

CONVERSION AND CATHOLICITY—INVITED SESSION

Topic: Conversion and Catholicity within the Guild of Theologians:
Overcoming Barriers to Dialogue and Communion
Convener: Dan Finn, St. John's University, Collegeville
Moderator: Dan Finn, St. John's University, Collegeville
Presenters: Christopher Ruddy, Catholic University of America
Christine Firer-Hinze, Fordham University

In an invited session organized by President-elect Richard Gaillardetz, Christopher Ruddy and Christine Firer-Hinze addressed the challenges confronting and resources enabling dialogue among Catholic theologians. Ruddy's contribution, "I desire to be truly ecclesiastic": Henri de Lubac on Temptation, Conversion, and the Theologian," began with an observation from Philip Murnion that "a spirituality of communion and dialogue is as demanding in its asceticism as a spirituality of the desert or the cloister."

De Lubac's ideal for the theologian to be "truly ecclesiastic" arose from his conviction that the theologian should have "fallen in love with the beauty of the House of God; the Church will have stolen his heart." As a Jesuit theologian who was removed from his teaching position in the 1950s, de Lubac explained that "the Church herself does not as a rule encourage over bold thought or too-high-flying spirituality." Yet his message for theologians today, according to Ruddy, is one of a fundamental loyalty to the Church, "a loyalty which will not deserve the name if it is of the surface only... If we are to accept the church we must take her as she is, in her human day-to-day reality just as much as in her divine and eternal ideality."

Ruddy cited four characteristics that de Lubac saw in the "homo ecclesiasticus": spirituality, catholicity, ecclesiology, and asceticism. Such a person would have to confront "our temptations concerning the Church": self-centeredness, destructive criticism, superficial adaptation, "successful" adaptation, elitism, and spiritual worldliness. Thus, the theologian must address three fundamental barriers: within the theological community, among theologians and bishops, and within the self.

Ruddy closed with observations on the affinities between de Lubac's *Splendor of the Church* and Pope Francis's writing and preaching.

Christine Firer-Hinze's presentation, "Creative Contention, Capital Investment, and the Debt of Love (Rom 13:8): Bonding and Bridging Practices and their Significance for U.S. Theologians' Academic, Ecclesial, and Public Work," brought social scientific insight to the conversation. She began with an observation about the demography of the CTSA, noting that in 1963 all officers and members of the Board of Directors were priests trained in the seminary, while 50 years later no officer and only one director was a priest.

Firer-Hinze argued that insights from the social capital literature in sociology are helpful in thinking through the issues of dialogue and difference within theology. Relying on Bourdieu, Coleman, Putnam, and others, she outlined "how and why people join together and (do or don't) reach across borders in diversely composed group settings, and what functions these bondings and crossings serve." She defined social capital as "socially-embedded connections and resources that benefit group

members by providing avenues/forms of information, influence, social credentialing, and identity-affirmation and -reinforcement.”

“Bonding capital” subsists within in-group networks, fostering cohesion, interaction, affection, and shared action. (Consider the function of *Commonweal* and *First Things*.) “Bridging capital” exists between groups, strengthening connections and maintaining communication and peace within a larger polity. (Consider “New Wine New Wine Skins” and catholicmoraltheology.com)

Firer-Hinze then related this sociological analysis to John Courtney Murray’s treatment of civility and civic life “as ongoing relations of reasoned public argument on the basis of a foundational consensus, as a way of thinking about how we comport ourselves within the public space of scholarly-theological conversation and debate.”

A lively conversation ensued among the many CTSA members in the audience, some more pessimistic about the conditions for dialogue in the church today and others more optimistic that the CTSA can play a creative role in overcoming the current challenges.

In the end, the *sensus fidelium* in the room—and certainly of the two presenters—might be well summarized by Firer-Hinze’s final paragraph: “Amid heartfelt contention, we as Catholic theologians continue to be gifted with our deepest bond of solidarity—our common identity as baptized members of the Body of Christ, joined by the Spirit who unifies and bestows different gifts and callings (1 Cor. 12-13)...We are joined by grace in the bonding and bridging solidarity of the communion of saints and sinners, in our consensus-in-practice in creed, in worship (especially the Eucharist) and, with God’s help in ways of thinking, teaching and living that render the one thing we will always owe one another, the debt of love (Rom. 13:8).”

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