of instrumental-empirical frameworks of knowing, and the ambiguity within Church teaching regarding the facticity of the creation stories. Drawing upon the work of Avery Dulles and Karl Rahner to illuminate the theology of revelation as expressed in *Dei Verbum*, Cimorelli argues that the critical significance of the doctrine of original sin requires a hermeneutical sensibility that allows us to see revelation as a dynamic, historical process. Such a view not only allows for a rich dialogue across historical eras with differing frameworks of understanding, but it serves as an ongoing challenge to the Church’s own tendency to treat revelation in overly propositional terms. In part two of their paper, Minch explores the historical roots of the doctrine of original sin from the biblical narratives that inspired it to the way it gained a specific shape in the West

under the influence of Saint Augustine. While this latter influence allowed for important insights to emerge, it also included a negative legacy on account of Augustine's strong association of sin with sexuality. Minch argues that a far more helpful approach to original sin can be found in identifying it with the prideful refusal to relationship with God, a refusal that takes on a structural aspect in human history, not through a quasi-biological transmission, but through a cultural and linguistic process that negatively conditions human beings as they are inducted into it. Minch draws upon the work of Paul Ricoeur and Edward Schillebeeckx in developing this line of approach.

Several topics were raised in the ensuing conversation, including the question of anthropocentrism in the Christian vision of ecological stewardship. On the one hand there is a need to see human beings as humbly participating in a broader community of creation, while on the other it is important to affirm the responsibility human beings have in positively shaping the future of our planet. Is the latter fatally anthropocentric, or can the human vocation of co-creation with God be undertaken in a genuinely de-centered and relational way? Another point of fruitful conversation followed along the lines of clarifying the relationship between finitude and sin, and especially the importance of not identifying them. The doctrine of original sin, it was agreed, is in fact an affirmation of our finitude as a gift. Additionally, questions were raised about the role of language, symbol, and ideological distortion in contemporary theologies of sin. Does the emphasis upon language overlook other important ways in which sin is manifest and transmitted in human history?

BRIAN ROBINETTE
Boston College
Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts