

## AMERICAN CATHOLIC EXPERIENCE

AUTHORITY FROM THE CENTER:  
REFLECTIONS IN LIGHT OF  
THE NORTH AMERICAN CATHOLIC EXPERIENCE

Presenters: William Lindsey, Belmont, North Carolina  
Charles Moutenot, Fordham University  
Judith Merkle, Xavier University, Cincinnati  
J. J. Mueller, St. Louis University

Judith Merkle convened the group attended by twenty-five participants. Lindsey asked why North American Catholic theology has not generated a tradition of cultural criticism as noteworthy as the American literary tradition. The commitment to "liberal individualism" has an ironic effect of producing deep, hidden mechanisms which coerce conformity so that individualism does not become anarchic. These mechanisms cast the critic's vision into doubt as appealing to self-interest, as too critical, or as not respectful of community. Moutenot reflected on *Veritatis Splendor* from two North American Catholic perspectives. From a Base Christian Community in the inner city, where "might makes right" seems to prevail, the critique of individualism in *VS* rings true. The decalogue as basic condition and the call of Jesus as ultimate ground of morality are a welcome reaffirmation of objectivity in moral thinking. From a theological perspective, natural law, the basis of much of Catholic morality, is not the sole possession of the Catholic Church but is possessed by all humanity. Hence, openness and dialogue with experts in other fields are necessary on difficult and controversial issues. Merkle presented sociologist Richard Sennet's notion of "negation" as authority bond. The dominant U.S. authority model puts Americans in a dependent relation without protection before authorities who do not care. To avoid vulnerability, we negate authority without negating the bond to the person(s) exercising it. However, if authority is *visible* (explicit and clear) and *legible* (mutual and communicative), then relations beyond negation, such as subsidiarity, are possible. Exercising visible and legible authority is the major challenge of the church today. Mueller argued that we are in a second stage of inculturation: we understand culture not as something "out there" (language, symbols) but as "in here," as *mind* (presuppositions, thoughts, feelings). We are not talking about bringing the gospel to a foreign land but are talking as believers across cultures. The church must find a way to listen to the Holy Spirit through

the inculturated mind and find ways of doing God's work through new forms of governance. To find unity in the Church we must turn to the inculturated mind. Six principles specific to American mind are: democracy, due process, equal rights, right to choose, voluntary participation, tolerance and pluralism.

Discussion followed. The universal Church exercises authority efficiently but people feel a weak sense of belonging. The local church shows a greater respect for diversity, identity, and participation while it lacks in efficiency. Do we get our negative images of the Church from the media? Were the seminar papers too negative? American Catholics seem to want authority when they are in trouble; when all goes well they do not want it. On the other hand, in today's "neoclerical" Church many lay people experience great obstacles and frustration in the way authority is exercised. The meaning of Church documents was discussed. Will people continue to read them? Will they be taken seriously at all? To be credible the whole church must be in dialogue and continue to be countercultural.

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## HANS URS VON BALTHASAR SOCIETY

### JESUS CHRIST: CRUCIFIED FOUNDATION OF THE COSMOS

Moderator: Christophe Potworowski, Concordia University

Presenter: Raymond Gawronski, Marquette University

Gawronski argued that Catholic art often shocks contemporary sensibilities by its detailed depictions of the Passion of Christ. This artistic focus on the concrete found articulation in the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar who conducted a steady polemic against all forms of abstraction. Without the Incarnation, all human thought tends ultimately towards a false abstraction.

Platonism has been perhaps the greatest "abstractor," positing a soul-essence which survives the dissolution of the human form in death. Religiously, all extra-biblical religion, for Balthasar, is an attempt to evade suffering and death. The single greatest alternative to the Christian understanding of suffering is that of Buddhism. If Platonism "saves" the soul of the human subject while being forced to forget the body, Buddhism dissolves both. The religion of the Old Testament