

LITURGY/SACRAMENTS—TOPIC SESSION

- Topic: Implications of the “Justice and Mercy” theme for Christian liturgical and sacramental experience and practice
- Convener: Judith M. Kubicki, Fordham University
- Moderator: Anne McGowan, College of St. Benedict, St. John’s University
- Presenters: Rhodora Beaton, St. Catherine University
Jonathan Stotts, Vanderbilt University
Susan Ross, Loyola University Chicago

Rhodora Beaton’s paper and PowerPoint presentation was entitled “Mercy Revealed: The Dignity of the Marginalized Made Manifest in the Liturgy.” Her paper considered the contributions of Catholic Worker artists and church designer Ade Bethune in light of Walter Kasper’s recent book, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*. Beaton argued that Kasper’s understanding of mercy as the fundamental attribute of God—expressed through the personal care and respect offered between human beings—is also already present in Bethune’s mid-twentieth-century writings and liturgical design.

In preparation for her presentation, Beaton studied papers housed in the Ade Bethune archives at St. Catherine University in St. Paul, Minnesota, to consider ways that sacramental theologians might answer Pope Francis’ call in *Evangelii Gaudium* to help the church become a community that has an endless desire to show mercy. Including some of Bethune’s images of the “working saints” in her PowerPoint presentation, Beaton suggested that Bethune’s understanding of the works of mercy carried out by the saints, informed her later work in church design. Bethune’s principles offer particular attention to the dignity and comfort of those, such as children and the elderly, who may find themselves relegated to the margins of liturgical celebration. A brief discussion of the ways in which Bethune’s design anticipated the reforms of the Second Vatican Council followed the presentation.

Jonathan Stotts presented a paper entitled “Calling Down God’s Mercy Upon the Body: Revisiting the Third Rite of Penance.” He argued that, while the majority of Catholics continue to avoid the practice of individual auricular confession, the absence of robust liturgies in parish and diocesan life signifies a glaring obstacle to the formation of the People of God as those called to live lives of justice and mercy. After situating individual auricular penance in its historical context, Stotts argued that the limited ability of pre-conciliar confessional practice to proclaim God’s mercy depended more on public and regular visibility of confessional practice within parish life than on its particular and somewhat ambivalent effects on individuals. He then reviewed the promises and challenges of the long-suppressed Rite of Reconciliation of Several Penitents with General Confession and Absolution in the context of the liturgical goals of Vatican II.

Using contemporary Catholic attitudes towards individual confession as evidence, Stotts argued that public and visible liturgical symbols of mercy provide a foundation for individual and devotional forms of the sacraments. Finally, he made the point that the third form of penance provides a necessary penitential and liturgical complement to the divine mercy proclaimed through frequent reception of communion now common to Catholic parish life.

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Attendees engaged in lively discussion on several points of Stotts' presentation, including the complementarity of individual and communal rites and practical implementation of penance services.

Susan Ross' paper was entitled "Challenging and Rethinking Justice, Mercy, and Gender." In exploring justice and mercy within the Church from a feminist perspective, Ross used the example of the LCWR's response to the CDF's investigation as an example of how lay women and women religious continue to practice justice, compassion, and mercy to and within the institutional church. This is practiced particularly through ministries to the most marginalized. Ross' pointed questions included the following: (1) What can the institutional church learn about justice from those who have suffered from the church's lack of justice; (2) how can the mercy extended by victims of injustice challenge asymmetrical conceptions of mercy (that is, mercy as extended by the powerful to the weak) and more adequately model the compassion of Jesus?

Ross contrasted the compassion and mercy extended to some with the judgment extended to others in order to question the range of justice and mercy with regard to gender and the celebration of the sacraments. She used Margaret Farley's reflections on love and forgiveness as a starting point for rethinking justice and mercy in relation to women and the sacraments. Drawing on the experiences of women engaged in pastoral and sacramental ministry, Ross argued for a broader and deeper conception of justice and mercy that cuts across the gender divide. She noted that women's often unacknowledged ministries can offer creative possibilities for the practice of justice and mercy for the whole church.

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