NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Theologian offers ways to resolve 'impasses'

Catholic News Service | Jun. 19, 2009

HALIFAX, Nova Scotia -- Unresolved "impasses" in theology and in church life lead to counterproductive stalemates that "stunt" the growth of the church, according to the outgoing president of the Catholic Theological Society of America.

"Academic stalemates may be rather benign, but stalemates in real life can be malignant," said Terrence W. Tilley, chairman of the theology department at Fordham University. "Real-life stalemates can be quite vicious, even destructive," pointing to past church stalemates as the schism and the Protestant Reformation.

"These malignant stalemates destroyed the possibility of ecclesial unity -- and will not be overcome as long as the shepherds of one flock demand that separated brethren repent of their errors to be accepted back into their sheepfold," Tilley said June 7 at the close of the CTSA's convention in Halifax.

His successor as president -- Fr. Bryan N. Massingale, a priest of the Milwaukee Archdiocese and associate professor of theology at Jesuit-run Marquette University -- was installed at the end of the meeting.

In his remarks Tilley identified three current impasses he sees in the U.S. church: "a shrinking, and in some places demoralized, presbyterate that cannot be enlarged significantly under present rules"; "a laity that loves the church but has stopped listening to the bishops"; and "a hardworking and loyal body of religious women who are disgusted and discouraged by repeated investigations of religious life and attempted reversals of self-governance."

While "some bishops have tried to work through these difficult impasses," Tilley said, "some have followed the vigilantes of the political and religious right by making noisy attacks on Catholic institutions of higher education. Some have berated politicians -- Catholic or not -- whose political strategies differ with theirs."

Tilley also pointed to three ongoing impasses in theological circles.

One impasse is whether one begins with Scripture and tradition, "or does one begin with the current situation?" Tilley asked.

He said Vatican investigations into the writings of U.S. Jesuit Fr. Roger Haight and Jesuit Fr. Jon Sobrino, a Latin American liberation theologian, are the result of such an impasse.

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has asked Fr. Haight not to teach Christology at any university -- Catholic or not. In 2005 it found "serious doctrinal errors" in his 1999 book, "Jesus Symbol of God."

He can still teach, but not systematic theology connected with Christology. He has been teaching at Union Theological Seminary, a nondenominational graduate school in New York.

In 2007 the Vatican strongly criticized the work of Fr. Sobrino, saying some of his writings related to the

divinity of Christ were "not in conformity with the doctrine of the church." No disciplinary action was taken against him, but the congregation warned about "erroneous or dangerous propositions" in his work.

Another theological impasse, according to Tilley, is "how to account for God's salvific will being effective beyond the community of the baptized."

"The real shape of the impasse," Tilley said, "emerges when we consider Judaism. Either Christianity is or is not supersessionist.

"If it is, then the First Covenant (God's covenant to the Jews) is abrogated, superseded by the salvation wrought in Jesus Christ," he continued, "and either we should seek to convert Jews, as advocated by the late Avery Cardinal Dulles," he continued, "and others, or we should co-opt Judaism by inclusivist tactics and theory that render it an incomplete outpost, ignorant of the salvation wrought in Jesus Christ.

"If the First Covenant is not superseded, then that covenant is sufficient, the claims for the universal salvific mediation of Jesus Christ are untenable and, incidentally, the practice of attempting to convert Jews is improper," he said.

Tilley said the third theological impasse -- how Jesus could be both divine and human -- has never been fully resolved, and was "papered over" during a turbulent period during the first millennium when "the church's unity was splintered. The political response to the impasse was to resort to force or divorce -- this impasse became a stalemate."

Various tactics "have been tried and found wanting" to solve the impasses, he said, but "the key failed tactic ... is stopping the dialogue, often done by silencing theologians."

One resolution, Tilley suggested, is to see that "the virtues of hope, constancy, fidelity, tenacity and solidarity are crucial," while "the vices of inertia, expediency, marginalizing the other and changing the subject are deadly. Dare I say that without loving, thoughtful, active patience in solidarity, we can get beyond no impasse, but will be condemned to stalemate?"

Tilley said, "The way through impasse is to keep hope alive."

He pointed to the case of U.S. Jesuit theologian Fr. John Courtney Murray, who in the 1950s was barred by the Vatican from writing on church-state relations, especially on efforts to reconcile Catholicism with U.S.-style separation of church and state.

The priest eventually was invited to joint the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, and "his ideas became the basis" for the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Religious Freedom, written by the agency, Tilley said.

He also urged continued communication. "If we cannot communicate the faith well, then we cannot represent the mystery of Jesus the Christ, the truly divine and truly human one," he said. "Theology is a practice that begins and ends in communication."

Source URL (retrieved on *04/02/2015 - 05:01*): http://ncronline.org/news/theologian-offers-ways-resolve-impasses