

### **The New Anthropological Subject at the Heart of the Mystical Body of Christ**

Moderator: Anne E. Patrick, Carlton College

Presenter: M. Shawn Copeland, Marquette University

Reporter: Anne M. Clifford, Duquesne University

To open the conversation: Mary Ellen Sheehan, University of St. Michael's College

At the continuation of the plenary session on Professor M. Shawn Copeland's paper, which she presented earlier in the conference, the respondent, Professor Mary Ellen Sheehan, opened the conversation by highlighting elements of the paper which she appreciated. She expressed her appreciation for the artful way in which Copeland's analyses and narratives opened new doors into the Gospel. She highlighted the importance of Copeland's attention to intersubjectivity and bodily materiality. She revisited Copeland's account of the treatment of Fatima Yusif, drawing attention to how her oppression as a woman of color reduced her to an object of derision. Sheehan mused, reflecting on the multifaceted possibilities in her name, Was Fatima a Muslim, a Coptic Christian, a Roman Catholic? Would knowing this make a difference?

Sheehan invited Copeland and the session's participants to consider questions related to the paper, some of which she included in the response she gave earlier. Among them were: (1) In the new anthropology proposed by Copeland, how is the subjectivity of the victim, e.g., the poor woman of color, to be constituted, and how is her own agency to effect needed change an integral part of her as subject? (2) Noting the poststructuralist attention to the instability of linguistic categories and postmodern attention to the other as other, is it really possible for a theological anthropology to make "difference" a central category while ascribing to a universalist understanding of human nature? (3) What are the political dimensions of the new anthropological subject; specifically how might the notion of solidarity that Copeland proposed transform politics?

Due to illness, Copeland was able to give only brief responses to the questions. She noted with gratitude that Sheehan grasped well her intent in proposing an intersubjective anthropology, one that also attends to bodily subjectivity and materiality. Both have implications for the human as multitextured. Copeland pointed out that although women of color may have multiple identities in different contexts, no black woman can ever stand in for a white man.

Copeland drew attention to one of the political-religious ramifications of her paper by reflecting on human creaturehood in relationship to ecology. She noted that many peoples of color, especially indigenous peoples, are conscious of their bonds with the earth and have long lived in ecological harmony with earth's other life forms. Spokespersons for industrialized-capitalist societies have challenged their way of life, deriding not only their life style, but also their religious expressions of being in relationship with all creatures. In response to the question of particular versus universal, she noted that her position is informed by the African-American Christian principle: Every human person is a creature of God. This principle both transcends and grounds difference.

Since there were no written questions submitted for this session, Professor Anne Patrick directed those assembled to form small groups. The following issues emerged from the small group discussion: (1) Since the use of the theology of Bernard Lonergan had been an informative element in Copeland's paper, there was some reflection on Lonergan's category of concrete human universal. In response, Copeland expressed caution regarding ontologizing difference, specifically the accidents of enfleshment that we categorize as racial difference. She noted the relationship of ontologizing racial difference to ontologizing sexual difference. Ontologizing the latter lends itself to treating rigidly defined notions of sexual normativity as constitutive of what is male and female. The result is that each is rendered a distinct species. (2) The use of Lonergan's method with its emphasis on rational imperatives seems to perpetuate the tradition of making rationality the distinguishing characteristic for *imago Dei*. A caution was raised about a possible bias inherent in this position because it lends itself to equating rationality with intelligence, leading persons with learning disabilities to be regarded as less human, less capable of imaging God due to their difference. The mentally challenged have their own *ratio*, one that often has a greater emotional immediacy, including capacity for empathy, than those with greater intellectual ability.

Copeland concluded the session by sharing the twofold commitment of Black Catholic Theology: (a) to conserve in the Christian tradition what gives life and (b) to purify it of what does not. This commitment leads her to attend to difference without embracing postmodernism because postmodernism (as it is emerging today) lacks a discernable *telos*. She does not want her contribution to theological anthropology to be subsumed under the postmodern project because she has a clear *telos*, the kingdom of God as revealed in Christ.

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