

CTA Conference Report 2015:

Formation in Holiness: Virtue, Growth and the Spiritual Life

The 2015 Catholic Theological Association Annual Conference met at Durham from 7th–10th September.

Philip Endean SJ opened the conference by addressing ‘what matters most’, drawing upon a diverse range of resources from Gerard Manley Hopkins’ ‘The Wreck of the *Deutschland*’ to a recent GQ interview with Stephen Colbert. The experience of God in occasions of suffering, or the ability to christen one’s ‘wildworst Best’, parallels Ignatius’ conviction in the *Exercises* that since God is to be found in all human experience, the full range of resources in the human subject must be brought to bear in the encounter with Christ through the gospel. Both these are reflected in Rahner’s sense that theologians must relinquish the desire to define too precisely the relationship between God and the creature: to be creaturely is to be called to ‘what matters most’ –encounter with God– but also abidingly unable to grasp it.

Etienne Vetö CCN turned to pneumatology in order to explore some of the systematic questions at the root of the conference theme. Beginning with a scriptural survey of the role of the Holy Spirit in Christian prayer, Etienne moved on to draw out what this might mean for our understanding of the Holy Spirit, suggesting that breath (*ruah-pneuma*) offered us a helpful way of addressing the unique characteristics of the Spirit as divine person.

Fáinche Ryan’s paper the following morning explored the connection between priesthood and holiness, attending first to Jesus’ relationship to priesthood, before turning to explore what this might mean for our understanding of the priesthood of all believers and the exercise of ordained priesthood. This offered a hopeful vision for our shared ministry, although Fáinche pointed to previous CTA conferences which discussed similar ground as a note of caution.

Gregory Collins’ paper pursued questions around holiness by engaging a Byzantine thinker, Maximus the Confessor, on the subject of freedom. In contrast to the contemporary understanding of freedom as choice between alternatives, Maximus understands freedom as freedom *from* choice, and the transcending of the circumstances that demand it. True human freedom is attained by the soul’s exodus from disordered self-love, and its movement towards God.

Peter Tyler drew attention to another discipline with an interest in the processes of formation and growth, by exploring how the recent return of soul-language to psychotherapy is bringing the field closer to its own roots in the work of Freud and Jung, and closer to discussions within theology. At the same time as noting some of the advantages of this retrieval of soul-language, Peter was critical of some of the baggage that accompanies it, including the dualism that can creep in with soul language, and James Hillman’s penchant for Greek myth and polytheism.

Joris Geldhof offered his paper on liturgy. Rather than liturgy being shaped by scripture, he argued that the relationship works in the other direction, where liturgy becomes a place in which the spirituality of scripture is revealed. To do this he focused on the Liturgy of Hours, in contrast to the usual focus on Liturgy of the Word; the Hours offer an additional insight into the complex relationship between liturgy and scripture. Joris worked through his argument by using the insights of Jean Daniélou and a close reading of sections of the euchology, always emphasizing how changes in liturgy can offer insights back into scripture.

Alana Harris’ paper bridged history and spirituality by introducing Caryll Houselander (1901–54), a woman immensely influential in her own day through her spiritual writings, yet not usually counted among the prominent Catholic figures of the same period. Alana introduced us to her biography and the characteristic themes of her writings, foregrounding in particular the spirituality of ordinary life that emerges in her book about Mary, *The Reed of God*.

Mark Barrett’s paper examined a practice that has become understood as one of the defining characteristics of Benedictine prayer and spirituality: *lectio divina*. Tracing the rise in popularity of

lectio as a practice, Mark questioned the historical centrality of the practice, and in particular noted the propensity of its modern advocates for reviving it as a practice of reading, without situating it in any theology of reading, or any particular ecclesial context. Mark's reading session, which followed, led participants to engage with two texts by Enzo Bianchi that attempted to give some theological foundation for the practice of *lectio*.

Nicholas Austin's paper on the final morning of the conference brought to the foreground one of the topics of the conference that had been waiting in the wings –virtue. Turning first to Aquinas' account of virtue, he argued that it provides a good account of virtue as growing towards the image of God, but lacks much account of how graced growth in virtue happens in practice. Ignatius' insights on the discernment of spirits in his *Spiritual Exercises* provide us with helpful tools for engaging with and encouraging this graced growth in virtue, by returning our attention to the encounter with God as what matters most.

Gemma Simmonds' paper drew the conference to a close by engaging with contemporary discourse around spirituality. Although northern Europe shows a decline in religious forms of belonging, there is no shortage of people engaging with 'spirituality' or 'spiritualities', and a mind-body-spirit industry has grown up around this desire for spiritual experience. At the same time as asking critical questions of this industry, which at its worst can make spiritual experience a commodity, or offer people transformation without providing any resources for dealing with suffering, Gemma suggested that theologians needed to engage with this widespread desire for encounter with, and experience of God.

The conference was also enriched by a number of excellent short papers on topics ranging from Christian education to Meister Eckhart. Conference attendees were also grateful to Anna Rowlands for a briefing on the refugee crisis, and for her suggestions on the kind of support CTA members could helpfully offer to Catholic aid organizations working in this area.