

LATINX THEOLOGY – CONSULTATION

- Topic: One Baptism: Evolving Visions of Catholicity from Nicaea to Vatican II and Beyond
- Convener: Mauricio Najarro, King’s College London
- Moderator: Ish Ruiz, Pacific School of Religion
- Presenters: Ben Groth, Claremont School of Theology
Xavier Montecel, Saint Mary’s University
- Respondent: Natalia Imperatori-Lee, Fordham University

This session was comprised of two papers, each approximately twenty-five to thirty minutes in length, followed by a respondent and question-and-answer session that filled the remainder of the allotted time.

In his paper, “One Baptism, Many Races,” Ben Groth explored how baptism and its documentation helped construct and enforce racial categories across the Spanish Empire. He argued that baptismal records were not just religious documents but also legal instruments of colonial racial governance. Drawing from the oldest continuously kept parish records on the Canary Islands, dating to around 1498, Groth detailed how these baptismal registers—recording names, ancestry, and racial designations—were used in legal disputes over social status and rights. Especially for individuals not considered white, these records had lasting consequences. Groth showed that people of color in places like New Orleans often challenged these racial labels to gain higher status, though church courts ultimately retained authority over these claims, intertwining ecclesiastical and colonial power.

Groth traced this system to the Canary Islands, the first Atlantic territories conquered by Spain, where consistent baptismal recordkeeping emerged alongside colonization and the enslavement of Africans and Indigenous peoples. These practices spread throughout the Americas. He also examined gender dynamics, noting that while midwives frequently performed emergency baptisms, the church restricted their ritual authority and excluded women from keeping official records. Ultimately, Groth argued, this archive of race was “implicitly and explicitly stamped with God’s approval,” reflecting how theology and bureaucracy converged to sustain colonial racial hierarchies.

In his paper, “Not Being for Others: An Exploration of Sin and Baptism *Latinamente*,” Xavier Montecel critically examined baptism within Hispanic theology. While Western theology traditionally emphasizes original sin and individual guilt, Hispanic theology resists these frameworks, highlighting community, liberation, and cultural richness. However, Montecel cautioned that this emphasis can sometimes reduce baptism to a cultural ritual, detaching it from deeper moral and spiritual commitments. Drawing on thinkers such as Antonio González Dorado and Juan Luis Segundo, Montecel argued for a fuller understanding of baptism as a collective commitment to grace and liberation that engages both cosmic and social dimensions.

To develop this view, Montecel analyzed three theological understandings of sin: Peter Abelard’s notion of sin as consent, James Keenan’s definition of sin as “the failure to bother to love,” and Ada María Isasi-Díaz’s *mujerista* theology, which defines sin as “not being for others”—a lack of solidarity with the marginalized. While

acknowledging the importance of social sin, Montecel contended that a personal account of sin remains essential. Baptism, he argued, calls for transformation that addresses both systemic injustice and individual complicity. Sin is not just wrongdoing, but a privation—a failure to love and act in solidarity. Baptism, then, becomes a radical commitment to “be for others,” particularly the oppressed, and a movement from the void of sin to the creative life of solidarity in Christ.

Respondent Natalia Imperatori-Lee offered a series of reflections that invited deeper engagement with both papers. “The waters of baptism are brackish,” she noted, “symbolically, they, and we, are fresh and salt water—not entirely potable, not completely cleansing, not totally healing.” Baptism, she argued, is both a sacred rite and a site of colonial violence—personally transformative yet historically compromised. Her response also praised Montecel’s integration of familial and ecclesial belonging, his dual focus on personal and social sin, and his framing of baptism as a “threshold” between death and new life. She also raised concerns about the potentially gendered burden of theological ideas like “being for others,” especially for Latinas and gender-nonconforming individuals socialized into self-erasure.

Turning to Groth’s paper, Imperatori-Lee reflected on baptismal archives as instruments through which colonial powers codified racial hierarchies under the appearance of divine authority. She called for deeper reckoning with the church’s role in legitimizing whiteness and exclusion, and highlighted the need to confront the mixed legacies—racial, cultural, and spiritual—left in the wake of colonialism. Her response urged listeners to embrace repentance, reparation, and radical love.

The discussion that followed brought these themes into contemporary focus. Cecilia González-Andrieu asked how the baptism of undocumented people might serve as a means of recognition amid pervasive state violence. Ramon Luzarraga drew historical and cultural parallels between the churches of the Canary Islands and those in New Orleans. The session concluded with a compelling conversation on whether sacraments themselves might be in need of redemption.

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