Opinion
Guest Voices



Kathleen Dorsey Bellow of Xavier University (left) and Dorsey Bellow, a Baltimore native, led a special session titled "Baltimore and the Black Catholic Experience" during the Catholic Theological Society of America's annual convention, held June 13-16 in Baltimore. (Courtesy of Paul Schultz)



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Written in 1885, the Baltimore Catechism had its pilgrim eyes fixed on the world beyond: To be saved meant that the individual Catholic could "attain the supernatural happiness of heaven."

Meeting June 13-16 in Baltimore at its annual convention, the Catholic Theological Society of America brought the matter of salvation firmly back to earth.

Offering a vibrant range of papers on the theme of "social salvation," more than 360 Catholic theologians explored what generations formed by the Baltimore Catechism and American individualism have often left out: that "we are not saved alone; our salvation is interrelated with the salvation of others," as incoming president Nancy Pineda-Madrid put it.

But this creative exploration occurred amid a disturbing fact: The number of academic jobs in theology is falling fast.



The Catholic Theological Society of America awarded the John Courtney Murray Award, its highest honor, to Dominican Sr. Mary Catherine Hilkert, professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame. (Courtesy of Paul Schultz)

The theological implications for understanding salvation in a social key run far and wide. By connecting "salvation" and the "social," we can see more clearly what from a Catholic perspective is obviously the case: that, as Pope Francis said in Laudato Si' : "The human person grows more, matures more and is sanctified more to the extent that he or she enters into relationships, going out from themselves to live in communion with God, with others and with all creatures."

Social salvation in the global present and theological past

In the 20th century, messianic totalitarian dictatorships mowed down millions in a perverse this-worldly search for social salvation represented by the dreams of a 1,000-year Reich and a classless society of communism. At the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church decried such totalitarian barbarism but also affirmed a connection between doing justice in this world and a final, salvific triumph of the kingdom of God. In the careful words of Gaudium et spes, the council fathers said: "While earthly progress must be carefully distinguished from the growth of Christ's kingdom, to the extent that the former can contribute to the better ordering of human society, it is of vital concern to the Kingdom of God."

Today the challenge for the idea of social salvation is sharply different. A messianic capitalism roams the globe, isolating individuals in a desperate market logic, extracting resources beyond the reach of regulation, and intensifying the individualism that has always resisted the idea of the social. Meanwhile, perversions of social salvation have taken new, collective shape in authoritarian nationalisms — think Donald Trump, Narendra Modi, Vladimir Putin — that use religion to create a redeemed, politicized people at the expense of excluded, often racialized others.

The challenge of context is one thing. The resources about salvation in the long history of the theological tradition are another. Two key points from that past help to understand the conversation at the convention. One is that the deepest vein in the tradition has always affirmed the social nature of salvation. The Hebrew Scriptures speak of God saving the people of Israel as such in history and at the end of time. The synodal turn in Catholicism is a recovery of this tradition as well.

The other point is that the tradition includes many concepts, symbols and stories to articulate the saving mystery that God in Christ and through the Spirit offers a cosmic power capable of healing sin and death. Parish homilies may default to discussions of salvation that are exclusively personal, focused on Christ's death as satisfaction for one's sins, and concerned only with the afterlife. Whatever consolation to believers such a view of salvation brings, it is essential to note: Other options abound.



Dominican Fr. Carlos Mendoza-Álvarez, professor of theology at Boston College, attends Mass during the Catholic Theological Society of America's annual convention, held June 13-16 in Baltimore. Mendoza-Álvarez presented "Social Salvation as Re-existence" during the convention. (Courtesy of Paul Schultz)

Social salvation and the borderlands

For Pineda-Madrid, the Chilton Chair of Catholic Theology at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, the appeal of the idea of social salvation emerged from her years growing up in the borderlands of El Paso and Ciudad Juarez (the incoming CTSA president chooses the convention's theme). Whatever degree of private sin there was, the public nature of evil cried out for divine healing. She recalled: "I was surrounded by extreme contrasts of wealth and poverty, by tenacious forms of extreme and cruel violence, and by an unavoidable actuality of the tragic. I was confronted by the massive contrast between the good that God wills for the world, and the reality of evil's persistent presence in the world."

The notion that "our salvation is interrelated with the salvation of others" prompted Pineda-Madrid to give central place in the convention to the often-excluded stories of African American Catholics. In April, the Archdiocese of Baltimore announced the proposed closing of 40 of the 61 parishes in the archdiocese (with a quarter of those slated for closure serving the Black Catholic community). Baltimore is 60%African American. From the Inner Harbor to Fells Point along the waterfront across from the convention hotel, enslaved people were once bought and sold amid cultured Catholic indifference.

To highlight such past and present challenges to being "saved together," the convention featured a pre-convention outing to meet in the city with the Black Church Food Security Network and an invited special session on "Baltimore and the Black Catholic Experience."

To highlight the salvific dimension of solidarity — salvific insofar as people unite for the sake of seeking the good — the convention for the first time featured three sessions in which Black, Asian and Latinx groups of theologians met together.

Images and ideas of social salvation

Images and ideas of social salvation abounded in convention presentations. Boston College theologian and Dominican Fr. Carlos Mendoza-Álvarez argued that we can find the meaning of social salvation if we look to the "combative hope" of the "disinherited of the Earth." Even then, though, we must be wary of assuming salvation has nothing to do with why those living in the peripheries are disinherited in the first place. "To think of social salvation simply as a spiritual healing of social polarization," Mendoza-Álvarez said, "without dismantling the asymmetries of power would only maintain the objective conditions of evil in the world."

For centuries, theologians have reflected on the degree to which the power of salvation is already present; or about to come; or a matter of the end of time. Susan Abraham, dean of the Pacific School of Religion, appealed to such concerns about sacred time in light of post-colonial, anti-colonial and anti-racist critiques. She argued that social salvation can best be understood as "a negotiation of temporal imaginations about the past and future to speak prophetically and critically to the present time."

The syncretic nature of Catholic theology was on display in presentations that looked to other religious traditions for resources in reimagining social salvation for today.

Katie Mahowski Mylroie from Boston College reread the Last Judgment text from the Gospel of Matthew ("When I was hungry, you gave me food …") in light of the Hindu school of Advaita Vedanta to explore the idea of extending salvation to persons and all beings. Bede Benjamin Bidlack of St. Anselm College turned to medieval Daoism and its notions of a "flow of love" to reimagine the Catholic understanding of universal salvation

Vince Miller, Gudorf Chair at the University of Dayton, painted a profoundly compelling picture of the way that our very imagination about the need for social salvation is stifled at every turn by the apparently seamless workings of a "frictionless" global economy. In the background, the political economy of our world does now what it has done for hundreds of years: extract what it needs to serve the greed that keeps the whole process going and satisfy our consumer preferences at the same time, too. We need to find ways to step outside the insidious ease of this process to find places of "friction" where our favorite gadgets may not work as well but where we might rediscover the capacity for love and solidarity and reverence for the earth.



Susan Abraham, dean of the Pacific School of Religion, presented "Saving (Catholic) HigherEducation" at the Catholic Theological Society of America's annual convention in Baltimore. Respondent Tracy Sayuki Tiemeyer of Loyola Marymount University is

at right. (Courtesy of Paul Schultz)

Social salvation and the Catholic theological academy

At the convention, the society awarded the John Courtney Murray Award, its highest honor, to Dominican Sr. Mary Catherine Hilkert, professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame. Hilkert has won renown for such works as *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (1997); *Speaking with Authority: Catherine of Siena and the Voices of Women Today* (2008); and A *Time to Keep Silence and a Time to Speak* (2023). The citation for the honor noted: "Her work remains incomparable in contemporary Catholic homiletic scholarship." In receiving the award, Hilkert said that "all of my best insights have come from my students' questions." A winner of teaching awards at Notre Dame, she was, delightfully, surrounded on stage by students past and present.

Other convention award winners included C. Vanessa White, associate professor of spirituality and ministry at the Catholic Theological Union and the winner of Catholic Theological Society of America's first-ever Distinguished Scholar-Leader Award from the Committee on Underrepresented Ethnic and Racial Groups. The honor is given to "highlight the contributions of under-recognized teacher-scholars, noting their work as a gift to the wider academy and Church."

Lisa Cahill, J. Donald Monan Professor at Boston College, won the Ann O'Hara Graff Memorial Award in recognition of "woman-defined scholarship, and liberating action on behalf of women in the church and/or the broader community." Professor Michael Grigoni of Wake Forest University was given the Catherine Mowry LaCugna Award for best essay by a young scholar for his work called "The Christian Handgun Owner and Just War."

At the annual business meeting, Catherine Clifford, professor of theology at St. Paul University in Ottawa, was elected incoming vice president. Her election creates an unprecedented string of successive CTSA leadership by four women: Kristin Heyer, professor at Boston College and the outgoing president, Pineda-Madrid, Abraham, and Clifford. Two younger members of the society — Laurie Johnston of Emmanuel College and Franciscan Fr. Daniel Horan, of St. Mary's College — were elected to the board of directors.

The awards and elections signaled significant social shifts in the CTSA: Theological voices of women, the underrepresented and the next generation all found seats at the tables of recognition and governance. But the hope stirred by such changes in representation shared an anxious space with the concern caused by the increasing loss of theology jobs.

Small, mission-driven Catholic colleges and universities have in recent years cut faculty positions in theology and whole theology departments. Even schools that have retained such faculty have offered less financial support to attend conventions like CTSA. Hard numbers presented at the convention business meeting reflect the changes: Membership in the society is down 14% and revenue from membership has fallen 30%. In light of such changes and of the cost for members to travel, members approved a proposal to make the annual convention virtual every fourth year (beginning in 2028).

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Social salvation and the social location of theologians

CTSA looks ahead to its 100th anniversary in 2045 and it's hard to say how the changes in the social location in which theologians work will affect the kind of theology that they do. Pineda-Madrid noted of such a future for theology in North America: "We need to step inside of a new social imaginary."

But it's clear, too, that there's no turning back from doing theology in the key of social salvation. The question going forward will be how.

In her homily at the convention's June 15 vigil Mass, outgoing president Heyer sounded a hopeful note appropriate to such changing, charged, humble times. The reign of God — the ultimate image of social salvation — is like a seed that grows in ways that neither theologians nor anyone else may know too much about. But perhaps in the end, Heyer said, such knowing is not as important for theologians as surrendering to the summons "to cooperate with the extravagant, subversive abundance God sows in our shared lives every day."

The Mass ended with a rousing recessional that rose to the high roof of St. Vincent de Paul Church, built in 1841 and slated for closing by the archdiocese. Then the theologians who had packed the old pews headed together back to the hotel amid

the sadness of the old, beautiful church closing and the joy of a lovely June night.