

CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: One Baptism
 Convener: Peter Fay, Villanova University
 Moderator: Xavier Montecel, St. Mary's University
 Presenters: Jens Mueller, Notre Dame of Maryland University
 Shaun Slusarski, Boston College

In “*Laudato Si’* and Baptismal Renewal: Embracing Ecological Conversion for the Jubilee Year 2025,” Jens Mueller contended that the coincidence between the Jubilee Year of 2025 and the tenth anniversary of Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato Si’* provides a ripe occasion to renew commitments to environmental responsibility and ecological conversion as requirements of baptism. After reviewing the encyclical’s teachings about the ecological, social, and cultural dimensions of the environmental crisis (e.g., global warming, throwaway culture, and the technocratic paradigm, respectively), Mueller proposed that the encyclical’s theme of integral ecology is a foundation for the necessary ecological conversion. Mueller incorporated the work of theologian Vincent Miller, who argues that integral ecology acknowledges the fact of interdependence (and thereby overcomes a culture of indifference) and encourages attentiveness and solidarity with God, others, and all creation. Thus, integral ecology generates a theological anthropology that recognizes human interrelatedness with all that exists and a sacramentality that understands that one’s treatment of the common home that humans share with God shapes one’s relationship with that same God. Next, to develop jubilee’s spiritual and ethical dimensions into concrete action for ecological conversion, Mueller turned to the work of agrarian writer Wendell Berry, who notes the dangers of the liberal reduction of freedom to autonomy and the connections between ecological conversion and holiness. Mueller cited the work of philosopher Albert Borgmann on focal things, which impel action that, however seemingly small, can carry forward hope. Reading jubilee ecologically led Mueller to call for penance and reparation for the environmental crisis, pilgrimage toward sustainability, and renewal of stewardship.

In “Pope Francis, Catholic Social Teaching, and Prison Reform,” Shaun Slusarski evaluated Pope Francis’s teachings on criminal justice. Francis did much to support people who are incarcerated through informal remarks, visits to prisons, symbolic gestures (e.g., washing inmates’ feet during Holy Thursday liturgies), advocacy for humane and rehabilitative approaches over retribution, declaring the death penalty to be inadmissible, and indicting life sentences. Slusarski cited empirical evidence to substantiate Francis’s castigating life sentences as a covert death penalty. Despite respecting the dignity of the incarcerated and opening space for their ethical transformation, Francis’s teaching on life sentences remains unclear and incoherent. For example, it sometimes refers to life sentences as impermissible but other times casts it as questionable. Furthermore, though Francis stated that the magisterium condemns life sentences, he, in fact, was the first pope to address this issue. Even the strongest censure of life sentences (i.e., *Fratelli Tutti*) remains underdeveloped and lacks the systematic clarity that is a hallmark of Catholic ethics. Whereas previous teachings affirming the legitimacy of the death penalty would have posed challenges

to papal efforts to change the teaching on capital punishment, there are no previous teachings about life sentences and, therefore, none that would have circumscribed Francis's more unequivocal prohibition of them. Slusarski recommended that future magisterial teaching ought to reject retributive approaches in favor of non-carceral ones. Insofar as incarceration is an anti-baptism that ruptures community, induces stigma, and dehumanizes, Slusarski concluded that baptism's promise of new life obliges the church to counter the death promised through incarceration.

These presentations prompted much discussion. One set of questions pertained to the resources, especially concerning personhood, politics, society, and the state, upon which future magisterial teachings about criminal justice might draw, with the suggestion that earlier eras of the church's history (e.g., Augustinian humility) will need to be critically retrieved over the dominant Thomistic approach that construes punishment as natural. A second set of questions inquired about the overlap between incarceration, the environmental crisis, and other challenges and a framework that can hold together their interrelations. Responses suggested the need to identify the carceral logic that undergirds the school-to-prison pipeline and to oppose these with restorative justice. Thinking with René Girard's mimetic theory, a third question worried that social cohesion might, in fact, require the scapegoating of criminals, which led to the submission that a cultural shift on criminal justice will entail critically interrogating the Catholic logic of eternal punishment. Perhaps the most sustained set of questions concerned how best to inaugurate the changes envisioned by the presenters on the ground. Responses ranged from endorsing synodality; teaching and forming students; building and fortifying organic connections between parishioners and those who, because of incarceration, cannot travel to parishes; finding and developing stories that humanize; resisting stigma; inspiring conversion and hope; and sitting with despair.

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