

# Evolving Methodologies for the Study of Christian Spirituality and Spiritual Theology

Antonianum University, Rome September 23 – 28, 2019



This international conference had two goals. 1) To offer the possibility of dialogue between the perspective of the interdisciplinary study of Christian spirituality, and the perspective of spiritual theology especially as pursued in Rome and Catholic Europe. 2) To offer a forum for the presentation of new methods for the study of Christian spirituality by scholars in different parts of the world.

The conference succeeded in presenting a most interesting variety of methods used to reflect about the lived experience we call spirituality, and it made possible a truly global exchange. Methodologies proposed by representatives of the Italian institutions included historical methods, personalistic method, Old Testament historical-critical method, and artistic contemplation. Anglophone scholars of Christian spirituality described a broad range of methodologies: those based on qualitative sociological and ethnographic approaches, city planning methods, literary methodologies, philosophical approaches such as mimesis, mystagogy in Biblical spirituality, self-implication as method, as well as methodologies based on systematic reflection on contemplative practice (and this is not an exhaustive list).

SSCS member, Prof. Mary Frohlich, asserted that at its essential core (my words) spirituality studies a pre-theological reality, namely, "human 'spirit' as the inner dynamism that urges toward the fulfillment of being interconnected, whole, in harmony, in relation to oneself and all that is beyond oneself. Even more simply stated, spirit is the urgency toward the fullness of life." (from draft of presentation) Beginning reflection presupposing this pre-theological reality makes possible interdisciplinary dialogue and the engagement of a broad set of persons pursuing studies in spirituality. A second stage in Christian spirituality studies would require more explicit Christian reflection, highlighting that such reflection inevitably involves self-implication. Frohlich's presentation is more complex than this, but the above is a brief highlight of what seemed to me most significant in her talk.

The Italian keynote by Professor Jesús García described the long history of spiritual theology in the Catholic tradition, beginning with patristic times and ending with the documents of Vatican II with their renewed understanding of the person and the Church. This renewed understanding of the person has shifted the goal of the study of spiritual theology to the “vissuto,” [that which is lived]; that is, *living* towards the fullness of life as a fruit of following Jesus Christ. This “vissuto” is studied according the principles of Christian revelation and is therefore a theological discipline. Prof. García would prefer to call spiritual theology, the theology of the living of the Christian life.

Whether due to language differences, dissimilarities in cultural and academic contexts and divergences in theoretical assumptions and perspectives, there has been little academic exchange between spiritual theology which has a long history in Catholic European Universities, and Christian spirituality the multidisciplinary rather than theological field of study which emerged in the United States in the 1980's.

Being present in Rome, I was reminded of the very different cultural contexts that undoubtedly influence each discipline. Rome is a Catholic city with Catholic universities and seminaries where students pursue spirituality from a firm faith perspective, often with the goal of teaching or working in formation in Catholic contexts in their countries of origin. Anglophone students of spirituality come from a plurality of religious backgrounds with broad ranges of faith conviction, most living in very secular, pluralistic contexts. Listening to the keynote speakers and the presenters and sharing with participants both during and after the conference, I became even more convinced it would be worth the effort for each discipline to learn more about the other. Not only learn about the theoretical perspectives of each, but about the cultural realities that shape the experience of the students and scholars. If we agree that self-implication and the belief of the scholar or student provides an inevitable lens for their study and scholarship, the differences of context and culture surrounding the two disciplines are worth exploring.

While perhaps there was only a tenuous beginning in the scholarly dialogue between the sister disciplines, I hope appreciation of the contexts and concerns from which different scholars and students approach their discipline was something that became clearer through the sharing of several days of presentations, breaks and meals.

For those wishing to read the presentations, the proceedings of the conference will be published online early in 2020 in *Mysterion.it*, the open source journal of the Forum of Spiritual Theology Professors in Italy (FPTSI), the society that partnered with SSCS in sponsoring this conference. Keynote addresses will also appear in *Spiritus*.

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