

Two responses re: The Vatican and Me

This past week we received these two responses to Thursday Theology #37, my piece called "The Vatican and Me". The first is a letter to Ed about me from Lou Smith. The second is a sermon by Carolyn Schneider. Somehow I'm sure there'll be more discussion about this topic after you've read these two pieces. Please feel free to write to us. We won't publish anything you say unless we get your permission!

Peace and Joy,

Robin

Thursday Theology #41

Ed:

I offer this as a contribution to Thursday theology. I'm glad that Robin Morgan ended her piece of a few weeks ago, "The Vatican and me", with an invitation to conversation. As she said, I couldn't let this one pass. The question, of course is Where to begin?

I think that I'll opt for Robin's first thought, specifically the loaded Rebecca West definition of a feminist: a person who expresses sentiments about women which differentiate them from doormats. FOUL!! By innuendo, if I refuse the appellation feminist (which I do), I consider women doormats. But I don't. Nor in all honesty does the Pope. Just take a look at the Vatican website, for example, and read what is there said about women; say in The Church in the Americas issued on January 23, last. I suppose that much of it will not be liked by a certain

brand of self-styled feminist, since the rootage of the Vatican position is in a complex and nuanced sense of human community, rather than in an individualistic egalitarianism. But such dislike does not mean that the opinions expressed by the Vatican equate women with doormats. So let's quit the unfair jargon and treat the issue which the Vatican statement tried to address. That, of course, means listening to what the Vatican means with the use of the term feminism, rather than imposing a convenient definition which allows for easy dismissal.

On to Robin's second thought. Since the ELCA stands in opposition to such declarations . . . we know nothing at all, except the claim that the ELCA opposes such declarations. Since we have not considered, much less fully explored, the truth or falsity of the Vatican claims, we have no idea as to whether the alleged ELCA opposition is good or evil, noble or base. I would assume that indifference to the poor, racial prejudice and violence, abortion, euthanasia, the legitimation of homosexual relationships and other immoral forms of sexual activity are, as the moral tradition of the church catholic has held, evil and thus sinful. The real question is whether or not such things can be laid at the feet of what the Vatican intends by feminism.

On to Robin's third point. Despite the disclaimer in her piece, we know it's not true that low self esteem is humanity's God-sized problem . . . her notion that we are really dealing with people who have absorbed voices telling them that they are sub-human, in fact finally plays into those very same hands. The reason is this: Just as the self-esteem movement directs attention to the (problematic) self, her question of which voices we are listening to directs our attention to the listener, i.e. the self-same self. It is, therefore just one more version of the Law, here placing upon us the enormous burden of making sure that we are listening to the proper voice. But in the end, we will also cut that law down to size (Place a

veil over it, as Luther and the Formulators of Concord had it.) and we will listen to the voice that most pleases us; which we will then no doubt equate with the Gospel, thinking that nice news equals good news. Better by far to observe Luthers distinction between the Love of God and human love as laid out in Theological Thesis 28 of The Heidelberg Disputation: The love of God does not first discover but creates what is pleasing to it. Human love comes into being through attraction to what pleases it. And having made that distinction, we cannot let human love function as the hermeneutic for our proclamation of the justification of the ungodly. My great fear is that the law of self-esteem, even in the form of listening to the right voice, when confused with the Gospel, will finally turn on us in the crunch. We will all die, even in our self-esteem and in that moment the voice of God's judgment will fall on our humanity – even on that humanity which God has created and is still creating in Christ (God always gives His gifts *sub contraria!*). The Devil who rides the self-esteem hobby horse, just like the Devil who rides the antinomian hobby-horse, is really out to get the Gospel.

There are also several other questions that occur to me in re-reading Robin's piece. For people who have been told by the likes of the Vatican . . . that they are not fully human . . . Where has the Vatican said any such thing? Granted that the Vatican's vision of full human being does not equate with the feminist vision, that does not grant the right to say ergo the Vatican thinks and teaches that women are sub-human. Even if women under the influence of certain forms of feminism say that they feel the Vatican says that, it does not mean it's true. No more than the notion that since I find being told that I am a sinner makes me feel bad, therefore the church considers me sub-human.

