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Impasses in today's church

Richard McBrien | Jul. 27, 2009 Essays in Theology

Terrence Tilley is chair of the Department of Theology at Fordham University and immediate past president of the Catholic Theological Society of America.

In his presidential address at the recent Catholic Theological Society of America convention in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Tilley spoke of the negative effects of the "stalemate" or "impasses" that currently afflict the Catholic church (for the full text, "Three Impasses in Christology," see Origins 6/25/09).

The three ecclesial impasses are "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 hard-working and loyal body of religious women who are disgusted and discouraged by repeated investigations of religious life and attempted reversals of self-governance."

Some of the bishops, Tilley observed, have tried "to work through these difficult impasses," but others prefer to ignore them. Still others make these even worse by following the example of "the vigilantes of the political and religious right by making noisy attacks on Catholic institutions of higher education."

Was Tilley perhaps thinking of the criticisms voiced by many bishops this spring against the University of Notre Dame for inviting President Barack Obama to deliver this year's Com-mencement address and to receive an honorary degree?

Tilley also expressed concern about the large numbers of Catholics who have simply drifted away from the church, according to last year's survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. He speculated that this "may be the response to stalemate in church."

As for the three Christological impasses, and specifically the loss of a spirit of cooperation and collaboration between the church's scholarly community and officials in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and in the hierarchy generally, Tilley counseled a "more adequate tactic," namely, allowing the "virtues of hope, constancy, fidelity, tenacity, and solidarity" to work.

"The vices of inertia, expediency, marginalizing the other and changing the subject are deadly," he pointed out.

"Stopping the dialogue by silencing theologians [such as Jesuits Roger Haight in our time and Teilhard de Chardin back in the 1950s] does not resolve impasse. You can kill theologians, but you cannot silence them?short of gagging their mouths and tying their hands behind them," Tilley continued.

"Theologians keep writing and keep talking. The *habitus* of their vocation is too strong to be stopped by human authorities." But here one might enter a few words of reservation.

The atmosphere can become so toxic that some, perhaps even many, theologians begin to pull their scholarly punches lest they draw unfriendly attention to themselves. Not everyone, it must be acknowledged, is built for

combat or can tolerate being in official disfavor.

Tilley did note, in support of his claim, that the French liberals of the first third of the 19th century and the European modernists of the early 20th century, both of whom were condemned by Rome, kept writing and speaking, and thereby became the cornerstones of Catholic social teaching in the first instance, and of the Second Vatican Council, in the second.

The so-called "new theology" that developed in mid-20th century France, just prior to Vatican II, did not die out, in spite of the concerted efforts of what was then called the Holy Office (the forerunner of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith). The movement's leading figures, such as Dominican Fr. (later Cardinal) Yves Congar, lived on and became major figures at the council.

The same was true of the then-premier theologian in the United States, Jesuit Fr. John Courtney Murray, who was silenced and then deliberately kept off the council's invitation list for the first session. He returned, thanks to the efforts of New York's Cardinal Francis Spellman, to become the chief architect of the U.S. church's major contribution to Vatican II, namely, the Declaration on Religious Freedom.

If the ideas of such figures perdure and help to shape the future life of the church, Tilley declared, it is "because they enable thoughtful people to live in and live out of the faith tradition in new contexts."

Therefore, the way through our impasses, according to Terrence Tilley, is "not for theologians to repeat the formulas of the past ? not for authorities to insist on one model for the mystery nor for theologians to close their ears to criticisms but for all to work to communicate the tradition in the present using many models understandable in the present. ..."

We can thereby "continue to practice the faith despite ideological diversity, and thus to allow these impasses, like all temporalities, to pass."

Such words, one hopes, will not fall on deaf ears.

Editor's Note: Here's a news account of Tilley's address, CTSA head suggests approaches to resolving 'impasses' in church [1].

Here's the full text of Tilley's presidential address [2], from the society's Web site.

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