

## HISTORICAL THEOLOGY – TOPIC SESSION

Convener: Grant Kaplan, Saint Louis University  
 Moderator: Grant Kaplan, Saint Louis University  
 Presenters: Justin Coyle, Mount Angel Seminary  
 Michael J. Petrin, Mount Angel Seminary  
 Joseph Flipper, University of Dayton

The panel began with introductions by Grant Kaplan and then proceeded with presentations by each of the three presenters to an audience of roughly twenty people. This occurred during the first of the concurrent sessions on Friday, June 13.

In the first paper, “Once Again on Theology at the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy,” Justin Coyle challenged the view—prominent in the historiography—that Orthodox theology at the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (KMA) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was “Thomistic” or deficiently Orthodox. Much of the historiography, Coyle argued, is inaccurate because very little of it actually references the manuscript evidence we possess from that period. Coyle shared portions of the text he is currently editing from Stefan Yavorskyi, among the first to offer a theological course at the KMA, to challenge historiographical assumptions. Yavorskyi’s text in fact appears to defend Eastern Orthodox theology by drawing heavily from Spanish scholastics like Francisco Suárez. Coyle closed his paper by highlighting how much more editorial work needs to be done on KMA texts before any general conclusions can be drawn.

Next, Michael J. Petrin presented a paper entitled “Grace, Imitation, and Transformation: The Baptismal Theology of Gregory of Nyssa.” He examined a provocative claim that Gregory of Nyssa makes in the *Oratio catechetica*: namely, that in certain cases, the life of sin that is lived by a baptized person is in no way different from the life of sin that preceded the ritual washing, “the water is water,” as the gift of the Holy Spirit is nowhere to be found. This claim, Petrin noted, stands in tension with Gregory’s well-known exhortations not to delay baptism due to fear of post-baptismal sin. Petrin argued that properly interpreting this area of Gregory’s baptismal theology requires careful attention to his rhetorical training and practice. In particular, Petrin demonstrated that Gregory’s exhortations not to delay the reception of grace through baptism are typically accompanied by exhortations to live a transformed way of life after undergoing the ritual. He then contended that Gregory’s claim that “the water is water” should be read as an example of rhetorical *hyperbolē* with a hortatory purpose—and therefore as fundamentally consistent with the baptismal theology that is found elsewhere in Gregory’s corpus.

The third paper, “Black Catholicity: Universalism and African American Catholicism in the Mid-Twentieth Century,” was delivered by Joseph Flipper. He complicated Albert Raboteau’s description of Black Catholics in the US as a “minority within a minority”—a religious minority among African Americans and a racial minority among Catholics—experiencing a double consciousness arising from double minoritization. Flipper argued that “minority within a minority” fails to capture Black Catholic self-understanding during this period. Drawing from Josef Sorett’s notion of “racial Catholicity,” Flipper observed that for many Black Catholic intellectuals, Catholicism supplied resources by which they could make “a claim on the universal.”

Blackness also offered resources for Black Catholics to make a claim on Catholicism. From the 1930s to the 1950s, Black Catholics were increasingly networked among one another. In addition, numerous Black Catholic writers and artists found themselves at the pivot of a transnational intellectual exchange and looked to the African diaspora to reframe their Catholic identity. Flipper contended that many Black Catholics understood themselves not as minorities in an American Catholic Church, but as part of a global Black Catholicism.

Following the delivery of these three papers, Kaplan moderated a lively discussion for roughly thirty minutes. Coyle responded to a question about recent Orthodox challenges to the neo-patristic paradigm and how his work contributed thereto. Petrin responded to a question about the difference between ancient and modern perspectives on sin, as well as another question about the relationship between rhetorical variability and systematic consistency in Gregory of Nyssa's theology. Flipper was asked about certain experiences of African Catholicism that migrated across the Middle Passage and helped form Black American religious consciousness.

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