Further, since it is acknowledged that God . . . created us in

Christ Jesus unto good works that God prepared before hand to be our way of life . . . , just what are those good works? However we might finally answer, surely they cannot include those things that are on the catalogue of evils listed in The Lutheran article. Therefore, again, the question that needs to be debated is whether, and if so how, or not what the Vatican calls feminism contributes to the permissiveness that has created and promoted those contra-works. We can hardly deny the rampage of those catalogued works in the world. All of us – even Law-Gospel theologians (I include myself first of all!) – need to consider how we might have contributed to such a situation, not merely in spite of but because of what we hold to be the best in our proposals. Or are we to assume that feminism is the moral norm and therefore beyond and exempt from critique? Which would, of course, make feminism itself God.

Finally – at least for now – Robin's closing remark about stakes and fires is either silly or mean. The Vatican, we all know, does not advocate the burning of heretics. Thus, if this is merely a rhetorical flourish on Robin's part, it is silly. On the other hand, if the rhetoric is intended – once more – to get the reader to dismiss the Vatican's position by portraying the current Pope and the Vatican staff as a collection of Tomas de Torquemadas, then it is mean and Robin owes them an apology; specifically for breaking the 8th Commandment with respect to them. I will, of course, pray that the final Declaration is not the last word. Both the Vatican and the rest of us need both more and more open conversation on the matter. In fact, we might also give thanks to God that these brothers in Christ have opened things up this far. And that Robin has opened them up at this site.

The primary text of this sermon is Psalm 82 with references to the other texts of the day (11th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C): Jeremiah 23:23-29, Hebrews 11:29-12:2 and Luke 12:49-56.

Power and conflict. Two things that we don't like to recognize or talk about in the church. Yet, every single one of our texts today is about power and conflict. This power and conflict involves all the levels of the universe in these readings: gods, nations, families, and the individuals. The problem here is not that people are fighting when they shouldn't be; it's that they aren't fighting when they should be. They are acting weakly and passively, giving in too easily.

It all begins when God makes the world and everything in it, each thing made directly by God because God wants to love it. You, each of you, were made by God's hands and knit together and brought into life and breath so that God could love you in your distinct and unique life with all your history and every circumstance. There never was and never will be someone just like you. You are priceless one-of-a-kind and the history of the world cannot be told without your story.

Yet there are many voices out there that want to tell the story of the world without yours. We hear from all sides that we don't matter. In different ways you have heard it from other people when they ignore you or keep you from expressing yourself or try to exclude you; or worse, if they have beaten and abused your body. Some of the forces that tell you you don't matter are invisible principles that work through disease, genes and hormones, the invisible hand of the economy, the structures of society, or the dynamics of a family.

It is the poor who hear almost without any break that they don't matter. This is especially true of the poor who live in countries that are poor. That's the case in the Philippines, where I grew up. There, the poor hear that they don't matter from all the same sources that we hear it from. They especially fear those invisible powers that seem to have such evil intent toward them: disease, political structures, economic systems, and gods and spirits. But, in addition to all that, they have the rich nations of the world telling them that they are just cheap labor for our multinational corporations and that no one cares about what goes on in their hearts and minds. We all know that when we hear we don't matter so often, we start believing it.

