

THEOLOGICAL DIVERSITY—INVITED GROUP

Topic: Theological Perspectives on Revelation
Convener: Christopher Ruddy, The Catholic University of America
Moderator: Kristin Colberg, College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's Univ.
Presenters: James Keating, Providence College
John Thiel, Fairfield University

The Theological Diversity interest group is committed to bringing Catholic theologians from diverse perspectives into dialogue that is at once vigorous and respectful. It devoted its inaugural session to two papers on the topic of divine revelation: James Keating's "What Difference Does It Make that God Has Spoken?" and John Thiel's "The Literal Sense of Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?"

Keating argued that Catholic theology today is increasingly fragmented along ideological grounds. Indeed, it is rare for what can safely be called "conservative" theologians to engage with their "liberal" counterparts on areas of disagreement (and *vice versa*). Part of this fragmentation has been the departure of conservatives from purportedly liberal associations such as CTSA and their creation of separate scholarly societies. Much of this movement can be explained by the fact that conservatives are by definition more insistent than liberals that divine revelation enjoy epistemic priority in the work of theology. Although revelation properly determines all that is said of God and his plan of salvation, conservatives can be tempted to question the orthodoxy of those seeking innovation within the tradition or even whether they are doing Catholic theology at all. This is a mistake, since the development of doctrine would be impossible without vibrant disagreement between liberal and conservative theologians. Liberals, for their part, must respect the place of revelation and resist all theological approaches that render revelation incapable of exerting epistemic primacy. Liberals, in some cases, have sadly countenanced such positions and given conservatives reason to believe that they do not share a common enterprise. The task of overcoming fragmentation is a two-sided affair. Conservatives must recognize the importance of disagreement over the pliability of the tradition, and liberals must recapture the place of revelation even while they seek new paths. To the extent that this happens, the Church and its theology benefit.

Thiel, in his paper, argued that the "literal sense" of tradition—"the words and practices of tradition that, in the judgment of believers, have a plain meaning, a literal sense of tradition that is uncontested in the present life of the Church's faith"—can be both a point of consensus and of disagreement among conservative and liberal Catholic theologians. Conservatives, emphasizing the divine givenness and completeness of the revelation given to the apostles, value the relative permanence of the literal sense, while liberals are more inclined to negotiate the historical fact that what the Church has received as divine revelation has changed and are open to that same kind of change in the present and in the future. Drawing upon his previous writings, Thiel proposed that such development can be "dramatic," or, more frequently, "incipient." God does not change, but believers' grasp of God and divine revelation does. The literal sense is the Church's claim about the mystery of divine revelation that actually deepens the more God draws near.

Thiel concluded his paper by expressing a desire for a more expansive Catholic aesthetics of tradition. Conservative aesthetics typically emphasize vision and

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permanence, liberal ones hearing and development. These respective aesthetics yield different conceptions of the theological task: canonicity, clarity, and “meticulous faithfulness,” on the one hand; constructivity, dialogue, and the “Spirit’s activity and its moving mimesis in the life of the Church,” on the other. Both approaches are needed, however, if Catholic life and thought are to flourish: “our theological diversity [can] reveal to us more completely, but ever incompletely, the mystery of God’s revelation.”

The ensuing discussion among the presenters and the attendees was wide-ranging and substantial, covering such issues as religious pluralism, the potential conflicts between revelation and experience, the usefulness and limits of the “form-content” paradigm vis-à-vis revelation and doctrine, the reliability and normativity of the Church’s tradition, and the importance of continued forthright engagement of theological and ideological differences.

Future sessions of this interest group will be devoted to theological anthropology (2017) and ecclesiology (2018).

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