

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY—TOPIC SESSION

Topic:	Justice and Mercy in the Life of the Parish
Convener:	Theodore James Whapham, University of Dallas
Moderator:	Natalia Imperatori-Lee, Manhattan College
Presenter:	William A Clark, S.J., College of the Holy Cross
Presenter:	Hosffman Ospino, Boston College
Presenter:	Phyllis Zagano, Hofstra University

This session highlighted three issues related to the practice of justice and mercy in Roman Catholic parish life. In “Reconfigured Mercy: Parish Communities and the Practice of the Gospel,” William A Clark provided a case study of two responses that have been offered by dioceses in Europe to address the realities of demographic shifts. After providing an analysis of Pope Francis’ call for Christians to be missionaries of mercy and for the Church to embody mercy by getting involved in the broader community as an expression of this grace, Clark turned to the practice of parish re-configurations and mergers. The first form of re-configuration involved the closing and combining of a large number of parishes. This produced an 85% reduction in the number of canonical parishes in at least one German diocese and resulted in a number of extremely large parish communities. In contrast, the diocese of Poitiers responded to a similar challenge by keeping the number of parishes relatively stable and turning to lay material managers and pastoral delegates. He concludes that examples of reconfiguration using processes which depend upon physical presence, local engagement, and personal intimacy are more successful at embodying the vision of mercy offered by Pope Francis.

In “Justice and Mercy Meet *en la parroquia*: Theological-Political Realities and Implications of the Sanctuary Movement as Practiced in Hispanic Catholic Parishes Protecting Undocumented Immigrants,” Hosffman Ospino provided a brief overview of the sanctuary parish movement in the United States and its implications for a theology of the parish and the practice of mercy. Ospino’s work began with a theological reflection on the concept of sanctuary and the history of sanctuary parishes in the 1980’s and again in the past decade. He argues that the example of parish communities such as Our Lady of Guadalupe Sanctuary in Los Angeles extend the practice of the faith beyond the reception of the sacraments to lives of those in the community most in need. Often risking political and ecclesial backlash, such communities remind Catholics of the power of prophetic action where mercy and justice meet.

In “Justice for the Life of the Parish: The Restoration of Women’s Ordination to the Diaconate and its Impact on Parish Life,” Phyllis Zagano provided an analysis of the importance of ordaining women to the diaconate in the Roman Catholic Church as an issue of justice for parishes. Complementing arguments for the restoration of the female diaconate rooted in justice for those woman who feel called to serve the church in such a capacity, Zagano’s paper rearticulated the ancient basis for the practice of ordaining women deacons namely the right of members of the parish community to be ministered to by women. Her work included a historical, theological, and pastoral analysis of the ancient practice and concluded with the image of the woman deacon processing to the ambo to proclaim the Gospel and

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invited to the audience to reflect on the justice that such a practice might bring about in our parish communities.

A lively discussion followed the presentation of each paper. In particular, attention was given to the challenges of changing parish demographics in the United States, questions regarding the reception of immigrants into sanctuary parishes and the associated challenges of welcoming and understanding and new community, and the recent call by Pope Francis to establish a commission to investigate the re-establishment of the female diaconate.

THEODORE JAMES WHAPHAM
University of Dallas
Dallas, Texas