Theology and Power: An Intercontinental Conversation

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Last July 19–20, 2013, the DaKaTeo (Catholic Theological Society of the Philippines) and the European Society in Catholic Theology, co-sponsored a symposium in Manila on “Theology and Power: An Intercontinental Conversation” as part of their participation in the three-year, global research project of INSeCT on “the nature, function and location of theology, with particular attention to the power of theology to overcome power abuse in Church and Society.”

The first half day symposium was held at the Loyola School of Theology, with three paper presenters: two from UK – Stephen Bullivant (St Mary’s University College), and Pia Matthews (St. Mary’s University College) and one from the Philippines, Mario Francisco (Loyola School of Theology).

The 2nd full day symposium was held at the St. Vincent School of Theology, with one paper presenter from Belgium, Machteld Reynaert (KU Leuven), and four from the Philippines – Ramon Echica (San Carlos Major Seminary), Dennis Gonzalez (St. Vincent School of Theology), Esmeralda Sanchez (University of Sto Tomas) and Randy Odchigue (Fr. Saturnino Urios University). A combined total of 150 participants participated in these two symposia.

The following were the themes highlighted in the talks:

The presentations of Francisco (“In But Not of the World: Filipino Christianity and its Powers”) and Odchigue (“Church Power and People Power: Hegemonies and Resistances”) highlight how an ecclesiology fusing Christian with national or ethnic identity can be a source of power. The Philippine Catholic Church, as the dominant religious group in the country, has wielded this power in the last century in favor or against certain state legislations such as; opposing the teaching of books written by nationalists that it regards as enemies, resisting the Filipinization of school personnel, supporting the legislation of religious instructions in public schools, and more recently, opposing the Reproductive Health Bill (now a law). In the latter

1 The theme of “sexual abuse” was not prominent in the essays from the DaKaTeo because in 2008, the Society already held a conference on “Sexual Violence Against Women” and released a statement “Act Justly, Love Tenderly, and Walk Humbly with your God!: A Plea for and in behalf of the Women-Victims of Sexual Abuse,” http://dakateo.webs.com/Dakateo%20Statements/SVAW-English-Final.pdf. The 3-volume publication on personal narratives of the victim/survivors, institutional narratives of those doing ministry with the victim/survivors, and the theological reflections, is still forthcoming.
case, some church leaders and supporters engaged in partisan politics by openly endorsing in the 2013 elections those they referred to as Team Buhay (Team Life) or supporters of the Church’s stance and campaigning against Team Patay (Team Death) or those in favor of the RH bill. It was also pointed out during the discussion of Sanchez’ paper (“El Shaddai: God Almighty”), that El Shaddai, an autochthonous Christian charismatic group, likewise exerts influence on their members to vote for certain political candidates.

Francisco underlines how the Church bolsters its arguments using the social imaginary of the Philippines as a Christian [Catholic] nation. This imaginary has been reinforced by the Vatican II image of the church as pilgrim people of God in the world. This generated the famous slogan during the Martial law period, “Para sa Diyos, para sa Bayan” (For God and country). Francisco ends with proposals on ways for Catholicism to reimagine “communion” apart from identification with the nation, but “one that still remains deeply immersed in but not tied to the world.” Among these is to recognize the existence and varying perspectives of other religious groups in the search for the common good.

Odchigue posits that the power of the Church is best used when it aligns itself with the discourse of the weak that subverts those who abuse power. Examples of this includes the first People Power revolution in 1986, when the institutional church which initially took the stance of critical collaboration with the Marcos dictatorship eventually allied itself with the various protest groups and movements culminating in the peaceful revolution. Another example is Cardinal Rosales’ support for the Sumilao farmers fighting for their certificate of land ownership in Bukidnon Mindanao.²

As with Francisco and Odchigue, Bullivant (“Vatican II and Abuses in the Church: 'A community composed of men' that is 'always in need of being purified' (Gaudium et Spes 1; Lumen Gentium 8’’) affirms that our self-understanding as church shapes how we deal with issues of power and its abuse. He asks whether the image of the church as “always in need of being purified” (LG8) and as a “community composed of men” (GS 1) might have changed the way we understand the sexual abuse crisis. While not downplaying the Catholic-specific reasons that may reinforce the problem of sexual abuses, Bullivant stresses that sexual abuse is not unique to the church; one finds similar responses as “negligence, mishandling, denial, cover-up,

turning a blind eye, blaming the victims, and ‘protecting reputations’ within the bigger society even where “… celibacy, clericalism, or this or that particular ecclesiology are wholly absent.” He argues that the Church needs to repent and be purified for reasons that “it shares with a great many other 'commun[ities] composed of men'.

