

FUNDAMENTAL THEOLOGY/METHOD – TOPIC SESSION

Convener: Nicholas Olkovich, St. Mark's College
 Moderator: T. Derrick Witherington, Loyola University Chicago
 Presenter: Jack Nuelle, Loyola University Chicago
 Respondents: Ryan Duns S.J., Marquette University
 T. Derrick Witherington, Loyola University Chicago

This year's Fundamental Theology/Method Topic Session was a lively conversation on the role of baptism in overcoming structural sin.

The conversation began with Jack Nuelle presenting his paper, "One Baptism for the Forgiveness of Sins: Symbolic Efficacy, Encounter, and Structural Sin." Nuelle began with a critical presentation of how the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* understands sacramental grace. His primary critiques of the *Catechism's* position were that it limits the human response to grace as a binary assent/not assenting, and that it ignores the role of a human person's yearning for God (after Augustine) as well as the Rahnerian supernatural existential, that human beings are always-already hungering for God as their true supernatural end. Following Rahner's insistence that grace *is* God, Nuelle claimed that the model of grace as presented in the *Catechism* is insufficiently existential, de-emphasizing the role of grace as a transformative encounter with the person of Christ. Insofar as Christ reconciles humanity with God, understanding grace as both separated from the person of Christ and as something that is presented to the human person by divine *fiat* rather than as being existentially encountered, Nuelle claimed that this places a chasm between grace and the experience of being forgiven. As a corrective to this, Nuelle utilized insights from Edward Schillebeeckx and Louis-Marie Chauvet, namely the former's emphasis on sacraments as being Christocentric events of existential encounter and the latter's theology of symbols which presents grace as effecting a personal transformation on the part of the participant in the sacramental rite. Returning to the topic of forgiveness, Nuelle engaged Jacques Derrida and John Caputo on the simultaneous impossibility and necessity of forgiveness and how being forgiven gives one a new interpretation of one's past, enabling one to discern for the presence of grace all along. In conclusion Nuelle commented upon the connection between grace and the gift in Chauvet and how Chauvet's "return-gift of love" as being the only proper response to the reception of the gift of grace could be seen as an invitation to look at our past harms and enter into a place of graced-forgiveness.

Derrick Witherington offered the first response to Nuelle's paper and focused on his reading of both Schillebeeckx and Chauvet. Witherington noted that Nuelle had insufficiently focused on the role of the church in Schillebeeckx's sacramental theology and how the existential encounter with God in Christ through them happens by means of concrete and ecclesially sanctioned sacramental rites, words, and symbols, and not in spite of them. Moving onto Chauvet, Witherington noted that Nuelle's allusion to Chauvet's understanding of the return-gift of grace was insufficiently critical and that this omission risks discrediting Nuelle's critique of structural sin. Noting Daniel Franklin Pilario's critique of Chauvet on this issue, Witherington commented upon Chauvet's use of the language of "obligation" when describing the

return-gift and whether or not this risks understanding grace in a dominating way, reducing the freedom of the human person to naught. Witherington then suggested that Nuelle engage Chauvet's writings on sacrifice to respond to Pilario's and similar critiques, understanding the return-gift as the sacrificial gift of love which is oriented to the making of an existential-spiritual gift on the part of the participants in the sacramental rite. Rather than obligation being seen in a dominating way, the obligation is itself an obligation of love similar to how family members are called to love one another.

Ryan Duns' response then turned to Nuelle's understanding of grace, suggesting that it represents a too limited reading of the *Catechism* and suggested that in his concern with combatting an extrinsicist understanding of grace, Nuelle has made grace appear to be equivalent with the human longing for it. Noting that the documents of the Second Vatican Council do not seem to advocate for a purely extrinsicist understanding of grace, Duns went on to note that Nuelle should focus on the role of agency within sacramental rites. Rather than focusing solely on the human being's role in receiving and responding to grace and becoming agents of reconciliation, it is equally important to recall that it is Christ who acts in the sacraments. Neglecting this, we risk overemphasizing passivity or overestimating human agency, not realizing that God, in Christ and through the Holy Spirit, is the one who takes the initiative to reveal in concrete ways the order of grace. Finally, Duns suggested that Nuelle's use of Derrida and Caputo, risks destabilizing the very reality of forgiveness affirmed in the Creed and enacted in baptism. Duns suggested that an engagement with thinkers more firmly embedded in the church's sacramental worldview would offer a firmer theological ground for the idea of forgiveness Nuelle was trying to express.

After hearing these two responses, Nuelle responded affirmatively and thankfully to the respondents before the floor was opened for further discussion. The remainder of the discussion centered around the role of the church in the bestowal of forgiveness and the general efficacy of sacramental rites in the face of personal and structural sin. What resulted was a lively, collaborative, and memorable session on a topic of continued relevance and importance.

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