

DISABILITY THEOLOGY – INTEREST GROUP

Topic: The Present: How do we envision and measure progress?
 Conveners: Mary Jo Iozzio, Boston College
 Miguel J. Romero, St. Louis University
 Moderator: Susan McElcheran, St. Michael's College
 Presenters: Kevin Timpe, Calvin University
 Blake Hereth, Western Michigan University
 Ben Parks, Mercy College, Ohio

What comes next? Disability consciousness.

In the third and final year of the interest group we were engaged with thinking about what may follow from this deliberate focus on disability in Catholic practice and theology across the disciplines of anthropology, ethics, history, liturgical practice, and scripture. A significant body of literature on disability has been produced by colleagues across these disciplines although the subject remains largely peripheral to sustained theological reflection on efforts by our members to recognize who is missing and/or whose voices are silenced. The future of a specifically Catholic contribution to the field has yet to be envisioned by most. This final year of the interest group focused on the integration of disability in the theological work that members of the CTSA can engage to unpack the imperatives of faith seeking understanding inclusive of investigations of the multiple and diverse realities of life with disability. As the first two years introduced the concerns and contributions of Disability Theology to our academy, this final year looked to how the CTSA in particular may further the work begun of recognizing 1) the prevalence of disability in the human communion, 2) the global prevalence of discriminations against people with disabilities (PWD), and 3) the theological imperatives that call us to ever more mindful attention of the gift and the responsibility of theological reflection about what is good and right in matters concerning PWD.

The session began with a welcome of fifteen members, some new to the CTSA. Mary Jo Iozzio offered the background developments and previous foci of and hopes for the group's work. The session included three presentations and a lively discussion among those present. Regretfully, Rosemary Garland-Thomson, Emory University, and co-presenter Andrew Walker-Cornetta, Georgia State University, were unable to attend and to submit their paper, "Thinking with Catholic Theology, Imagining Disability," for another to deliver it.

In their presentation, "Catholic Faith and Intellectual Disability," Kevin Tempe and Blake Hereth offered challenges to the medical models of disability re: to intellectual and cognitive disability, with a focus on diversity within God's creation of human, non-human animal, and other "creature"-kind. Their presentation began with a challenge to the work of Stephen J. Gould, American paleontologist, evolutionary biologist, and historian of science. Gould's theory of punctuated equilibrium demonstrates the dynamic changes on the planet from its fits and starts to the present. However, Gould was not impressed by the chance of disability and held that disability was a flaw (rather than another iteration of human and other creature-kind diversity). Alternately, Tempe and Hereth argued convincingly that normative-imposed

functioning is itself harmful to individuals by assuming the “worst” of the experience (and a “better to be dead” mentality). Presumed “broken,” persons with disability remain the *imago Dei* glory of God fully alive. Perhaps remarkably, people with disability are the vanguard of the future.

In “Martyrdom and Disability,” Ben Parks focused his presentation on a challenge to sacrifices attendant to martyrdom of persons with disability and/or their families and caregivers. Catholic piety has its place in this tradition, surely. However, piety is often misused and contrary to a personally willed sacrifice. Parks interrogated the assumed “martyrdom” of people with disability and/or their family and caregivers. The challenge for the non-disabled is to not assume and impose “piety” on persons with disability. Rather, Parks considered at the Massacre of the Innocents and Jesus’ crucifixion to argue that, in the deaths and in the hearts of loved ones, dignity remains intact. Martyrdom, Parks argued, is an offering, yes, but it is not necessarily pious or violent. The martyrdom Parks described is fully dignified. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Irish embraced an asceticism that grants the martyr her/his dignity in spite of cruelties to which she/he may be subject. Further, as there are many ways that persons can be martyred, Parks recounted the traditions of Ireland where martyrdom is creatively engaged as a cultural value. Here, colors are attached to the ‘kind’ of martyrdom a person willingly embraces: ‘green’ martyrs leave the comforts of home as hermits; ‘white’ martyrs dedicate their lives to God and service to others; blue martyrs dedicate themselves to fasting and other mortifications in penitential service. Passivity here is not limp, it is fully engaged with the present.

The goal of the interest group was to raise the profile of Disability Theology in a Catholic vein. The future is promising. Like other minoritized communities, a distinct theology has emerged from members of the CTSA, may the silence be broken and our voices celebrated.

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