

## Symposium seen as possible start of bishop-theologian dialogue

Jerry Filteau | Oct. 10, 2011

WASHINGTON -- After participating in a three-day national symposium on "Intellectual Tasks of the New Evangelization," several young theologians told NCR by phone or e-mail that it served as a possibly fruitful start, but only a start, for more dialogue between them and U.S. bishops.

"My experience of the symposium reinforces my belief that bishops and theologians need to continually find ways to be in constructive dialogue with each other," said Amanda Osheim, an assistant professor of practical theology at Loras College in Dubuque, Iowa.

"I found the conference to be fruitful and especially enjoyed meeting other pre-tenure theologians," said Emily Reimer-Barry, an assistant professor of theology and religious studies at the University of San Diego. She added, however, "I wish there had been more opportunities for dialogue between the bishops, senior faculty and pre-tenure participants."

Apart from the featured speakers and panelists, all the invitation-only symposium participants were faculty members who just recently began teaching theology at Catholic colleges or universities across the country and have not yet received academic tenure. Of the 54 participants, 50 had received their doctoral degrees within the past five years. The remaining four had obtained their doctorates between 2001 and 2005.

The symposium, held Sept. 15-17 at the Washington Court Hotel here, was initiated by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Doctrine and cosponsored by The Catholic University of America's School of Theology and Religious Studies. It had two main goals:

- To initiate better understanding and collaboration between bishops and an emerging new generation of professional theologians;
- To explore the role theologians have in contributing to what Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI have termed the "new evangelization."
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The term applies not just to the church's mission of preaching the Gospel anew in all cultures, but especially in traditionally Christian countries that have become increasingly secular, where many who were raised Christian have drifted away from the faith.

"The new evangelization is not going to take place in an intellectual vacuum," Capuchin Fr. Thomas Weinandy, executive director of the bishops' Secretariat for Doctrine, said in opening remarks Sept. 15. "Part of our vocation [as theologians] is to pass on and defend the faith of the church."

He said Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington had proposed the idea of a symposium for young theologians because "the bishops wanted to build up a relationship" with those who will be "the future of theology in the

American church.?

The first keynote speaker, Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, a patristics scholar, cited examples of how early church theologians addressed issues of their culture to witness to the Gospel as providing guidance in meeting similar challenges in the 21st century.

In today's world "you have the expertise to unpack the beauty of the face of God in Christ," he said.

DiNardo said part of the task of teaching theology to undergraduates in colleges and universities today is, unfortunately, being a catechist as well. Catholic college students today "want to learn, but they are catechetically innocent," he said.

The main talk the next day was by Archbishop J. Augustine Di Noia, a U.S. Dominican theologian who formerly headed the U.S. bishops' doctrine office and is now secretary of the Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments.

He described theology as "a universal discipline" and urged participants to "unapologetically affirm that theology depends on a higher science" -- the *scientia Dei*, or God's own knowledge. Theology, understood classically as the *scientia divina*, or human participation in the knowledge of God, depends on what God has revealed of himself, he said.

He commented that "one of the biggest challenges" facing theologians in the church today is the "internal secularization" of Catholics.

John Cavadini, director of the Institute for Church Life at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, argued for development of "a renewed apologetics, appropriate for the new evangelization."

Asking what is at the heart of the Christian message that has the power and credibility to attract, he suggested that it is found in St. John's claim, "God is love" -- a theme Pope Benedict explored at length in his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*.

"Love is not an instrument to be used in persuasion or in defense of Christian claims, but rather it is the defense, the persuasiveness. It is intrinsically credible," he said.

A third of the young theologians at the meeting were women. Where such a gathering 40 years ago would have featured a sea of Roman collars with only a small scattering of lay men or women, only five of the 54 young theologian participants at September's symposium were priests.

"This weekend for me was inspiring," said Ryan Topping, the only Canadian in the group -- he was teaching at Walsh University in North Canton, Ohio, last spring when the invitations went out to Catholic theology faculties across the country.

Now visiting professor at St. Thomas University in Fredericton, New Brunswick, Topping said, "It was encouraging to be in the presence of leaders -- lay and ordained -- who called us to return with confidence to the sources of our faith."

Christie Billups, an assistant professor of theology at Lewis University in Romeoville, Ill., said she came away from the symposium "with very mixed feelings."

She said she appreciated "the deep sincerity of the cardinals [Wuerl and Di Nardo] who called the meeting and their desire to do something positive."

“But I think there were a number of things that they did not accomplish that are absolutely necessary for what they are setting out to do,” she added. “One of those would be really, truly welcoming the voices of the theologians. ... If they’re going to build a bridge, they need to make the forum open enough -- and safe enough, frankly -- for theologians of all stripes and perspectives to say what they truly think and feel. And I don’t believe that that happened.”

“I found it interesting that Archbishop DiNoia was under the impression that he was ‘speaking to the choir,’ that all the young theologians there basically shared his views of what current trends in theology are harmful and in need of correction, she said.

She said her own impression was that about “two-thirds to three-fourths” of those attending probably would fit that description, but she and a handful of others would not.

Osheim said the symposium highlighted “the great need to think creatively and critically about both the intellectual and contextual realities that influence the Gospel’s reception.”

She thought, however, that “the symposium could have been less didactic ... and more constructive instead. The opportunity for collaborative and constructive conversation among theologians and bishops with regard to the new evangelization was not fully realized.”

Reimer-Barry echoed that view, saying the aim of building theologian-bishop relationships “is a noble goal. But I wish the structure of the conference had encouraged more of this kind of engagement. It would have been nice if there had been time built into the program for table discussions, for example, or if the bishops and senior faculty speakers had spread out at various tables to mingle with the junior faculty.”

She said in her conversations with other young theologians, “I found that we had much in common. We all have a love for the church and each person I met described his or her teaching with enthusiasm and passion.”

Topping said in an e-mail, “Much of the animosity felt by older theologians toward the Vatican or, more generally, toward episcopal authority has simply disappeared. ... By contrast, the majority of young Catholic philosophers and theologians that I have met through my teaching -- in England, Canada and America -- are eager to serve the church, to imbibe her customs and to perpetuate the faith.”

“I hope we can get beyond the theologian-magisterium battles,” said Reimer-Barry. “But I think that we need to carve out spaces for more listening and greater engagement. This is a good first step.”

Jesuit Fr. John Gavin, an assistant professor of religious studies at College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass., said, “This was clearly just the beginning of an important conversation among scholars and pastors and I hope that the work will continue through further sessions and collaboration.”

He also expressed gratitude to the Knights of Columbus for underwriting the costs of the symposium.

## **ON THE WEB**

Copies of John Cavadini’s talk and several others from the weekend have been posted online by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops at [www.usccb.org/about/doctrine](http://www.usccb.org/about/doctrine).

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