News
Spirituality



M. Shawn Copeland received the John Courtney Murray Award at this year's CTSA convention in Indianapolis. (Paul J. Schutz, Santa Clara University)



by Heidi Schlumpf

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @heidischlumpf

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

June 14, 2018

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

For the first time in the 46-year history of the Catholic Theological Society of America's highest award, an African American theologian has been honored for "distinguished theological achievement." Black and womanist theologian M. Shawn Copeland received the John Courtney Murray Award at this year's CTSA convention in Indianapolis.

Copeland was called "a ground-breaking pioneer in black Catholic theology" whose "pioneering and prophetic scholarship … confronts us with the uncomfortable truth of the cost of discipleship" by CTSA president Mary Hines, who presented the award at the June 9 banquet.

In accepting the award, Copeland said the award "is not just about me, it is about us; this is our story," as she named and praised the scholarship, advocacy and generosity of dozens of others, including James Cone, the founder of black theology who died in April.

"Honoring me also calls us to engage the work of scholars who, in response to the Incarnation of our God, have placed the life, dignity and flourishing of God's human creatures at the center of their intellectual praxis: theologians who insist that women's lives, differently-abled lives, migrant lives, refugee lives, queer lives, trafficked lives, persecuted lives, brown-and-red-and-yellow-and white-and, yes — black lives — all matter," she said.

Copeland is professor of systematic theology at Boston College, where she received her doctorate 27 years ago. She also has taught at St. Norbert College in DePere, Wisconsin; Yale University Divinity School in New Haven, Connecticut, Marquette University in Milwaukee, and the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University in Louisiana.

She was the first African American president of the CTSA and had previously received the Ann O'Hara Graff Memorial Award from the society's Women's Consultation in Constructive Theology.

Ever since her grandmother traced the sign of the cross over her as a baby, and a sixth-grade teacher planted the seed about studying theology, Copeland has been

on a path to share how theology can respond to suffering, especially suffering from persistent racism, sexism and heterosexism, Hines said.

Copeland noted that 45 years ago, the CTSA's first discussion of black theology included a report in which Edmundite Fr. Joseph Nearon said that "as I look around at this convention, I note that I am the field this morning."

"Because of grace gifting our small corner of God's wide world … this evening I can report: 'I am *not* the field,' " Copeland said. Today, black theology is "authentically black and truly Catholic," she said.



M. Shawn Copeland and St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson, a past recipient of the John Courtney Murray Award (Paul J. Schutz, Santa Clara University)

Yet she challenged the CTSA members to continue to recruit and train black Catholic scholars for theological studies. "We must seize leadership in this endeavor for the good of our country, for the good of our church and for the greater honor and glory of God," she said.

Copeland was one of three feminist theologians honored by theological groups in early June.

Latina theologian Nancy Pineda-Madrid received this year's Ann O'Hara Graff Memorial Award, which recognizes a theologian whose accomplishments include womanist, feminist or other "woman-defined" scholarship as well as liberating action on behalf of women in the church or broader community.

Pineda-Madrid was praised for her scholarship, her clear and prophetic voice, and her many ministries with and on behalf of women, specifically her ground-breaking work on women's suffering and ritualistic killing in Ciudad Juárez on the Mexican border.

"She lifts up the lowly, empowering those who are on the margins of our society, especially those who are most vulnerable to abuse and violence," said Nichole Flores, assistant professor of religious studies at University of Virginia and a former student of Pineda-Madrid.

Her work demonstrates that "we must attend to those whose voices have been silenced. She lifts up these voices, calling our entire discipline to do the same," Flores said.

In accepting the award, Pineda-Madrid, a former president of the Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the United States (ACHTUS), noted that women theologians must "cross the border" and engage with groups of Latin American theologians.

Advertisement



Nancy Pineda-Madrid received this year's Ann O'Hara Graff Memorial Award at this year's CTSA convention in Indianapolis. (Paul J. Schutz, Santa Clara University)

"I am convinced, now more than ever — in the age of Trump — that the border, broadly understood, must command greater attention in our theological consciousness," she said, noting that even the Catholic Theological Society of America's name is one the organization has "yet to grow into."

"America does not end at our southern border, it extends all the way down to the Tierra del Fuego" in Argentina, she said.

Pineda-Madrid also called violence against women — including femicide, sex trafficking, domestic violence, and rape as a weapon of war — "one of the most urgent challenges to the credibility of theology in our time."

Flores also praised Pineda-Madrid for encouraging theologians to ask tough questions and to fight in the face of adversity. "She has taught us to defend what we know to be true, beautiful, and just," Flores said. "She has helped us find roots in a church, an academy, and a society where we can feel rootless."

A week earlier, another group of Catholic theologians, the College Theology Society, also recognized a feminist theologian with its Presidential Award.

St. Joseph Sr. Anne Clifford, professor of religious studies and philosophy at Iowa State University in Ames, was honored for her service to the society and profession, "and for bringing science, theology and lived experiences into greater dialogue," said CTS president Franciscan Sr. Shannon Schrein, in presenting the award June 2 in St. Paul, Minnesota.

[Heidi Schlumpf is NCR national correspondent. Her email address is hschlumpf@ncronline.org. Follow her on Twitter @HeidiSchlumpf.]