

CHURCH/ECUMENISM—TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Church/Ecumenism  
Convener: Kristin Colberg, College of St. Benedict/St. John's University  
Moderator: Brandon Peterson, The University of Utah  
Presenters: Judith Gruber, Loyola University of New Orleans  
Jakob Karl Rinderknecht, University of the Incarnate Word  
Margaret M. Gower, Loyola Marymount University

In her paper, “Ec(o)clesiology: Ecology as Ecclesiology in *Laudato Si'*,” Judith Gruber argues that *Laudato Si'* does not have the church as its explicit theme, but still makes profound ecclesiological statements which allow us to describe the church in ecological metaphors. She asserts that, by using the ecological system as an ecclesial metaphor, Pope Francis challenges us to think about the church-world relationship in new ways and provides an analytical lens for examining the complex relationship between dogma and pastoral practice. Gruber demonstrates, through a close reading of the text, that *Laudato Si'* develops a renewed definition of the church which unsettles its institutionalized boundaries—(all) those who resist the destruction of creation perform the *leiturgia* of the church and its *martyria* for the life-giving God. She concludes that Francis' efforts to remap the church in a broad ecclesial ecosystem are essential for examining the crucial ecclesiological question today—“where is the church?”

Margaret Gower's paper, “The Church as ‘Fidelity,’” draws on the ecological definition of “fidelity” in order to offer an enriched ecclesiological notion of “fidelity” to the church. Her paper demonstrates that the ecological definition of fidelity—“the more or less rigid ties by which the species are bound to certain communities”—is useful for creatively rethinking the notion the church as “fidelity.” In particular, she highlights the value of five “botanical virtues” of awareness, communication, feedback, adaption, and movement for providing a more adequate description of the lived reality of the church and its eschatological possibilities. She asserts that, together as the church, all of our roots and all of our relationships, all of our entangled bonds, make our own ties (although sometimes painful) the work of life, the work of the living “fidelity.” Her paper concludes with an interesting reflection on the notion of “being bound” to a place as a result of circumstances that are often beyond one's control—in the case of plants this means being bound to a particular ground and place; in the case of people, it means being bound to a particular religious tradition.

In his presentation, “Church, Categories and Speciation: Describing the Ecclesial Ecosystem,” Jakob Karl Rinderknecht asks how the category “church” functions in the language of the Second Vatican Council. Building on cognitive research of the last several decades, he argues that categories generally do not function as containers with sharp boundaries and clear conditions. While some few ideal categories (such as square or triangle) are adequately described in this model, most are better understood according to a “prototype model” in which certain examples form central examples or prototypes, and other examples are related to those centers in closer and more distant ways. In applying these ideas to Vatican II's description of the church, he argues that the council treats the church in a parallel way. The council treats those churches in communion with the See of Rome as central examples of the category, while recognizing that separated communities, which it understands to be “deficient in some

*Topic Session: Church/Ecumenism*

respects” nevertheless are communities of “importance in the mystery of salvation,” (UR, 3) and so churches, though less central examples of the category. Such an approach, according to Rinderknick, highlights the fact that the relationship between Catholics and non-Catholics is non-competitive and opens possibilities for fruitful dialogue.

The conversation that followed connected the three presentations in interesting ways and allowed the presenters to be in dialogue with one another and with the members gathered. Considerable conversation was devoted to the question of whether the church, at times, becomes “too invisible” in its efforts to engage other disciplines and adopt their methods. Another source of discussion was the necessity of finding new points of entry for considering difficult ecumenical questions and the church’s relationship to the world. The latter part of the discussion considered the possibility of advancing our understanding of the church if we ask “old” or perennial questions in “new” ways.

KRISTIN COLBERG  
*College of St. Benedict/St. John’s University*  
*Collegeville, Minnesota*