When you start believing that you don't matter, you start thinking of yourself as weak, powerless and ineffectual, and you begin to be passive. You act as if you don't matter, which is a lie and causes big trouble, as we hear God say in Psalm 82 to the assembly of the gods when they gather together. Who are these gods? The gods are anyone or anything to which THE God has given power to rule because any authority-bearing office is a means by which God wants to govern the world. At the time that this psalm was composed, the people of the Middle East believed that every nation had its own national god, who chose its rulers and revealed its laws. The writer of this psalm, however, looked around him and saw that in all the nations the rulers were corrupt and the laws were unjust. Either the gods were evil or they weren't looking. The people were being crushed by the rulers and the faces of the poor were being ground into the dirt, while the judges declared the poor guilty and declared innocent the ones who had stolen their property, their labor, their goods, their honor and their worth. Does it sound familiar? So God calls the gods to account for this. The gods say, "We didn't know, we didn't understand, we didn't see." And

God thunders at them, 'How could you miss it when all the foundations of the earth – the justice, the love, everything that I made it for – are shaken? You will all die.' It sounds as if God has given up on the world, as if God agrees that none of us really matters.

But God says to himself, "I don't want to destroy the world that I made out of sheer love, and each creature in it. My heart is breaking, and I matter! I am going to save it." So God the Son comes into the world as a human like us, and we see him his whole life fighting against forces that say the world doesn't matter: he throws out the invisible demons who cause disease and he tells even the poorest that God has given his rulership to them. We see Jesus spending his whole life fighting against the forces that say he himself doesn't matter: he never stops arguing with people who don't believe that he will save the world. And on the cross, we see Jesus make the hardest fight of all as he seems to hear his own heavenly Father's voice saying, "You shall die like any mortal and fall like any prince," so that Jesus shouts back, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? I matter!" He dies fighting for the life of the creation, and three days later his Father raises him up, saying, "Well done, my hero!"

Jesus calls his death and resurrection his "Baptism" in our passage from Luke. That is why we say that we are baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus. When we are baptized we are claimed by God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This is the same God who made us. We matter. It is the same God who saved us, so that, when we seem to be hearing even God's voice saying, "You will die," we can shout back, "I matter! And even if I die I will live because of my Christ Jesus." A faith that fights like this is a faith that has been set on fire by the Holy Spirit. This is what Jesus said he came to do: to set us on fire and teach us to fight because we matter and the world

matters. Martin Luther wrote that sometimes God even “gives us a word contrary to the word of consolation, as if God were disposed to work evil. Thus God wants to make heroes of his own!” God wants us to practice fighting against God himself so that we can fight for the world.

About a decade ago, the people of the Philippines decided to say, “We matter” in the face of all the forces that were telling them they didn’t. Marcos was still president. They marched, they talked, they prayed, they gathered. The decisive moment came when a crowd of thousands had gathered unarmed to protest against the government’s repression of them. Army troops were ordered out in helicopters to fire into the crowd. The pilots tell the story this way: They received the command to fire as they got close to the people. One by one, they all responded, “I am still circling for position, sir.” They circled for position for a really long time until they finally landed without firing. When asked why they didn’t fire, they said, “When I looked at the people I saw the face of my mother, my brother, my sister.” The people had gathered to say, “We matter!” and now the pilots could no longer just see poor people who didn’t matter. Now they saw people who mattered very much. So, all of their lives were changed, and the course of their whole history as a nation.

Fighting like this is, as you know, very, very hard, especially since your sins keep popping up and staring you in the face and your conscience keeps saying to you, “You see? Look at that! Now, why would God love you?” Or other people’s sins keep getting in the way, so you say to yourself, “Look! God can’t really love them.” So, that’s why we come and gather here every week to confess our sins together, to hear God forgive us and the ones standing here with us, to be reminded of the story of Jesus so that he can say to us, “See how much you matter!” And, if that’s not enough, he says, “If you still can’t believe it, then see how much I matter and take my body and blood and join

it with your own." And we pray, and the words that we say in prayer are fighting words. We say, "God, here is what is on my heart and it is precious to me and to you. God, here is what other people are going through and I know they matter to you, too. Do something, God!" So we join the psalmist's prayer: "Arise O God and rule the earth, for you shall take all nations for your own." And we could be changed. The whole course of history could be changed. That's how much it matters.