

PERMEABLE BOUNDARIES: THE ROLE OF ETHNOGRAPHY IN
ATTENDING TO INTEGRAL HUMAN ECOLOGY—SELECTED SESSION

Topic: Ethnographic Method and Integral Ecology
Convener: Lorraine Cuddeback, University of Notre Dame
Moderator: Jessica Coblentz, Boston College
Presenters: Lorraine Cuddeback, University of Notre Dame
Jaisy Joseph, Boston College
Layla Karst, Emory University

In her paper titled “Integral Ecology, Integral Ecclesiology: Ethnographic Method and its Implications,” Lorraine Cuddeback argues that ethnography is uniquely positioned to examine the “integral ecology” of both human persons and society called for in *Laudato Si’*. Using Luke Bretherton’s “extended case study” method, Cuddeback analyzes how ethnographic methods offer thicker accounts of the dynamic interplay between macro-level social structures, and micro-level actions and relationships. Cuddeback illustrates this with her own case study from ethnographic fieldwork within a nonprofit that provides services for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Cuddeback’s case describes how the nonprofit benefited from the financial and socio-political capital of both the disability rights movement and local Catholic institutions and persons, which challenges narratives about the absence of faith communities from disability advocacy. The case also prompts ecclesiological questions about why religious actors are only visible among micro-level relationships, and not within macro-level advocacy. The interconnections shown through ethnography demonstrate how structural social changes impact local, particular communities, but also how those communities speak back to and shape the macro-level forces.

In her presentation, “Local Churches, Local Ecologies: Catholicity through the Lens of the Empirical,” Jaisy Joseph argues that ethnography, especially participant observation, contributes towards a “culture of encounter.” Joseph focuses on four key virtues needed for ethnographic work—humility, reflexivity, collaboration, and audacity—that foster mutual knowledge, respect, and encounter of diverse others. Then Joseph brings this ethnographically framed “culture of encounter” into dialogue with her fieldwork with Melkite, SyroMalabar, and Ge’ez Catholic churches, developing a “catholicity from below” shaped by the concrete experiences of migration, cultural tensions, and ecumenical relations of these communities. This empirically-informed catholicity calls us to greater recognition of what migrants experience existentially, and what this means for the pilgrim Church’s own journey in the world. More importantly, ethnography as a practice offers the possibility of struggling towards the healing and reconciliation often needed in these places of encounter, and it better equips the church for the task of catholicity for the church *in via*.

Layla Karst’s presentation, “The Pilgrim Church: Implications of the Turn to Practice,” proposes a theology of pilgrimage that situates the pilgrim, rather than the shrine, as the sacred center of Christian pilgrimage. Distinctive from the previous two approaches, Karst shows how ethnographic literature can be deployed in the alternate disciplinary space of theology. Karst illustrates how ethnographies of pilgrimage trouble “top-down” theologies of pilgrimage, which have a long history of reframing and interpreting such popular practices within the liturgical primacy of the Eucharist.

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Instead, she suggests that sustained attention to the wider ecology of pilgrimage can help us reimagine the theological relationship between pilgrimage and the liturgy as mutually informing, rather than subordinate. If an integral ecology calls us to take seriously the dynamic and ongoing wisdom of religion as it is actively lived out in the world, then the living God is revealed in both liturgical and popular practices. In this relationship, the pilgrim is revealed as a member of the Body of Christ and the ecclesial Body of Christ can better understand what it is to be a Pilgrim Church.

The conversation that followed focused on the challenges of ethnographic method. One question concerned the relationship between descriptive understandings of the church and normative understandings of the church, and at what point the descriptive becomes normative. This led to a discussion of the consequences of normative theology on the lives of people and the need to create a dialogue between the normative and the descriptive. There were also questions about whether ethnographic method ought to be done as theology in and of itself, or used in assistance of theological work. The panel's answers to these questions stressed the importance of openness and humility in interviews and other encounters with community members, as well as the role of accountability to communities in order to avoid exploitation. The discussion highlighted the ethical significance of representation in theological method and work, and the opportunity that ethnography presents to expand it.

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