

SPIRITUALITY—TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Spirituality as a Source for Theology  
Convener: Simon J. Hendry, S.J., University of Detroit Mercy  
Moderator: Wendy Wright, Creighton University  
Presenters: J. Matthew Ashley, University of Notre Dame  
Dorian Llywelyn, S.J., Heythrop College, London

In his paper “Pope Francis as an Interpreter of Ignatius’s *Spiritual Exercises*,” Matthew Ashley argued that “Christian spirituality. . . is a constitutive element and source of theology for Pope Francis rather than. . . a merely subjective application of universal principles worked out elsewhere” and that “understanding the Pope as a theologian requires understanding him as a practitioner and interpreter of spirituality.”

Ashley did this by focusing on “the theme of mercy and its relationship to justice,” referring to a retreat that Francis preached to Spanish Bishops in 2006. Francis saw mercy evidenced in the first week of Ignatius Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* in the experience of one’s sinfulness along with a sense of being forgiven, and justice in the second week’s grace of intimacy with and following of Christ and the “faithful abandonment of oneself to God’s will.” Francis articulated the close connection between these two in a reflection on the confession and call of Peter in Luke 5:1–11. When in response to the miraculous catch of fish, Peter exclaims his sinfulness, Jesus not only forgives him but calls him to be a fisher of people. The experience of mercy is not just the experience of being the *object* of God’s mercy and love but the experience of being called to be its *subject*, making it a reality for others. Being forgiven and being given a mission of mercy and justice are part of the same experience. This experience of the close relationship between the two is the key to understanding Francis’ theology of justice and mercy as integrally linked.

In his article “Mirror of Justice, Mother of Mercy: Mary, Theology, and Spirituality,” Dorian Llywelyn uses understandings of Mary to examine the relationship between spirituality and theology. He describes two basic polarities in the understanding of Mary: Mary as Mirror of Justice who reflects Jesus and is an image of justice and perfection, and Mary as Mother of Mercy who shares our human experience and compassionately intercedes and intervenes. The two share much in common and each raises important questions for the other, but the question remains of how to understand Mary.

Much Marian theology is rooted in prayer, ritual, and experiences of popular religiosity and folk religion that often overflow the boundaries of official liturgical practice and academic theology. These provide a concrete, visceral, incarnate encounter with God which is often expressed in forms that are metaphorical, symbolic, and evocative rather than rational and propositional. Various theological constructs of Mary derive from different kinds of experience and different types of contexts and reflect different attitudes and emphases.

Stating that experience and lived faith are primary and conceptual theology is secondary, Llywelyn argues for a closer connection “between devotion, religious practice more widely conceived, and their intellectual elucidation.” The way forward is “theology infused with spirituality” which can provide a “fruitful locus for posing questions correctly and interrelating them productively.”

*Topic Session: Spirituality*

A lively and engaging substantive discussion arose about Francis' spirituality as a source for his theology of justice and mercy but even more so about the experience of Mary in people's spirituality and the connection between popular religiosity and theology and the mutual relationship needed between them.

The papers and the conversation deepened the awareness of the academic field of spirituality's self-understanding as studying the lived experience of people as it relates to transcendent reality, operating from thick descriptions of experience, reflective critical analysis of that experience from a variety of perspectives, and constructive understanding of that experience as it is open to transcendence. This session continued an ongoing conversation about the relationships between the academic field of spirituality and the theological enterprise.

SIMON J. HENDRY, S.J.  
*University of Detroit Mercy*  
*Detroit, Michigan*