

Preface

It was in late April of 2011, a few weeks before the Dayton *Ecclesiology and Exclusion* conference, that I had to contact my good friend and esteemed colleague, Dennis Doyle, to inform him that I would not be able to participate in the conference as I had planned. Our family was then engaged in a grace-filled deathwatch for my father-in-law, Weyman Horadam. My regret at missing the conference was well founded. As the essays in this volume demonstrate, the Dayton conference proved to be a theological event of extraordinary value on at least two counts. First, it constituted a unique gathering in North America of some of the most prestigious scholars in ecclesiology from throughout the world (with such distinguished participants as Mark Chapman, Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, Mary McClintock Fulkerson, Paul Lakeland, Neil Ormerod, Dennis Doyle, Gerard Mannion, Bryan Massingale, Sandra Mazzolini, Peter De Mey, Susan Wood and Bradford Hinze) and belonging to diverse Christian faith traditions. Second, the conference was addressing a topic, the question of exclusion, which has emerged as one of the most pressing issues for the churches today. It is an issue of particular significance for my own Roman Catholic tradition.

Over the past few decades a growing number of Catholic bishops have adopted the practice of withholding communion (a particular form of sacramental exclusion) to Catholic politicians who were deemed to not have sufficiently promoted Roman Catholic teaching on abortion in their legislative voting records. In the spring of 2009 a number of prominent Catholic bishops objected to the decision of the University of Notre Dame to invite President Barack Obama to give a commencement address, again largely because of the president's position on abortion. On December 21, 2010 Catholic Bishop Thomas Olmsted of the Diocese of Phoenix decreed that St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center in Phoenix could no longer be considered Catholic as a consequence, in part, for the hospital's continued insistence that it had acted ethically in terminating a pregnancy in order to save the mother in the tragic

situation in which, without any medical intervention, it was likely that both mother and child would die. On March 30th, 2011, little more than a month before the Dayton conference, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Doctrine issued a statement regarding what it saw as serious doctrinal deficiencies in a recent theological work of a noted Catholic theologian, Prof. Elizabeth Johnson. Add to these recent events Catholicism's longstanding positions excluding women from priestly ordination, the divorced and re-married from Eucharistic communion and gays from sacramental or even civil marriage, and you get a religious tradition that, rightly or wrongly, now appears inextricably linked with an ethos of exclusion.

Of course many of these policies and practices of exclusion are not unique to Roman Catholicism, as was made clear in several essays in this volume. One of the great strengths of this collection of essays lies in the willingness of the authors to tackle the thorny ecclesiological problem of exclusion from multiple perspectives, often shedding fresh light on a longstanding ecclesial issue. Here we find thoughtful pieces examining the role of race, gender, immigration, sexual orientation, and creedal commitments in the discernment of ecclesial practices and policies of hospitality and exclusion.

An honest engagement with the issue of ecclesial exclusion is complicated by the tendency of many today to view exclusionary practices and policies in an almost entirely negative light. Yet doing so fails to do justice to the complex place of exclusionary practices in the Christian tradition. These practices and policies often presuppose longstanding traditions and theological rationales that cannot be facilely dismissed. As Neil Ormerod and others have noted in these pages, the question of establishing and maintaining boundaries, often to the point of acts of formal exclusion, have strong biblical precedents. The Christian tradition can be read as an ongoing negotiation between two biblical trajectories. The first is manifested in Jesus' radical practice of open table fellowship (eating with sinners, prostitutes and tax collectors), a practice that constituted a subversion of the "table etiquette" of both first century Judaism

and the Greco-Roman symposium.¹ The second trajectory, rooted in such passages as Matt. 18:15-17 and 1 Cor. 5:1-13, grants the practice of excommunication in certain pastoral contexts both as a way of preserving ecclesial unity and as a medicinal pastoral practice. Christianity has often struggled to hold together the enduring theological and pastoral insights embedded in each trajectory.

The challenge for the churches today is to find fruitful ways to renew this negotiation in a postmodern context. The question of ecclesial inclusion/exclusion is inevitably bound up with postmodern preoccupations regarding the politics of identity and the nature of communal belonging. How can we as a church be characterized by both a strong center and open doors?² How can we continue to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ in and out of season (thereby sustaining a strong center) while maintaining permeable boundaries? There are no easy answers to these questions but the contributors to this volume do us a tremendous service by forcing us to set aside lazy assumptions and premature judgments in favor of rigorous historical, theological and sociological reflection. We are in their debt.

¹ Patrick McCormick, *A Banqueter's Guide to the All-Night Soup Kitchen of the Kingdom of God* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004), 41-2. For the Greco-Roman symposium as a framework for understanding the development of the Christian Eucharist see Dennis E. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, Press, 2003).

² For this way of framing the issue see Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).