

THE ENDURING GIFT AND THEOLOGICAL CHALLENGE
OF JOHANN BAPTIST METZ – INTEREST GROUP

- Topic: One World, One Hope: Living with Hope Today Out of a Dangerous Memory
- Convener: J. Matthew Ashley, Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University
- Moderator: Julia Prinz, VDMF, Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University
- Presenters: Janice Thompson, King's College
Daniel Castillo, Loyola University of Maryland

This was the second session in the interest group that explores the legacy and ongoing relevance of Johann Baptist Metz and his innovative “new political theology.” Janice Thompson spoke first, on “Living as a Community of Hope in a Hope-Destroying World: Johann Baptist Metz and the German Church after Auschwitz.” Her subject was the 1975 statement by the Joint Synod of the Dioceses in the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany): *Unsere Hoffnung*. She commented both on the process that led to this synodal document and on its content, which was based on a draft prepared by Johann Baptist Metz. Regarding the process, Thompson noted that it had a number of features that we today associate with synodality. It was initiated in part because of concerns and interests of the laity in the West German church, and involved an extensive consultation of Catholics in Germany (some twenty-one million surveys were mailed out). Metz’s draft was accepted, with some minor revisions, by an overwhelming majority of the bishops (225 out of 267 voted to accept it). It began by asserting that the God in whom we believe is the God of “our hope,” and the “we” that hopes is the whole church, extending ecumenically beyond the Roman Catholic Church, and including those who have questions or objections about the church and/or have become marginal to it. The document evidenced a willingness to self-criticism. Because the God of “our hope” is a universal God of all the living and the dead, our hope must include all persons; this hope will not allow us to reconcile ourselves to suffering anywhere. The church failed in this regard when it came to the Jews who suffered and died during the Holocaust (or, to give it a specific geographical name that ties it to Germany: Auschwitz). Then followed the first official recognition of responsibility, and apology for the German church’s failures during the Holocaust. Finally, in a section that was particularly important for Metz, the document focused on the possibility of forgiveness of sin (both at the level of the individual and of the church), which requires that society and the church reject a tendency to defer guilt by minimizing it or blaming it on others.

Following this, Daniel Castillo spoke on “Renouncing the Glamour of Evil: Dangerous Memory in a Time of Politico–Ecological Emergency.” He started with the baptismal promise to reject the glamour of evil and refuse to be mastered by sin. He asked how it is that sin and evil can be experienced as alluring and glamorous, rather than horrific. Focusing specifically on political-ecological emergency, this question becomes that of how a colonial/neo-colonial “ordering” of our global house that maximizes extraction and aggrandizement of resources, doing incalculable damage, and then unequally distributes the precarities that come with this radical disruption/destabilization of our world, can be seen as glamorous. He outlines an

answer to this question based on Augustine's justifying of a localized evil by appeal to a broader, beautiful (and thus alluring) order and harmony. Thus, the "localized evils" (say, of deforestation or the murders of ecomartyrs such as Chico Mendes), are justified by an appeal to the allure of a global order being created by the growing reach of human science and the power of the neoliberal techno-economic regime. Metz's category of dangerous memory points to a way that this "enspelledness" of our minds and hearts by which we see what is horrific as alluring can be interrupted by remembering the suffering of those victimized by this "order and harmony." Castillo went on to argue that these memories are not enough to fully deglamorize evil, because even they can be denatured unless they are accompanied by and interwoven into a counter-narrative to the colonial metanarrative of progress through growing economic and technological power. Thus, he urged that greater attention be paid to Metz's category of dangerous narrative, moving beyond seeing it as simply a straightforward transcription of dangerous memory.

John Downey, who has written extensively on Metz and translated many of his works into English, then made a few remarks. He asserted that the best way to continue Metz's legacy is to develop his ideas further or better than he did. He suggested that four key themes in Metz's thought which can and should still be put in play are 1) his critique of cultural amnesia and the forgetfulness of suffering woven into our current political order, 2) the importance of questioning God, 3) the recognition that there is no suffering in the world that does not concern us, and 4) attention to suffering arises out of compassion and empowers efficacious solidarity with those who suffer.

J. MATTHEW ASHLEY

*Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University,
Berkeley, California*