

INTERVIEW WITH M. THERESE LYSAUGHT, PROFESSOR AT LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO



Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

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EXCERPTS:

- “I am passionate about [...] the fact that reality is greater than ideas—and how we can develop the practices and virtues that help us to allow reality, via encounter, to constantly convert our intellectual paradigms, our lives, and the church, in service of the truth and healing and grace.”
- “Full-time, secure faculty positions in colleges and universities, especially in theology, are evaporating... And unfortunately, the church has still not fully embraced the role of lay pastoral associates in parishes.”

Would you describe your work, and some of the particularities of your organization?

I work at the Neiswanger Institute for Bioethics and Healthcare Leadership at the Stritch School of Medicine, Loyola University Chicago. Loyola is Jesuit university. Only four Catholic universities in the US still have medical schools, and Loyola is one of them.

What is your main field of research, and why did you choose that field?

My main field of research is theological ethics with a focus on Catholic moral theology and Catholic bioethics. I would say that this was less of a choice and more of a calling. During my undergraduate studies, I was majoring in chemistry when I encountered the field of theological ethics—I was powerfully drawn to it and it hasn't let me go yet! It has always seemed to me that if we are to devote our intellectual energies to the understanding of reality and the pursuit of truth, then the most important focus of those energies should be the foundation of reality—God, who is Truth. And if God is incarnate and acts in history, then we also have to engage the questions of how the Body of Christ (the Church) lives the Triune God's presence in the world—i.e., ethics, or, more accurately for Christians, discipleship. Or, in the Pope Francis' phrase, missionary discipleship!

Box 1: Interview Series

What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website? The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Why a series of interviews? Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

What is the focus of this interview? In this interview, M. Therese Lysaught, Professor at Loyola University Chicago, shares insights about the work that she received an Expanded Reason Award for. The interview is part of a series on the Expanded Reason Awards.

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You are a recipient of the Expanded Reason Awards. What was your contribution for receiving the Award?

I am a co-author of *Biopolitics after Neuroscience*, with Jeff Bishop and Andrew Michel. We have very much been equal partners in this project from the beginning—conceiving the project; writing the initial grant proposal to the Science of Virtue initiative; participating in grant-related activities; researching and writing and arguing about (collegially) and re-writing and revisioning and editing (and editing and editing) the book manuscript. It has been a wonderfully collaborative and collegial project. My research for the book focused on the economic aspects of the story we tell, as well as the parts on virtue theory.

How easy or difficult is it for you to share your values with students when teaching?

That's a great question. I have never found it difficult. I have always taught at Catholic universities, which creates a context in which it is appropriate to discuss and share values. I believe I communicate my values with my students through the material we engage in class as well as—very importantly—how I interact with them as individuals and a group. Witness is the most powerful form of sharing. Of course, I am far from perfect in this, but this is something that I work toward.

How do your values affect your research? And what are some challenges you face?

I think my values—or at least the questions and topics that I think are important—are largely captured in my lengthy response to another question below. But in addition to my passion for the study of theology, theological ethics, and medicine, I would say that additional values of my work are critical analysis of normative discourses, bridging siloed fields, asking different questions, reimagining our fields—and doing all of this collaboratively.

This can be challenging! The academy prefers “single-authored” work—while much of my work is collaborative, interdisciplinary, and co-authored. The academy (and the church, often) prefers that people focus ever more deeply in a very narrow area and that they opine on a narrow range of established questions, rather than trying to bring intellectual discourses into conversation and challenge received paradigms. I seek to reimagine theological ethics from a liturgical and ecclesial starting point—a position that perplexes and often provokes resistance from much of the theological academy. I seek to bridge the academy, parishes, and health care, a bridge requiring much more work. Few want to make visible the powerful role of economics in our lives and our intellectual frameworks—to do so is to name the invisible idol and often provokes a

powerful backlash. But no one said being a Catholic moral theologian would be easy.

What is your advice for students who may be Catholic and are contemplating doing graduate work or a PhD?

This is a tough question, primarily because the job market for those with graduate work in theology—either academic or pastoral—is not encouraging. Full-time, secure faculty positions in colleges and universities, especially in theology, are evaporating, as our institutions of higher education—even Catholic institutions—are being taken over by neoliberal management practices. And unfortunately, the church has still not fully embraced the role of lay pastoral associates in parishes. So, what does one do with graduate training in theology in 2022? This is a question that the church needs to address more intentionally.

At the same time, as I said, what could be more important than deepening our understanding of God in service of participating in the ongoing work of grace in the world? Graduate study in theology is a good in itself—and who knows what doors the Spirit might open for a person who takes this path?

Could you share how you ended up in your current position, what was your personal journey?

My personal journey has been very non-linear! In many ways, it has been a lifetime journey of conversion. As I said, I was happily studying chemistry when I was, in a way, knocked off my metaphorical horse and called to the study of theology. A key course in this conversion was a course on the philosophy of science, which helped me begin to see the social aspects of science and the need to bring both an appreciative and a critical lens to how we understand science—and all disciplines.

I completed my BA in Chemistry (with a focus in organic chemistry) as a back-up, but then decided to pursue the study of theology. I earned my MA in Theology at the University of Notre Dame and my PhD in theological ethics at Duke University. At Duke, I had the great gift of studying with Stanley Hauerwas. My doctoral studies included a concentration in the history of medicine, which I continue to believe is critically important for our work in theology and medicine. In an attempt to integrate my background in science with my training in theology, I chose to focus my dissertation in the area of medical ethics, exploring what it might mean to reimagine medical ethics through the lens of the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick. That framework—of seeing the liturgy and the sacraments as an essential source of theological and moral theology, particularly as they engage the body—has shaped my work since then.

After my graduate studies, I spent two years at a research center that focused on the intersection of faith and medical ethics, and then did a one-year post-doc at one of the Human Genome Project sequencing labs at the University of Iowa, where I had a marvelous opportunity to again do science but now as a theologian. This post-doc was sponsored by the Ethical, Legal, and Social Implications (ELSI) program of the US National Institutes of Health (NIH). In this post-doc, I was a lot like an ethnographer, getting a view of big science from the inside. It also prepared me for a three-year appointment to the Recombinant DNA Advisory Committee at the NIH, the committee that at that time reviewed all the human gene transfer (gene therapy) protocols submitted to the NIH.

From there, in 1995, I moved into the first of three teaching positions at Catholic universities, which have also entailed much academic administration. Along the way, I also became involved with the Catholic Health Association (CHA) in the US. Here I discovered an enormous and important ministry of the church—Catholic healthcare—which is largely siloed from the Catholic academy in the US. I was privileged to spend a whole year with CHA as their first Visiting Scholar. It has been highly rewarding trying to bridge these ministries, but also often maddening since these ministries largely seem to want to remain siloed (in my experience).

At another point along the way, I was invited to accompany a student immersion trip to El Salvador in 2009. That was life-changing and led to a six-year project working with Salvadorans and engineers on an appropriate technology global health project. This built on a trip to Haiti in 2004. These experiences brought home to me in a new way the critical importance of liberation theology and Catholic social thought for Catholic bioethics—something largely off the radar in the US. These encounters with global reality converted my teaching and research trajectory. They also helped me begin to see the determinative role of economics (which we could call the idolatry of Mammon) in both the structures of violence that oppress so much of the world as well as within healthcare.

Even after all these experiences in Haiti and Latin America, I must admit that the murder of George Floyd in the summer of 2020 and the surrounding protests helped me see the insidious evil of racism in a new way and how it continues to be so powerfully interwoven throughout the structures of US culture and the globe—but equally throughout our theological disciplines, the practice of

Catholic healthcare, and the life of the church. For the past few years, then, I have been directing many of my efforts to learning more about this so that it can reshape my teaching, my research, and my life.

Milestones of this journey are reflected in my publications, particularly my books. My first book, *Gathered for the Journey: Moral Theology in Catholic Perspective* (Eerdmans, 2007), sought to reimagine how one teaches a Vatican II moral theology to undergraduates and MA students. My work at the interface of theology and medical ethics led to me being invited to become the co-editor of the 3rd edition of *On Moral Medicine: Theological Perspectives in Medical Ethics* (Eerdmans, 2012). My time at CHA led to *Caritas in Communion: The Theological Foundations of Catholic Health Care* (CHA, 2014). My work in Latin America clearly informs *Catholic Bioethics and Social Justice: The Praxis of US Healthcare in a Globalized World* (Liturgical Press, 2019). And my career-long commitment to critical, historical, philosophical study of science—particularly its social and economic aspects—is reflected in *Biopolitics After Neuroscience*.

Finally, could you share a personal anecdote about yourself, what you are passionate about?

I tell this story at the beginning of a chapter I wrote entitled “Catholicism in the Neonatal Context: Belief, Practice, Challenge, Hope,” in *Religion and Ethics in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit*, edited by Ron Green and George Little, 37-64. Oxford University Press (2019). In 2000, I found myself unexpectedly one day sitting between two isolettes in a neonatal intensive care unit, each containing one of my twin children who had been born two months early. While prior to that I knew theoretically about the epistemological importance of experience, being in that situation as simultaneously a mother and a ‘medical ethicist’ made clear for me the crucial nature of immersion in reality, the embodied aspect of knowledge, and the importance of accompanying and listening to those who actually experience the suffering of the world.

So I am of course passionate about my children! But I am also passionate about, to again use a phrase from Pope Francis, the fact that reality is greater than ideas—and how we can develop the practices and virtues that help us to allow reality, via encounter, to constantly convert our intellectual paradigms, our lives, and the church, in service of the truth and healing and grace.