

THE LEAST OF THESE: PEOPLE SUFFERING FROM  
MENTAL ILLNESS, LAW ENFORCEMENT, AND  
INNOVATIVE RESPONSES – SELECTED SESSION

Topic: People Suffering from Mental Illness, Law Enforcement, and Innovative Responses  
 Convener: M. Cathleen Kaveny, Boston College  
 Moderator: Shaun Slusarski, Boston College  
 Presenters: Peter Fay, Villanova University  
 Tobias Winright, St. Patrick’s Pontifical University, Maynooth  
 Meg Kaveny, Portland Police Bureau

This session was selected by the CTSA administration to focus on the response of law enforcement who encounter people suffering from mental illness in the course of their professional duties.

Peter Fay, Sienna Teaching Fellow at Villanova University, illustrated how people with serious mental illnesses like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder are too often “de-baptized”—that is, deliberately excluded from communities such as families, friend groups, churches, and society at large. Fay argued that the Catholic theology of baptism offers an alternative vision in which people with serious mental illness—as intrinsically dignified and relational—are integral to the Catholic community. Baptism requires the Catholic community to respect the dignity of people with serious mental illness and to enact solidarity, justice, and love for and with people with them, by, for example, welcoming and befriending them and by advocating for improved policies for and with them. In turn, baptism requires people with mental illness to live with faith, hope, and love as best they can. Finally, Fay maintained that Thomistic virtue ethics offers resources for developing a Catholic account of the faithful, hopeful, and charitable living of people with mental illness that considers pre-onset virtuous formation, age of onset, severity of illness, and degree of clinical recovery.

Tobias Winright, Professor of Moral Theology, St. Patrick’s Pontifical University, Maynooth, drew upon his previous experience working in the criminal justice system as a corrections officer, a reserve police officer and a police ethics instructor. He described the increasing contact that police officers have with persons with mental illness, noting they are disproportionately likely to be involved in a police incident, including those that result in arrest or even an officer-involved shooting. To account for this state of affairs, Winright referred to criminological studies showing that a military, or warrior, model of policing tends to destabilize and escalate encounters between officers and persons suffering from mental illness. He pointed to other models of policing, such as a social peacekeeper model and community policing. Winright then discussed some cities and communities where policing reform is taken seriously, including Seattle, Dallas, Minneapolis, and Newark. He also highlighted the collaboration between the police department and the mental health first-responders organization CAHOOTS in Eugene, Oregon. In this collaboration, civilian mental health workers take the lead in interactions with mentally ill persons, with police officers providing backup if necessary. Winright concluded by proposing police reform

according to these non-military models to help rather than harm persons suffering from mental illness.

Meg Kaveny, a social worker who works with the Behavioral Health Unit of the Portland Police Bureau, spoke about her experience on an interdisciplinary team that includes both law enforcement and trained mental health clinicians. She emphasized the practical nature of their work—finding people with mental illness places to live, making sure they get to their doctors' appointments, and engaging them as individual people rather than as statistical problems. She noted that not all police departments operate in the same way. In Portland, for example, all police officers are required to take substantial mandatory training in crisis intervention (CIT). She also discussed how this practical attention to the “least of these” is an outgrowth of her Catholic commitment to the dignity and equality of all human beings.

The ensuing discussion critically examined the breadth of the category of “mental illness,” its relationship to disability rights theories, and other possible approaches to minimize violence in the interactions of law enforcement with the public more generally.

M. CATHLEEN KAVENY  
*Boston College*  
*Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts*