

Conclusion: Dissent in the Roman Catholic Church: A Response

The contributions to this roundtable weave a rich tapestry of dissent in the Roman Catholic Church. Together, they expose some of the divergent voices within the church—voices that resist easy reconciliation and unification. Dissent, this roundtable shows, takes many forms; it can be directed ad intra (Willard) or ad extra (Gonzalez Maldonado), it can be geared toward the justification of hegemonic structures (Slattery) or aim at their subversion (Steidl). Moreover, these contributions do not just highlight the multiplicity of voices within the church. Indeed, each of them points to conflict and contestation between the diverse Catholicisms they discuss: each of these sometimes-contradictory Catholicisms claims to be authentically and normatively Catholic. This indicates that a discourse about plurality within the church is at the same time a discourse about the struggle for sovereignty of interpretation over the church. Further, the contributions also show that these contestations over the right to define orthodoxy take place under asymmetrical relations of authority and power. The struggle over right belief and right practice is first and foremost a struggle over who has a voice to define Catholic orthodoxy in the first place—who can participate, from which position, in this struggle? Ultimately, therefore, this roundtable demonstrates that questions of normativity by no means become arbitrary or sidelined once we reveal the silent and silenced voices underneath the established master narrative of the church about itself as one and stable. Yet, at the same time, it also becomes obvious that established theological approaches to this inner-ecclesial plurality no longer hold. The dominant theological readings of Catholic tradition have always reckoned with a history of plural, deviant Catholicisms, but they have subjected this inner-ecclesial plurality to the theological ideal and a historical construction of unity and consensus. However, as Gaillardetz and Slattery point out, this narrative of unity has lost both its innocence and its self-evidence as the only legitimate framework for organizing the “raw material” of Catholic tradition. Rereadings of church history through the lens of power-critical studies make visible that Catholic tradition, too, is a power/knowledge regime. They reveal that orthodoxy is, in a literal sense, “heresy”: it takes its shape through epistemopolitical choices (ἀρεσις); it is forged through the exclusion of alternative theological

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narratives.⁷³ Where do we stand after this destabilization of tradition, after this loss of innocence? Once stability and consensus have been problematized as the normative organizing principles of Catholic tradition, how else should we think of the church? *Can we develop alternative models that take conflict and contestation into account as constitutive moments in our understanding of the church, rather than an afterthought to be eradicated?*

This roundtable offers trajectories for such a renewed ecclesiology. A starting point can be found in an observation shared by all the panelists: each in their own way demonstrates that inner-ecclesial conflicts cannot be addressed in isolation from larger issues of social justice. Gonzalez Maldonado reports about ecclesial resistance to neocolonial structures of exploitation, but also reminds us of a history of ecclesial complicity in imperialism; Slattery and Steidl discuss inner-ecclesial conflicts over the church's entanglements in racist systems; Willard analyzes the toppling of ecclesial hierarchy in the Archdiocese of Boston, in response to a system of abuse that rests on patriarchal structures.⁷⁴ These case studies show that inner-ecclesial conflicts emerge where and when hegemonic hierarchies of political power, unequal distribution of resources and exclusionary patterns of participation in society, come under scrutiny. Brad Hinze introduces theoretical frameworks for a reflection of such negotiations from the perspective of political philosophy, which use the concept of dissent to study the intimate connections between the distribution of power and the production of knowledge in society. They frame "dissent" as a reorganization of dominant discourses and thus imbue it with a liberative dimension.⁷⁵

⁷³ The relevant bibliography is by now extensive, and I will not attempt to provide a comprehensive list. (Rather random) examples for power-critical analyses of the pre-Constantinian era are Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Robert M. Royalty, *The Origin of Heresy: A History of Discourse in Second Temple Judaism and Early Christianity* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Virginia Burrus, *The Making of a Heretic: Gender, Authority, and the Priscillianist Controversy* (Berkeley: University of California, 1995); Rebecca Lyman, "Hellenism and Heresy," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11, no. 2 (2003), 209–222; Eduard Iricinschi and Holger M. Zellentin, eds., *Heresy and Identity in Late Antiquity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008).

⁷⁴ Cf. Marie Keenan, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church: Gender, Power, and Organizational Culture* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁷⁵ Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London and New York: Continuum, 2010); Judith Butler, "Critique, Dissent, Disciplinary," in *Conceptions of Critique in Modern and Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. Professor K. de Boer et al. (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 10–29.

Gaillardetz' discussion of "pastoral magisterium," in turn, offers a distinctly *theological* framework for grasping the normative relevance of these contestations around social justice for the teaching of the church: Vatican II's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church (Gaudium et Spes)* refers to these conflicts as the "signs of the times" and states that they are of highest theological authority for ecclesial theology; they point to specific discourses in a particular context in which human dignity is at stake, and GS makes the far-reaching argument that the teaching of the church emerges from its advocacy for human dignity in these specific discourses.⁷⁶ *In the process of giving witness to the gospel as the hope for the dignity of all human beings, the church finds adequate language for its proclamation. The dogma of the church is pastoral.*⁷⁷ Because its advocacy for human dignity is of such constitutive importance for the theology of the church, we can make the argument that, according to GS, ecclesial teaching develops in a twofold dissent: first, the *raison d'être* of the church is to proclaim the gospel where human dignity is in danger of being violated (GS §§1–3). Its foundational task in giving witness to the gospel is to dissent from the violation of human dignity. Second, in this advocacy for human dignity in the name of the gospel, the church continues to discern new languages for the gospel (GS §11); the pastoral magisterium therefore also entails a stance of double dissent from established church teaching: in order to stay true to the gospel, the church has to dissent from an immunization of doctrine against new formulations, and it has to dissent from formulations of doctrine that turn out to be violations of human dignity themselves. Within the framework of the pastoral magisterium, dissent thus becomes a criterion for orthodoxy in the church; dissent, as it were, becomes a *nota ecclesiae*.

This normative understanding of dissent, of course, involves a major ecclesiological risk, especially if we resist the temptation to subject instances of dissent to a unilinear narrative, according to which the deposit of faith unfolds organically in the church. When we reconceive of dissent as a criterion of orthodoxy, such a teleological, essentialist framework will be replaced by a nonfoundational epistemology: when the teaching of the church takes its shape in dissent from violations of human dignity, both outside and inside the

⁷⁶ Pope Paul VI, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*, December 7, 1965, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

⁷⁷ In his commentary on *Gaudium et Spes*, Hans-Joachim Sander has developed a strong argument for this reading of the document. See Hans-Joachim Sander, "Theologischer Kommentar zur Pastoralen Konstitution über die Kirche," in *Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil*, ed. Peter Hünemann, Bernd J. Hilberath, and Guido Bausenhardt (Freiburg and Basel: Herder, 2009), 581–886.

church, then its doctrine does not have one clear and absolute origin but has always already been dependent on other, secular discourses, and it is fundamentally incomplete and open. The church then is there where there is dissent from oppressive exclusions. Dissent as a *nota ecclesiae* realigns the boundaries of the established church, and it makes the church a preliminary and unstable entity.

Steidl addresses this ecclesiological risk when he asks about the sincerity of the church affiliation of the members of Católicos Por La Raza. Was their fight for racial justice an authentic expression of their faith? Ultimately, he answers this question in the negative. For him, using the church as “a mere instrument to advance the Chicano civil rights agenda” falls short of the established criteria of church membership.⁷⁸ Here, the boundaries of the established church are the normative definitions of orthodox belief and practice, even if they are perceived to be in conflict with the protection of the dignity of all human beings. For Willard and Slattery, the definitions of the Catholic Church are less clear. Willard puts a spotlight on the ecclesiality of those who decide to stand outside or on the threshold of the Catholic Church. Slattery calls for a reorganization and “fraction” of church history; in order to reclaim the holiness of the church, he blurs its established boundaries. Once we shift our ecclesiological focus from preestablished narratives of ecclesial unity and stability to dissent from oppression as the defining characteristic of the church, ecclesiological boundaries have to be recalibrated. It can no longer be taken for granted that the church, in its established form, is the advocate for human dignity (and then perhaps admit that sometimes it has fallen short of it). Instead, this criterion gives us a radically new lens for looking for the church, in unexpected ways and places.

In short, this roundtable shows that a reflection on dissent in the Roman Catholic Church cannot be limited to differentiations between fallible and

⁷⁸ See Jason Steidl, in an earlier, longer version of his contribution to this roundtable: “After the Christmas Eve action, however, CPLR’s leadership became more concerned with legal defense than continuing protest. Although they organized one more protest, in which CPLR members symbolically burned their baptismal certificates, they would never reach the height of infamy that they achieved that Christmas Eve. In fact, most CPLR members would never return to the Church again. After the fallout from the protest, they believed the Church was more an obstacle for Chicano civil rights than a resource. Some, such as leader Richard Cruz, gave up their faith entirely. This begs the question—which cannot be answered—about the sincerity of their relationship to the church in the first place. Were they really concerned about the church for the church’s sake, or was the ecclesial body a mere instrument to advance the Chicano civil rights agenda?”

infallible statements, and a delineation of definite teaching. Instead, we can read its case studies of dissent such that it destabilizes our very understanding of the church.

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