

BLACK CATHOLIC THEOLOGY – CONSULTATION

- Topic: Baptism, Blackness, and Ecology: Exploring Water's Role in Black Catholic Theology and Political Resistance
- Convener: Nicole S. Symmonds, Columbia Theological Seminary
- Moderator: Byron Wratee, Villanova University
- Presenters: Jeanine Hill Fletcher, Fordham University
 Paulinus Odozor, Notre Dame University
 Kayla August, Boston College

Considering the conference theme, the Black Catholic Theology Consultation focused on the particularity of baptism in the Black experience with our session, “Baptism, Blackness, and Ecology: Exploring Water’s Role in Black Catholic Theology and Political Resistance.” The consultation was interested in how baptism practices have historically formed and deformed Black people and expressions of Blackness. Furthermore, because water is an integral element in baptism, the consultation also considered ecology, considering how ecological issues tend to have the most significant effect on marginalized populations, including Black and African people. The session included three papers delivered in order by Jeanine Hill-Fletcher, Kayla August, and Paulinus Odozor, each presenting for twenty minutes, concluding with a question-and-answer session where roughly over a quarter of the twenty-one attendees participated.

In “Enslaved and Enslaving Catholics in the Waters of Renewal,” Jeanine Hill-Fletcher time-traveled to St. James the Greater Catholic Mission in South Carolina, where she studied the archives of baptism rolls that revealed the relationship between the enslaver and the enslaved. She stated that the rolls showed evidence of baptismal paradox, that is, that for the enslaved, baptism was an entrance into death and/or an invitation to new life. Integral to this claim is Hill-Fletcher’s utilization of Saidiya Hartman’s “critical fabulation” method, which combines historical and archival research with critical theory and fictional narratives to fill in the lacuna in historical records. In exploring the baptism rolls of St. James the Greater and the West African origin of the community, she demonstrated how those experiencing baptism as a death-dealing practice in the North American context had life-giving baptismal practices from Kongolese Catholicism. Of this, Hill-Fletcher said, “In the waters of renewal, in the nineteenth century South Carolina Catholicism of St. James the Greater, baptism may have been a ritual that unified Black and White Catholics and simultaneously created two distinctive Catholicisms, one life-giving African-inflected, and one maintaining its death-dealing White-Eurocentricism.” Hill-Fletcher’s paper was a reminder of the importance of the archives and critical fabulation in piecing together silenced voices, in helping Catholics reckon with the baptismal paradoxes that may still exist in their parishes.

Kayla August presented her paper, “Give Me that Old Time Religion: The Lessons We Learn from the Lay Enslaved Preacher,” in sermonic form with five signature movements that provided historical evidence of how Catholic priests offered salvation through the sacrament of baptism but failed to practice what they preached in giving religious instruction. Instead, lay leaders fulfilled the role of religious instruction.

August began with a brief survey of historical records of Protestant and Catholic enslavers that revealed laws and codes regarding baptizing the enslaved. These records show that up until the nineteenth century, Protestant plantation owners were hesitant to baptize the enslaved due to a fear that a Christian could not own another Christian by English law, although they often still baptized the enslaved. On the other hand, French and Spanish Catholic slave codes mandated the baptism of the enslaved, and enslaving people was accepted in US Catholic communities despite Pope Gregory XVI's condemnation of slavery in 1839. With Christian contradictions abounding, particularly in fulfilling the religious education after baptism, the enslaved lay preacher began to play a pivotal role in the religious formation of other enslaved people. August passionately and cogently argued that the enslaved lay leaders preaching in the community created a dialectic through the sermonic moment. The preacher and the community co-constructed the sermon through call and response and other audible affirmations in the preaching moment. As such, the participant proclamation became as important as the preaching proclamation, as the community participated in making God known. August offered, "In this method, we assume communal involvement, not as optional, but as essential. Allowing all community members to go from mere spectators to necessary participants in making God known. This partnership is essential as we sit in new questions, consider new pathways, and make claims about the mandate of the Word in our current context."

In "Environmental Degradation in Africa: Issues, Implications, and Solutions," Paulinus Odozor explores how ecological issues literally and figuratively impact the waters of baptism. In this interdisciplinary essay, Odozor used history, sociology, and theology to narrate the effects of climate change events in places such as Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and South Africa. He identified the aspects of environmental abuse in Africa in conversation with *Laudato Si'*, centering his explorations of the effects in the key passage from the encyclical, which states, "The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth." This quote paired with data pointing to the effects of population explosion in Kinshasa that increased levels of toxins in human waste, the food insecurity and vegetation degradation in South Africa, and the environmental challenge of the DRC, which houses much of the tropical forest in Africa. Odozor noted that there is a paradox of ecological challenges the continent is facing due to economic growth, which is sometimes connected to detachment from the natural environment. With the data contextualizing environmental degradation in Africa, Odozor reminded us that it is not just a scientific, economic, or technological problem but a moral issue. As such, Odozor posited that if *Laudato Si'* is a call to action, Africa is often rendered invisible in that call, and that must change. He reminded us that environmental degradation is a human problem that requires human response and action, especially in Africa, because caring for the earth and its humans is not an act of mutual exclusion but a mutual responsibility.

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