Echica’s paper (“Elements in the Barrel that Produce Rotten Apples”) also relates to the sexual abuse crisis but this time focusing on the Church’s structural complicity with this violence. Drawing from studies in social psychology, particularly Philip Zimbardo’s Standford Prison Experiment and Sarah Milgram obedience experiment, he gleans common elements that make otherwise decent individuals abuse their authority: anonymity and distantiation, absolutization of authority, prestige of institutions involved, and the blame game. He argues that these structures are present as well within the Catholic Church and that recognizing this will be beneficial for the Church.

Gonzalez (“How Can Humility Tame Power and Prevent Its Ideological Entrapment?”), Reynaert (“A Kenotic Use of Power in Theology: Dangerous or Not?”), and Matthews (“Challenging Prometheus: A Theology of Disability”) focus on virtues exalted in our theological discourse and their ideological entrapments. Gonzalez deals with the power of humility which has been used ideologically to reinforce subservience and passivity among the oppressed. This is in stark contrast with the example of Jesus of Nazareth who was described as “meek and humble in heart” in the Bible but was at the same time not afraid to denounce the hypocritical actions of those in authority (Matthew 11:29; 23:3). Gonzalez further notes that the lack of transparency within the Church (e.g. in its finances, and disciplinary processes.) is a “structural flaw” that leads to abuse of power. Addressing this flaw is a way by which the Church can exercise “humility, tame power, and prevent the harmful ideological reduction of humility to submissiveness to the powerful.”

Similarly, Reynaert argues for a discipleship based on Jesus’ praxis, particularly his kenotic power. The notion of kenosis or the self-emptying of God can, like the virtue of humility, be used to reinforce abuse of power. Jesus’ kenosis though is a relinquishing of “hierarchical” power. In this light, Reynaert examines the role of the pastoral caregiver who seemingly is bereft of power in the kenotic service-oriented and self-sacrificing act of caregiving. Drawing from Michel Foucault’s concept of power, she argues that it is important to recognize the continued
presence of power even in such kenotic acts in the pastoral context in order to avoid abuse of power.

While Reynaert focuses on the power of the pastoral caregiver, Matthew shifts attention to persons with disabilities, traditionally regarded as “pastoral care receivers”. Power and the balance of power, she argues, is at the heart of medical and bioethics. Matthews questions their discourses that give primacy to autonomy and control, which is problematic for those who are severely disabled. People with disabilities, who appear to have no usefulness in society, challenge us instead to practice the virtues of solidarity, preferential option for the poor and justice.

To conclude, we borrow insights from the SOTER conference keynote speech of Agenor Brighetti on the nature, location and function of theology in the church and society. From a liberationist perspective, he highlights the plural nature of theology, its locus in the faith experience of Christian communities, and its function to proclaim a liberating message. Based on the papers presented, this very well captures the kind of theology that can facilitate the overcoming of abuse of power. First, on the plural nature of theology, Francisco emphasizes too the need for the Church, in its search for the common good, to engage in dialogue with other Christian and religious groups in the Philippines. Secondly, the “place” of theology/locus theologicus is the experience of Christian communities. This experience has to be further analyzed vis-à-vis the philosophical and social sciences (Echica) and the faith tradition (Bullivant, Gonzalez, Reynaert) from the optic of the poor. In looking at experience, Odchigue and Matthews stress too, the need for the Church to pay particular attention to the voices of the poor and the marginalized (e.g. landless farmers, the disabled). This is in view of thirdly, theology’s liberating function. Even virtues (Gonzalez, Matthews) and theological concepts (Reynaert) need to be de-ideologized from the perspective of those in the margins. Along this line, even as Pope Francis notes the importance of reading reality from various viewpoints, he emphasizes: “I am convinced of one thing: the great changes in history were realized when reality was seen not from the center but rather from the periphery….Being at the periphery helps to see and to understand better, to analyze reality more correctly, to shun centralism and ideological approaches.”

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Note: These articles plus additional essays solicited from Austria, USA, and the Philippines, will be published in an anthology – *Theology and Power: International Perspectives* – edited by the conference organizing team: Stephen Bullivant, Eric Marcelo Genilo, sj, Daniel Franklin Pilario, cm and Agnes M. Brazal.