News

An older Black woman with blue streaksin her hair speaks at a podium covered in a brightly c

M. Shawn Copeland, retired theology professor at Boston College, gives a lecture titled "#BlackLivesMatter as Public Theology" Oct. 7, 2021, at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana during the 31st annual meeting of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium. (CNS photo/Matt Cashore, courtesy University of Notre Dame)

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Political theology, centered in the person of Christ, can spark the "renewal of common life," said Catholic theologian M. Shawn Copeland during a Feb. 15 presentation at Villanova University where she received its prestigious Civitas Dei Medal.

Villanova's Civitas Dei Medal honors Catholics who have made outstanding contributions to Catholic intellectual tradition. Copeland is the first Black Catholic the university has honored with the medal since its inception in 2012.

A former professor of systematic theology at Boston College, Copeland has written several books, including "Knowing Christ Crucified: The Witness of African American Religious Experience." She was the first African American president of the Catholic

Theological Society of America, has taught at numerous colleges and universities, and currently holds the Vincentian Chair of Social Justice at St. John's University in New York.

With the medal's name derived from the Latin title of St. Augustine of Hippo's "The City of God," Copeland -- who received a standing ovation from audience members -- reflected on political theology, which she described as an approach "oriented toward helping the human person in the struggle to become fully human" amid "the demands and joys of common human living."

Copeland said her work is rooted "at the foot of the cross of the crucified Jew, Jesus of Nazareth," and "grounded in (the) desire … of heart and soul, mind and strength to follow him."

Seeing Jesus Christ in "the crucifixions of those children, youth, women and men whom Jesus calls members of his family (has) never been more necessary (and) more urgent," said Copeland.

The "specter (of slavery) lingers" throughout the nation, said Copeland, citing "the world's … highest rates of incarceration, gross poverty in (minority) and poor white communities, (and) raw and unconcealed domination, made manifest in the extrajudicial killings of Black and brown children, youth, women and men."

While "structural historical amnesia" seeks to dismiss atrocities committed against Indigenous and Black peoples, as well as immigrants and women, Christians are "obliged to remember" by virtue of their baptism, said Copeland.

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"We are marked with a sign that neither can be erased nor easily forgotten," she said. "The cross of the crucified Jew, traced on our bodies at baptism, initiates us into a promise of new life, and reminds us of our … irrevocable relatedness to all creatures in the here and now, through and in (Christ's) person and name."

That awareness directs political theology to focus not on abstractions, but on persons who are "flesh and blood," and who "suffer crimes and sins against the other," such as violence, oppression and injustice, Copeland said. "God, in persons, is offended. These are sins against the divine image and each human creature."

Through that lens, political theologians can partner with experts from other disciplines to address "problems that tend to reduce human persons to statistics," such as poverty and ecological disasters, while "(guarding) the image of God" in each individual, said Copeland.

She also stressed the need for intercultural dialogue and a spirit-filled, all-encompassing solidarity that "mobilizes us in resistance and action for justice."

In addition, "we must till, nurture and water the fragile soil of our souls with prayer, fasting, sacrifice, intentional relinquishment … and, for many of us, Eucharist."

Another critical task for political theologians is "(learning) to lament," which is "both a form of prayer and a practice of justice," said Copeland. "Lament not only dialogues, but also boxes, with God. … Lament takes seriously God's compassionate love and care in the midst of suffering and privation."

Political theology must also be infused with love, which "answers in concrete, practical action the question, 'Who is my neighbor?'" said Copeland. "The neighbor is whoever is dismissed and discarded. ... whoever is weak, forgotten, excluded, victimized … (and) made to feel that his or her life … does not matter in the modern global design. These are the very little ones whom the Holy Three (Trinity) cherishes and embraces as their own."

Such theological reorientation will help "in healing and creating relations in history and society," said Copeland. "We want to coax forward a different sociality, (one) that will flourish in a different kind of city."