NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://www.ncronline.org)

Emerging women theologians apply academic expertise to issues of justice

Jamie Manson | Jun. 19, 2013 Grace on the Margins

Perhaps one of the more exciting developments at the Catholic Theological Society of America is the ongoing push throughout its annual three-day conference to integrate the work of younger theologians with the voices of more seasoned academics.

Since there were more than 100 presentations at this year's convention, held June 6-9 in Miami, it was impossible to hear all of the contributions from the new generation of scholars. But as I made my way through the partitioned ballrooms of the hotel, I found the work of four emerging women theologians particularly compelling, especially for the ways in which they applied their academic expertise to some of our most pressing global issues of justice.

One of the finest intergenerational conversations occurred during a June 8 plenary session, when Natalia Imperatori-Lee, an associate professor at Manhattan College, responded to an address by Australian scholar and priest Ormond Rush.

Reflecting on Rush's point that the Second Vatican Council's pastoral and reform agenda was to ensure that the "face of the church would faithfully mirror the genuine face of God," Imperatori-Lee asked, "What are the venues for a face-to-face encounter between the hierarchy and the laity?'

An authentic face-to-face encounter must "include gestures of justice, generosity and sacrifice" and be divested of "prestige and power," Imperatori-Lee said. These postures have not always been present in an institutional church that "has turned away from the others in its midst, or worse, dismissed or erased other in totalizing, colonializing ways."

A Miami native of Cuban descent, Imperatori-Lee told her colleagues she has found some hope in the new pontificate, especially Pope Francis' gesture of putting his face quite literally at the feet of Muslim woman during a Holy Thursday foot-washing. "The posture and the positioning, the intimacy of that image and its radical nature, are for me what the council meant when it talked about reflecting the genuine face of God to the world," she said.

Echoing the council's acknowledgement that the face of the church "is not always resplendent with the light of Christ," Imperatori-Lee also asserted that the darker realities of the institutional church are "not erased by the face of the pope." "If anything," she concluded, "this pope might begin to highlight the ways in which we can face the sins of the church."

The effect the sins of the church, the state and the economy have had on women in the Americas was the focus of Nancy Pineda-Madrid's CTSA presentation on the rising tide of "feminicide," which Pineda-Madrid, an associate professor at the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry, defines as "the systematic assassination of women because they are women."

Arguing that these women are "a contemporary example of 'a crucified people,' " she challenged her colleagues to let theology "agitate and provoke us" and awaken us from "whatever slumber it is that keeps us from seeing the horror of the assassination of women."

A native of El Paso, Texas, Pineda-Madrid's scholarship has given special attention to the plight of Mexican women, especially in her book *Suffering and Salvation in Ciudad Juárez [1]*. Between 1993 and 2009, more than 800 females between the ages of 12 and 29 have been beaten, raped and murdered in the Mexican city. The violence arose as women began to leave their homes to work in manufacturing jobs and has been exacerbated by country's notorious drug cartels.

Adding to the tragedy, this ongoing atrocity has received little attention from the Mexican government or the Roman Catholic hierarchy.

"A great portion of humanity knows crucifixion as their historical reality," Pineda-Madrid said. "Our generation lives in a time of feminicide. This asks us not only to look carefully and closely at the relationship between women and men, between the poor and the wealthy, but to consider a revision of our Christian theology."

Further raising the profile of global justice issues at this year's conference was Meghan Clark, an assistant professor specializing in moral theology at St. John's University in Jamaica, N.Y. Clark presented a study of a partnership between two maternity wards, one in Cork, Ireland, and the other in Omdurman, Sudan.

Funded by Irish Aid, the Helping Babies Breathe initiative attempts to train Sudan's village midwives in neo-natal resuscitation techniques. Since 80 percent of births in Sudan do not take place in hospitals, the role of the midwife is essential in combating the infant mortality rate.

But rather than doing the teaching themselves, the Irish and American medical professionals invited a local midwife who was a doctoral candidate in infection control to be the instructor. Clark sees in this model an example of solidarity in action.

"Catholic social teaching is important in reminding us that development cannot be one-sided," said Clark, who is currently completing the book *The Vision of Catholic Social Thought: The Virtue of Solidarity and the Praxis of Human Rights*. For the last three years, Clark has served as a consultant on the domestic justice and human development committee of United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

"We are first and foremost united in one family," she continued. "Helping Babies Breathe was an example of making the training truly collaborative. Solidarity in global partnerships is built upon participation, subsidiarity and sustainability."

The sustainability of water has been a fundamental question for Christiana Peppard since her doctoral studies in theology, ethics and science at Yale University. Now an assistant professor at Fordham University, Peppard was this year's recipient of the Catherine Mowry LaCugna Award, given annually at the CTSA conference to a new scholar for the best academic essay in the field of theology within the Roman Catholic tradition.

Her essay, like her presentation at the convention, focused on fresh water and Catholic social teaching. And her forthcoming book, *Just Water: Theology, Ethics, and the Global Water Crisis*, will present her fullest treatment

of the topic yet.

While Peppard recognizes that most people do not typically associate Catholic theology with sustainability, she reminded her colleagues that Catholic social teaching calls water one of the "goods of the earth." For this reason, contributions from Catholic social thought "crucially augment the standard, impoverished theories of fresh water's value."

Peppard suggests that we develop a "hydrological hermeneutic" that "enables us to see that while oil and gas are central to contemporary existence, they are not essential in the way that water is."

Unlike fossil fuels, "there is no substitute for fresh water," she said, "either in principle or in practice."

"Fresh water is an embodied, ultimate and universal human need. It is the condition for life, economic development and civilization," Peppard continued. And, given its scarcity, more than any other element on earth, water "will shape patterns of power, privilege, and poverty on all levels of scale in the 21st century."

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her *NCR* columns have won numerous awards, most recently second prize for Commentary of the Year from Religion Newswriters (RNA).]

Editor's note: We can send you an email alert every time Jamie Manson's column, "Grace on the Margins," is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow directions: Email alert sign-up [2].

Source URL (retrieved on *2016-05-30 07:53*): http://www.ncronline.org/blogs/grace-margins/emerging-women-theologians-apply-academic-expertise-issues-justice

Links:
[1] http://store.fortresspress.com/store/productgroup/406/Suffering-and-Salvation-in-Ciudad-Ju-rez
[2] http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup