

CTSA 2024 Convention Theme
Social Salvation

“. . . and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” (Luke 3:6)

God’s gift of salvation is the touchstone of Christian faith. When human beings experience salvation, God’s gift of God’s self, this experience can awaken a desire to know ever more deeply Jesus the Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, and a desire to become part of the community of believers receiving this gift. Even so, we live in a time that presses a highly privatized understanding of the Christian faith, distorting what salvation means by reducing it to the individual and personal exclusively, thus dismissing its social nature. Salvation is always individual and personal, but it is always social as well.

Biblical narratives speak of God’s saving presence in history, such as in the Exodus account of the Israelites’ journey from bondage to freedom, or in the in-breaking presence of the Reign of God in the here and now as repeatedly announced by Jesus the Christ. At present, an effective challenge to the social sin of our time -- be it in the form of racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, classism, anthropocentrism, colonialism, and on and on -- requires an account of social salvation in keeping with God’s concern for the social order of the world. In this sense, social salvation addresses the ongoing human endeavor to recognize and resist social sin, in other words, to subvert structural evil in the interest of the ascendancy and visibility of the good.

Throughout the Christian theological traditions, theologians have debated the meaning of atonement in terms of expiation, sacrifice, justification, reconciliation, redemption, and oneness. Yet, in our time, effective ongoing human practices of resisting evil may not only build community among practitioners but also symbolize and create a unity of consciousness around the ascendancy of the good. As a result, might we understand salvation in history as furthered based on the degree to which the spiritual unity of the world becomes more visible? In other words, atonement (or at-one-ment) experienced as social salvation.

Is social salvation fundamentally a never-ending process in history that confronts and subverts evil, an ongoing interpretive process that *reads the past*, Jesus’ vision of the reign of God, *towards the future*, the promise of eternal life, *in the present*, the here and now of our lives? In a world of increasing divisions, be they political, racial, ideological, economic, and/or ecclesial, foregrounding a social understanding of salvation will encourage a greater commitment to the gospel’s promise that “. . . all flesh shall see the salvation of God,” (Luke 3:6).

The 78th annual convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America will be held June 13-16, 2024 at the Marriott Inner Harbor in Baltimore, Maryland.

Confirmed plenary speakers include Carlos Mendoza-Álvarez, O.P., Susan Abraham, and Vincent Miller. Kristin Heyer will deliver the presidential address.

Several theological subdisciplines can contribute to the depth of our understanding of social salvation. Below are a few initial ideas. I look forward to your own creative insights.

- ❖ In light of the 2023 theme, *freedom*, how might the expanse and/or limits of human freedom set the conditions for the possibility of social salvation? How might the threats

to freedom today undermine not only liberating practices that subvert social sin but also undermine the ability to imagine a world more consonant with God's saving presence? Given that the ongoing process of social salvation requires active human participation, how might consciousness and freedom be cultivated so as to enhance the possibility of social salvation?

- ❖ How might understandings of the immanent and economic Trinity that foreground the relationality of God inform a social understanding of salvation? How might theosis and/or deification from Greek Orthodox traditions inform our understanding of the way that the personal and social are integral to one another in salvation?
- ❖ How might understandings of the *imago dei* that emphasize the social nature of human beings (Gen 1:26-31; 2:15,18-24; 4:1-2) inform a social understanding of salvation? In the context of escalating levels of violence and trauma experienced acutely by the most vulnerable human beings among us, how does this inform understandings of salvation? In the current age of the Anthropocene, how might the impact of global warming and ecological degradation inform and expand our understanding of social salvation?