THE CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES

Topic: Dialogues, Tensions, and “Seeds of Hope” in the United States Church
Convener: William A. Clark, College of the Holy Cross
Moderator: Joseph Hartzler, Franciscan School of Theology
Presenters: Mary Doak, University of Notre Dame
           Timothy P. Muldoon, Boston College
           Maureen R. O’Brien, Duquesne University

The general convention theme, “Theology in Dialogue,” was particularly meaningful for our developing group, which seeks to contribute to the dialogue between theologies of church and the dynamics of North American culture. The presentations engaged this theme by considering various aspects of the fragmentation presently so evident in the U.S. church.

Mary Doak’s presentation, “Beyond Fatalism and Fanaticism,” drew on the Second Vatican Council and on the theology of Johann Baptist Metz to establish the key importance of human freedom and diversity in the church’s witness today. Despite the rhetorical celebrations of these values in the United States, the reality in our increasingly complex public lives and in our ever larger Catholic parishes is widespread despair of the possibility of pluralism leading to common action. Instead, trends toward lack of participation and increased conformity encourage the apathetic fatalism and the anxious fanaticism that result from a sense of irrelevance on the part of individuals. Hannah Arendt has pointed out that both such responses arise from the same root and reinforce each other. Contrary to these current trends, Vatican II made “diversity in unity” a concept integral to all of its documents, drawing on the theology of Trinity and of Eucharist. The writings of John Paul II continually stressed the dignity of persons within communities. J. B. Metz insists that we are called to be a people united in God as subjects of our history, able to stand in solidarity with those subjects who are threatened. This theology should ground an ecclesial life that is a genuine alternative to the prevailing options of an increasingly triumphal church that eclipses subjects, or an increasing privatism that denies the communal connection among subjects. The church should make no apology for the dialogue which allows human persons to stand together as subjects with and in God.

Timothy Muldoon’s “Young Adult Catholics In Dialogue With Older Catholics” employed themes resonant with those that Doak developed: the pluralism characteristic of postmodern culture, the attractiveness to young people of both nontraditional spiritualities and apparently “ultramontane” traditionalism, and the possibility that the “fresh eyes” of the young might constitute “Seeds of Hope for American Catholicism.” While some 44% of Catholics in the United States are under the age of 40—that is, born after Vatican II—recent studies indicate that these Catholics do not show high levels of commitment to Church life, even though they remain firmly Catholic. In the context of postmodernity, which
has seen the relativization of truth claims, young people who encounter Catholicism
often do so unencumbered by the “baggage” of years of experience in the church—
experience which many older Catholics have taken for granted. Because of the
breakdown of “cultural Catholicism,” the kind of Catholicism that is emerging in
the postmodern era is one in which pluralism is the rule rather than the exception.
Younger Catholics are apt to understand their Catholicism first as a kind of
belonging, and only secondarily as a set of very specific beliefs and practices.
While these younger Catholics need to be offered a greater exposure to the basic
kerygma, older Catholics need to understand the extent to which their own approach
to the church is governed by a narrative to which younger Catholics generally do
not have access. For the ongoing dialogue between them, important resources
present themselves in the contemporary world. First, there is an obvious correspon-
dence between contemporary globalism and Catholicism’s longstanding global
reach. Second, postmodern pluralism offers the church space to remain culturally
relevant to younger people, provided that attention is paid not just to authority
structures but to persuasiveness. Finally, the general contemporary interest in all
forms of spirituality can be utilized to the church’s advantage.

In the final presentation, “Lay Ecclesial Ministry in the U.S. Church Today:
Dialogues, Ambiguities, and Opportunities,” Maureen O’Brien posited that lay
ecclesial ministers in the United States are engaged in implicit and explicit
dialogues that highlight the ambiguities of their position. Important new research
and church statements on lay ecclesial ministers (LEMs) underscore the crucial
ongoing importance of dialogue on this aspect of U.S. church life. There are, in fact,
four prevailing dialogues that illustrate both the ambiguities and opportunities of
these ministers’ present situation. Dialogues focused on identity and vocation offer
the opportunity for LEMs to discern their spiritual identity as ministers, but involve
the ambiguity of their being both “lay faithful” and “pastoral leaders” at the same
time. Dialogues focused on pastoral context allow LEM’s to focus on the practical
aspects of their ministry, but involve the ambiguity of important terms of that
ministry being established by church regulations beyond local control. Dialogues
focused on professionalization are moving toward the establishment of common
certification standards, but without resolving the ambiguity between the terms
“professional” and “lay.” Finally, dialogues focused on ecclesial teaching lead to
clearer articulation of the meaning of lay ministry, but involve the ambiguity of
bishops proposing theological perspectives on realities already being lived and
reflected on by lay people themselves. Dialogue for lay ecclesial ministers requires
a model that fosters a dynamic interplay between “margins and centers” in the
church. Through acknowledging their multiple locations vis-à-vis ecclesial margins
and centers, intentionally claiming these locations, promoting dialogical fluidity and
open-endedness, engaging in communal self-naming, drawing on multiple sources
as conversation partners, and aligning their efforts with God’s incarnational and
creative activity, lay ecclesial ministers can more effectively live with ambiguity
and become agents of ecclesial transformation.
The ensuing discussion among the approximately forty people in attendance dwelt on questions of developing a dynamic and prophetic vision of Catholicism in the United States that is responsive to the needs and ambiguities of contemporary culture.

WILLIAM A. CLARK
College of the Holy Cross
Worcester, Massachusetts