

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

August 4, 2008 at 12:14pm

Theologian Elizabeth Johnson: 'Drench anger with forgiveness'

by John L. Allen Jr.



Denver -- Facing the anger with the church sometimes felt by

women's and men's religious orders, St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson called upon her fellow religious on Saturday to "suck the venom out" of those wounds so that "we can go forward making a positive contribution, without hatred."

Johnson, an acclaimed feminist theologian at Fordham University in New York, spoke to a joint assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, the main umbrella groups for women's and men's orders in the United States, held August 1-4 in Denver.

Some 1,100 sisters, priests, brothers, and associate members of orders gathered in Denver for the four-day event. The LCWR and CMSM hold a joint assembly every four years.

Johnson delivered the keynote address Aug. 2. She laid out a spiritual "feast" drawn from reflection on the Nicene Creed, seasoned with new insights from science and theological reflection.

In that context, Johnson reflected on the Creed's affirmations concerning the Holy Spirit, especially the

Spirit's role in building community within the church. Quoting the Belgian theologian Edward Schillebeeckx, Johnson said that Catholics lovingly regard the church as the "only real reliquary of Jesus in the world."

Love is tested

Yet, Johnson said, that love is sometimes tested by the church's human failures.

"In our day," she said, "the entrenched clerical system of patriarchal power, in addition to creating conditions in which the sex abuse scandal could occur, has also at times been deeply suspicious of the charism of religious life and where it would lead the church. I think of the Jesuits and justice, of the option of so many women's religious orders for a collegial style of leadership and obedience, etc."

In another place in her address, Johnson leveled a similar complaint.

"We in this Catholic church continue to live by patriarchal values that, by any objective measure, relegate women to second-class status governed by male-dominated structures, law, and ritual," she said.

In light of those grievances, Johnson accented the Holy Spirit's capacity to foster forgiveness.

"Forgiving does not mean condoning harmful actions, or ceasing to criticize and resist them," she said. "But it does mean tapping into a wellspring of compassion that encompasses the hurt and sucks the venom out, so we can go forward making a positive contribution, without hatred."

Johnson illustrated her point with a story about Fr. Charles Curran, a moral theologian fired from his position at the Catholic University of America in 1986 for asserting a right of dissent from official church teaching on matters such as birth control. (Curran is a member of the NCR board of directors.)

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Charles Curran public humiliation

"Summoned to appear in Rome for questioning by Cardinal Ratzinger, he came out of the meeting knowing that he had failed to convince," Johnson said. "He would be condemned as a Catholic theologian and fired from his faculty position: a public humiliation, a personal disaster, and also a rejection of theologians as a whole, who by and large agreed with Curran's position."

"The next day was Sunday. Bernard Häring, the influential moral theologian who taught in Rome and was Curran's old professor and mentor, celebrated Mass in a chapel at the Alfonsianum for Curran and his six university advisers. The Gospel happened to be the Prodigal Son. Looking at Charlie, Häring's homily went something like this: at this time, the church is the prodigal son. It is taking your treasure — your training, talent, reputation, contribution — and wasting it, feeding it to the pigs. The Spirit of Jesus calls you to be the father in this parable, not rejecting but welcoming back the prodigal. Do you forgive the church?"

"Häring went from person to person, grabbing them by the necktie or the sweater, and looked them in the eye with this question," Johnson said. "The Mass could not continue until they wrestled with their anger and allowed the Spirit to move them to a different place."

Efforts to promote dialogue with church authorities were reflected in Denver in the presence of Archbishop Gianfranco Gardin, a Conventual Franciscan who serves as secretary of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life in Rome, making him the Vatican's No. 2

official for religious life. Accompanying Gardin were Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Sharon Holland and Oblate Fr. Hank Lemoncelli, who serve on Gardin's staff. Also present was Bishop J. Terry Steib of Memphis, Tenn., a Verbiter who sits on the U.S. bishops' Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations.

Benedictine Abbot Jerome Kodell of Subiaco, Ark., a noted writer on scripture, delivered a reply thanking Johnson for her emphasis that religious life is founded on relationship with God.

Founded on a relationship with God.

"That means we're not required to trust anyone else, even in the church," Kodell said. "Instead, we're required to trust that God will work through the church's ministers." Kodell immediately noted the corollary: "Of course, this also means that our members are not required to trust us, but rather that God will work through us in spite of ourselves."

Earlier in her address, Johnson reflected on affirmations in the Nicene Creed concerning God as Creator, and God Incarnate in Jesus Christ.

Johnson said that contemporary scientific discoveries concerning the age, size, dynamism and interconnectedness of the universe are prompting Christians to see creation not merely as "an instrument to serve human needs" but rather as a reality enjoying "its own intrinsic value."

"In our day, human practices of consumption, pollution and reproduction are wreaking terrible damage on our planet's life-sustaining systems of air, water, and soil, and the other creatures that form with us one community of life," she said. "The picture darkens as we attend to the deep-seated connection between ecological devastation and social injustice."

In that regard, Johnson applauded a joint statement on climate change adopted by the LCWR and CMSM. Among other things, the statement invites religious orders to "contemporize our vows in light of eco-spirituality and response to climate change."

Moreover, Johnson said, scientific insights also prompt a new understanding of God's role as Creator.

"We know that the universe evolves through random events working within lawful regularities," she said. "If there were only law, the result would be stagnation. If there were only chance, it would be chaos."

Creation closely allied to disorder

"God is not only the source of law and order, but also empowers interruptions of regularity," Johnson said. "God is the source of disruption that causes change to happen. Creation is much more closely allied to disorder than our older theology ever imagined."

Turning to the section of the Creed about Jesus, Johnson criticized the "satisfaction theory" of the Cross pioneered in the 11th century by Anselm of Canterbury. In brief, Anselm held that God required Christ's death in order to forgive human sin. Johnson called it "one of the worst theological ideas ever to take hold about this event," though noting that Anselm himself, in the context of feudalism, intended it to emphasize God's mercy.

Johnson argued for seeing the Cross not "as a death required by God in repayment for sin," but rather "as an event of divine love" and as the price paid by Jesus for his ministry "a price, she said, still sometimes paid today by religious women and men in different parts of the world.

"Jesus did not come to die but to live," Johnson said, "and to help others live in the joy of divine love."

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Editor's Note: Listen to a podcast conversation between NCR editor Tom Fox and Sr. Johnson: [Elizabeth Johnson and The Quest for the Living God](#).

The text of Sr. Elizabeth Johnson's address is on the LCWR website at: www.lcwr.org/lcwrannualassembly/2008assembly.htm.

Source URL (retrieved on 08/21/2017 - 22:19): <https://www.ncronline.org/news/theologian-elizabeth-johnson-drench-anger-forgiveness>

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