

## SEMINAR ON THE AMERICAN CATHOLIC EXPERIENCE

Inculturation and catholicity provided a fruitful approach to the seminar's fifth year of theological reflection on the history of Catholicism in the United States. The session focused on the recently published six-volume bicentennial history, *Makers of the Catholic Community; The Bicentennial History of the Catholic Church in America*. (Authorized by the National Council of Catholic Bishops. Christopher J. Kauffman, General Editor. New York: Macmillan, 1989.) Three questions organized the presentations and general discussion: What does it mean to talk about the American Catholic experience as an experiment in inculturation? How might this approach to the American Catholic experience inform the writing of a critical and inclusive history of Catholics in the United States? What would such a history contribute to an appropriately inculturated and pastorally sensitive theology for American Catholics?

To open the discussion a panel comprised of William Lindsay (Xavier University in New Orleans), Patricia O'Connell Killen (Pacific Lutheran University), and Jon Nilson (Loyola University of Chicago) presented brief assessments of each of the six volumes. Lindsay commented on Margaret Mary Reher's *Catholic Intellectual Life in America: A Historical Study of Persons and Movements* and Joseph P. Chinnici's *Living Stones: The History and Structure of Catholic Spiritual Life in the United States*. Lindsay noted a strong Americanist bias in Reher's account and a paucity of critical attention to ethnic, immigrant, and regional issues that occupied Catholic intellectuals practically and theoretically. He appreciated the catalogue of events, people, and ideas in Reher's final chapter but regretted its too modest attempt to interpret Catholic intellectual history during the past fifty years.

Lindsay found more interpretive texture in Chinnici's treatment of spirituality. Chinnici located the religious experience of his subjects in a broader American context. However, the question of regional differences remained a major one for Lindsay. To illustrate he pointed to Chinnici's inclusion of James Keller and the Christophers and exclusion of Flannery O'Connor in his chapters on twentieth-century Catholic spirituality. Lindsay believes that regional difference, such as those between north and south, are probably more important to the interpretation of the American Catholic experience than the liberal versus conservative delineations of the Americanist controversy.

Jon Nilson reflected on Gerald P. Fogarty's *Patterns of Episcopal Leadership* and David O'Brien's *Public Catholicism*. Nilson was puzzled by a lack of attention in both volumes to the religious world view and motivation of the people discussed. For example, in his chapter on George William Mundelein and John Patrick Cody of Chicago, Edward Kantowicz presented Cody as an exemplar of the financially astute managerial bishop but also as a churchman who was an active

promoter of racial justice; yet, he leaves this intriguing combination unexplored and unexplained. Nilson found the collection disappointingly lacking in analysis of the patterns noted in its title.

Nilson appreciated O'Brien's skillful weaving of historical information into an interpretive framework. Still, he was puzzled by O'Brien's claim that American Catholicism has no coherent grasp of its public role, a claim made at the end of a volume which describes in detail the major ways in which American Catholicism has been considered and actualized as a public church. More critical discussion of the religious views and theological understandings of the actors treated in these volumes would make them more useful for theology as well as for the effort of inculturation as a whole.

Patricia O'Connell Killen presented Karen Kennelly's *American Catholic Women; A Historical Exploration* and Delores Ann Liptak's *Immigrants and Their Church*. She found the Kennelly volume valuable for opening up primary material on religious and lay women in the Catholic Church in the United States. Some of its essays succeeded in detailing the range of positions that Catholic women held on issues such as the Equal Rights Amendment, women's suffrage, and the place of women in the world of work. Often, however, the interpretations did not succeed in getting to the level of the interaction between culture and religious faith in the lives of women.

The Liptak volume set as its agenda summarizing recent excellent studies of Catholic immigrants in the United States. She wrote with such broad sweep and using so generalized a framework for conceiving church, clergy, and laity, however, that she lost the depth of appreciation for inculturation which makes the works she summarized so valuable.

The general discussion that followed aired the practical difficulties of conceiving and executing a project such as this six-volume bicentennial history. Some present were able to answer questions about the genesis of the six volumes. Questions of selection, organization, theological and historical assumptions, audience, and purpose were addressed with sympathetic appreciation for the difficulties involved. The limits of inculturation as an interpretive category for history and theology were addressed. Still, a desire for a more self-consciously dialectical sense of the relation between catholicity and culture on the part of interpreters of Catholic history in the United States was strongly voiced.

Moving beyond the six volumes, participants were especially interested in how the stories of particular people in differing regions could be mined to identify genuinely American Catholic themes. They judged recognition of the richly diverse particularity of the Catholic experience in the United States vital to any interpretation of it as an experiment in inculturation. They also discussed the structuring of a mutually critical correlation between historical information on Catholics in the United States and efforts to construct an inculturated theology.

To begin to address these concerns the seminar will use a comparative approach at the upcoming convention. Christine Athans will moderate a discussion comparing Catholic theology with Jewish and Protestant theology between World War I and Vatican Council II. The effort will be to discern common cultural questions and influences and tradition-specific approaches to them. A possible second

session will explore the relationship between the social gospel tradition and contemporary efforts to construct a public theology.

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