

PUBLIC THEOLOGY – INTEREST GROUP

- Topic: Voting
- Conveners: Rosemary P. Carbine, Whittier College
David DeCosse, Santa Clara University
- Moderator: Rosemary P. Carbine, Whittier College
- Presenter: Nicholas Hayes-Mota, Santa Clara University
Ramon Luzarraga, Saint Martin’s University
Byron D. Wratee, Villanova University

This interest group facilitated a shared space for theologians to gather across diverse interdisciplinary fields and further develop the praxis of Catholic public theology in our time. To resonate thematically with this year’s convention and reflect theologically on the 2024 US presidential election and its multi-pronged threats to democracy, this year’s session addressed voting. Voting figures prominently in US Catholic public theology and political engagement. This session expanded on vibrant theological conversations sparked by recent US presidential elections and also aligned with the convention theme of baptism to focus on some salient theo-political intersections and implications about baptism, democracy, and voting, especially since 2025 marked the sixtieth anniversary of the Voting Rights Act. This session considered public theologies of voting in light of widespread voter suppression/restriction, contemporary social movements to reclaim political participation and voting rights, and voting trends among prominent ethnoracial, gender, and religious groups in the US electorate. After introductions to this group, the conveners, and the panelists, each panelist presented and the nearly fifty attendees enjoyed small group discussion, followed by general questions and discussion.

In “Forming the People: Towards a Baptismal Theology of Citizenship,” Nicholas Hayes-Mota elaborated a baptism-based view of citizenship by critically and constructively analyzing the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ (USCCB) document “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship” and the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) practices of faith-based community organizing. Hayes-Mota observed an overly ecclesiocentric, intellectualistic, and reductionistic voting-centric approach in the USCCB’s document. By contrast, the IAF’s practices of deliberative discernment in community of common action for the common good is grounded in a theological exercise of baptism. In Hayes-Mota’s view, the IAF offers a more robust and expansive theological vision and practice that forms both people and the people, i.e., a collective vision of empowerment, solidarity, and the common good that significantly parallels a synodal approach in the contemporary church.

In “Why Roman Catholics Cannot Vote for a Dictator (Including Aspirational Ones), Ever,” Ramon Luzarraga traced relevant historical examples of Catholic teachings, theologians, and groups to meaningfully meet the current moment of rising global authoritarianism. Synthesizing wide-ranging resources from Henri de Lubac, Pope Pius XI, and Catholic Alliance with as well as resistance to dictators like Spain’s Francisco Franco, among others, Luzarraga insightfully showed how the church’s entanglement in authoritarian power politics violates catholicity (by delegitimizing or instrumentalizing church leaders for totalitarian ends) and threatens civil society (by

limiting human rights to association and to participation in the common good). Drawing on these in-depth examples, Luzarraga argued that global church governance, missions, and education reinforce catholicity, the common good of the human family, and a faith-based cosmopolitanism in religio-political ways that condemn and counteract any resurging idolatry of nationalism.

In “One Baptism, One Vote: Public Theology and the Call to Black Political Participation,” Byron D. Wratee extended a womanist theology of survival and a positive quality of life in the wilderness to call for religio-political and social change that dignifies Black people and communities, too long divested of rights, family, and heritage in US democracy. Lifting up Black men’s lived experiences of intersectional injustices under systemic racism and other ideological social structures and stigmas, Wratee articulated a baptismal theology of democratic political participation based on the hollers or laments of Black men about their ambivalence with American politics and public life. Heeding these cries for change embodied by Marvin Gaye’s “Inner City Blues” and by Black men’s pushback against political scapegoating for election results, Wratee constructed a theo-ethic of voting as a sacred and political birthright that reclaims both humanity and political belonging, grounded in God’s pathos with a suffering world.

After the presentations concluded, the moderator encouraged attendees to gather in small group discussion about three questions: 1) Based on your perspectives and experiences, how do you think the Catholic Church could better form its members as citizens? 2) How much of our nation’s bout with illiberalism and slide toward authoritarianism is a structural problem with our polity or a character issue with citizens and who we elect to public office? 3) How do these papers speak to our present politically-charged moment of US authoritarianism, characterized by highly-militarized state surveillance and violence of immigration raids, detention, and deportation; white supremacist and fundamentalist ideologies that fuel harmful national budget proposals; and the dismantling of democratic institutions and practices in US government and higher education? How do these papers speak truth to power and also a prophetic word of hope in our time of political, social, economic, and educational turmoil? Groups engaged these questions in diverse and lively ways, then reconvened for an open-ended enriching discussion about several topics, including intersectional analyses; prophetic possibilities for reimagining the nation-state; discerning the Spirit in challenging times; and, increasing US secularity. The session concluded with gratitude and with general agreement that Public Theology should continue beyond this short-term group.

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