

INTERCULTURAL AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIMENSIONS OF THE *SENSUS FIDELIUM* IN LITURGY AND POPULAR DEVOTION—SELECTED SESSION

- Topic: Intercultural and Interreligious Dimensions of the *Sensus Fidelium* in Liturgy and Popular Devotion
- Convener: James G. Sabak, O.F.M., Providence College
- Moderator: James G. Sabak, O.F.M., Providence College
- Presenters: Rita George-Tvrtković, Benedictine University  
James G. Sabak, O.F.M., Providence College

In her paper, “Bridge or Barrier? Popular Devotion to Mary in the History of Christian-Muslim Relations,” Rita Tvrtković probes the idea of a shared connection with the Blessed Mother in terms of popular piety among Christians and Muslims. She poses the question whether or not such sharing bears a similarity with the common foundation of Abraham in both religious traditions. The question is framed by an analysis of the role played by Mary as both a bridge and as a barrier in the relationships between Christians and Muslims in history. Tvrtković investigates how the use of Mary in acts of piety and devotion by Christians and Muslims serves the *sensus fidelium* as both a means of understanding and as a challenge to such understanding between the traditions. One example Tvrtković employs, which demonstrates Mary as a bridge, is devotion to the icon of Our Lady of Saydnaya (in 13th-century Syria), venerated both by Muslims and by Christians. Additionally, a Dominican, William of Tripoli, describes a devotion to Mary in a mosque as an entirely Muslim practice. Tvrtković notes, however, that Christians have viewed Muslim devotion to Mary primarily as a bridge to Christian conversion and baptism. Tvrtković explains that history demonstrates all too well Mary’s other role as a barrier, often described as a warrior or conqueror against Muslims. The use of Mary in this way expresses the paradoxical nature of a cultural and theological *sensus fidelium*, where mutual devotion to Mary by Christians and Muslims is countered by use of Mary as a weapon and defense against those who seek to undermine the Church. Tvrtković suggests that for a shared, grassroots *sensus fidelium* communicated through Marian devotion to contribute to Muslim-Christian dialogue it must also recognize how history has affected elements of Catholic tradition and to avoid revisionist histories that either ignore or devalue the challenges of Marian piety in Christianity.

In his presentation, “‘Keeping Vigil’ and the Response of a Believer to Grief and Suffering,” James Sabak investigates the commonalities and contrasts between “secular/cultural” vigils and the practice of Christian vigil. Organizing a vigil in response to violence and tragedy in American society offers a time to mourn and lament communally, but does it offer any more than this? Sabak notes that in Christian contexts, keeping vigil expresses eschatological hope, which allows believers to face down the debilitating and paralyzing effects of evil. He poses the question, how does a shared ritual effect the *sensus fidelium* of the practice of the ritual in secular and religious contexts? Utilizing the analytical perspectives of Gotthard Booth, Victor Turner, and Ronald Grimes on ritualization and on responses to grief and suffering, Sabak highlights the principle differences between the practice of “organizing” a vigil in “response” to violent tragedies and the tradition of “keeping

*Selected Session: Intercultural and Interreligious Dimensions of the Sensus Fidelium  
in Liturgy and Popular Devotion*

vigil” as an act of anticipatory fulfillment of God’s promises. According to Sabak, the act of keeping a Christian vigil is an act of memory and transformation conscious and cognizant of God’s power in tragic situations that makes a powerful stand against pain and anguish. Such consciousness defies a tortured lament that often sees God as either indifferent or incompetent when it comes to addressing human suffering, and reinforces the eschatological proclamation of salvation received in Christ.

The conversation that followed focused on several areas in both presentations. Participants engaged Tvrtković’s ideas on Mary as “bridge” and “barrier” bringing out further complexities in the way Muslims and Christians have viewed Mary through the centuries. They also asked for clarification on the contemporary use of vigils in Christian practice. Questions were raised on the specific way in which Muslims view Mary. Conversation examined the parallels Mary shares with Jesus in Islam, and also explored the dimensions that single out Mary with exceptional emphasis, such as identifying Jesus as the son of Mary. Tvrtković re-emphasized the need to explore how shared devotion to Mary influences how Christians respond to Islam. It was also remarked that within Islam there is inconsistency and disagreement on how best to express devotion to Mary. Tvrtković mentioned that Vatican II did attempt to place Mary in the middle of Christian-Muslim relations, as a bridge to discussion, not necessarily toward Christianity. Such a perspective, Tvrtković stated, affirms William of Tripoli’s findings that among the Muslims devotion to Mary enables believers to progress on the way of salvation.

JAMES SABAK  
*Providence College  
Providence, Rhode Island*