

## COMMUNITY OF SANT'EGIDIO AS A LIVED THEOLOGY

Topic: "The Community of Sant'Egidio as a Lived Theology: A Way Forward in the Impasse over Church-World Theology?"

Convener: Kristin E. Heyer, Santa Clara University

Presenter: Laurie Johnston, Emmanuel College

Respondent: David O'Brien, College of the Holy Cross

Johnston noted that the tensions in church-world theology, which Komonchak has identified in *Gaudium et Spes*, persist today in many areas of controversy, and particularly, as Kristin Heyer has noted, in public theology. The debates over church-world theology are partly to blame for the difficulties in developing a model of Christian discipleship that can allow Christians to preserve a sense of their citizenship in heaven while living fully in this world, as *Gaudium et Spes* demands. The lay Community of Sant'Egidio, a 60,000-member lay group founded in Rome in 1968 by Andrea Riccardi, offers a model of such discipleship that may prove of interest to theologians seeking to overcome some of the tensions in church-world theology and the resulting praxis. Sant'Egidio's members have a sense of their own vocation that challenges many of the typical dichotomies in church-world theology. They reject any implication that a radical commitment to Christian discipleship requires being removed from everyday life in the world, from work or from family. They have consistently spoken of themselves as "monks in the world." Sant'Egidio maintains both an openness to the new and a deep sense of rootedness in the historical tradition, traceable in part to the influence of Yves Congar upon the young community. This leads them to marry many traditional liturgical practices with a very contemporary commitment to social justice. In 2000, the community organized a pilgrimage through Rome's Trastevere, with visits alternating between historical sites (e.g. a hostel for the poor where St. Francis stayed in Rome) and current sites where Sant'Egidio provides service to the poor (e.g. a soup kitchen and a center of hospitality for immigrants). This remembrance of *charity* both past and present also leads to acts of prophetic witness and advocacy, such as marches on behalf of the rights of gypsies and immigrants, and yearly candlelight walks along the path taken by Jews being deported from Rome by the Nazis.

Sant'Egidio's somewhat unique attitude towards political authority also belies traditional dichotomies. While expressing skepticism about the possibilities of political power, Sant'Egidio members do not hesitate to engage in the political process on behalf of their friends in the world, often with real savvy and success, garnering a Nobel Peace Prize nomination as well as a recent comment in *The Economist* that "When George Bush visited Rome last year, he wanted to see everybody who mattered in world affairs: Pope Benedict, the leaders of Italy—and members of the Sant'Egidio community." While maintaining a self-understanding that focuses on being a "fundamentally monastic community," Sant'Egidio members nonetheless engage in frank conversations about how to best apply "leverage" for peace in situations of political conflict. In so doing, they

marry realism and idealism in a unique way, speaking of what they do for peace as “dreaming in reality.” Riccardi explains, “working for peace involves more than affirming principles or taking part in public demonstrations.... We must move from affirmations of principle to actual encounters with those who make war.”

Johnston concluded that Sant’Egidio’s orientation in the world is shaped by a deep commitment to *Gaudium et Spes*’ call for dialogue. This dialogue is not a compromise of one’s identity, but a deep expression of solidarity with the world. Described by Austen Ivereigh as a “border-crossing charism,” Sant’Egidio’s spirituality sees the Gospel as “call to be able to be welcoming and hospitable enough so that in our own life we are moving beyond boundaries, we are witnessing the love of God in a way that is embracing everyone, in a way that is excluding no one....[This] is the primordial openness.”

David O’Brien’s response noted that “movements” have long played an important role in American Christianity, particularly on the Protestant side. As H. Richard Niebuhr explained, movements at once challenged and enriched denominational and congregational life. They offered opportunities for discipleship not available in institutions, served as safety valves for discontent and restlessness, and met neglected pastoral needs. While movements have been less prevalent in American Catholicism because of the focus on parish life, some such as Cursillo and Marriage Encounter have had an important role. But O’Brien sees three key challenges facing Sant’Egidio today: (1) navigating the power structures of the Catholic Church; (2) legitimizing lay vocation and social ministry “in the world” which, despite *Gaudium et Spes*, have become contested ground, in light of recent shifts in teaching and practices regarding lay ministry, sacramental practice, shared responsibility, and language of the church as the hierarchy; (3) Sant’Egidio’s intense commitment to dialogue is a commitment with political implications that carries great risks for the Church and so, O’Brien fears, may find serious opposition.

In the discussion, questions were raised about Sant’Egidio’s approach to peacemaking and its somewhat anarchical organizational structure. Participants compared Sant’Egidio with other lay movements such as the Catholic Worker, and concluded that underlying church-world theologies are a key distinguishing characteristic. Attention was paid to the deeply optimistic anthropology that grounds Sant’Egidio’s approach to the world and commitment to dialogue.

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