

CHURCH / ECUMENISM—TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Justice and Mercy
Convener: Richard Lennan, Boston College
Moderator: David Turnbloom, University of Portland
Presenters: Edmund Kee-Fook Chia, Australian Catholic University
James B. Nickoloff, College of the Holy Cross
Respondent: Natalia Imperatori-Lee, Manhattan College

The mission of the church to serve justice and mercy in a world marked by poverty and oppression was the central focus of the presentations in the session on ecclesiology. In his presentation, “Justice and Mercy in Global Christianity,” Edmund Kee-Fook Chia compared the vision for the church that Pope Francis articulated in *Evangelii Gaudium* with that to be found in “Together Towards Life,” a text from the World Council of Churches, and “The Capetown Commitment,” from the Lausanne Movement, a gathering of Evangelical churches. In so doing, Chia explored the emphasis on awareness of “the other” that exists in the three documents, an awareness that has become integral to the church’s mission.

Chia showed how the three texts, each in its own way, recognize that the changing socio-political-economic shape of the world challenges the church as a whole to new forms of engagement with “the other.” Above all, Chia highlighted the need for the church “to learn *from*,” and not simply “to learn *about*,” cultures that differ from the dominant global north. Such learning, he argued, must change the way that the church understands “mission.” Chia stressed that multi-dimensional forms of “dialogue” are the primary task for the church in the present, a task that is a hallmark of the Catholic Church in Asia since its experience is most often of relationship with the religious “other.”

In “Medellín’s Vision of Ecclesial Holiness: Foundation For Ecumenism?” James Nickoloff argued that the bishops at Medellín concentrated on a priority that Pope John XXIII had committed to the Second Vatican Council, but that the council had left largely unaddressed: world poverty. For that reason, Nickoloff emphasized, Medellín can rightly be interpreted as the completion of Vatican II. Just as importantly, however, Medellín is also an expression of the Latin American bishops’ attentiveness to the circumstances of their local communities, an attentiveness that can be understood as the “coming of age” for the church in Latin America.

Nickoloff framed Medellín further as developing another theme from Vatican II: the church as holy, yet sinful. Under that caption, Nickoloff depicted Medellín as understanding ecclesial holiness as openness to “the other,” especially to the despised other, a category that includes the poor, as well as homosexual people and many other groups. Nickoloff also contrasted the approach of Medellín with the forms of Pentecostalism that have surged in Latin America in recent decades; for the latter, he claimed, openness to the other is far less evident than is true of Medellín. As Pentecostalism, forms of which promote the “prosperity gospel,” has grown, Medellín’s emphasis on holiness as openness to “the other” has been eclipsed.

In responding to the two presentations, Natalia Imperatori-Lee concentrated on a tension in the life of the church that is often especially evident for Catholics: the tension between unity and diversity. Imperatori-Lee stressed that Catholics are familiar with the distinction between unity and uniformity, being cautious about

Topic Session: Church / Ecumenism

collapsing the former into the latter, but do not necessarily have a clear sense of what constitutes authentic “unity.” As a result, Catholic ecclesiology can fall back on forms of ethnocentrism that resist diversity and openness to the challenges that Chia and Nickoloff identified.

The discussion that followed the three papers orbited around two principal themes: the disparity of resources between the church in the “global north and the “global south;” and the status of “popular religion” in the Catholic Church. Central to both issues is the tension between the “center” and the “peripheries” that Pope Francis has identified often as a key issue for the mission of the Catholic Church. The discussion made clear that the relationship between these two foci is also vital for the future of ecumenical relationships.

RICHARD LENNAN
*Boston College—School of Theology and Ministry
Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts*