

Bishop: 'Schneiders' analysis inspiring, challenging'

Bishop Kevin Dowling | Jan. 11, 2010



Bishop Kevin Dowling (CNS photo)

As a religious, who happens to be called to ministry and service as a bishop in the church and world, I have reflected with attention on the five articles of Immaculate Heart of Mary Sister Sandra Schneiders, my sister in religious life. I want to express my gratitude and appreciation for her courageous, faith-filled and insightful analysis and reflection upon crucial issues which are at the heart of the prophetic call and mission of religious in the church and world of today.

She raises difficult questions and shares her viewpoint with what I believe is integrity and honesty, and whether one agrees with her or not, the essential invitation in what she has written is to reflect prayerfully and in a discerning spirit upon what God may be saying to each of us who reads her reflections.

Even if we disagree with her, we still need to ask with honesty: what value, what gospel value, is she trying to express in what she writes? Even if one has a different opinion to hers, one can try to understand her articulation of what she believes is in accord with the gospel of Jesus. Perhaps I can then grow in my own calling? and that, in the end, is what really matters.

The wide range of comments, some harsh and even vitriolic, some articulating a similar perspective, some expressing the struggle and pain of searching people, are in themselves important to consider. That there can be such a difference of opinion and approach is, on the one hand, a mirror of the complex world and society in which we live and of the pilgrim church and its members immersed in that reality.

On the other hand, such difference and even division requires deeper analysis because I think it goes to the heart of the question: just what is our fundamental faith-vision of God, who is this ?God? for me/us, and as a consequence what kind of church should we be in any era of our historical journey with Jesus, our leader and mentor?

For me, Sister Schneiders has articulated a comprehensive, inspiring and very challenging vision of the essentially prophetic nature of the calling and mission of the religious life, incarnated as it must be in the complex socio-economic, cultural and political reality of modern times. She has also clearly demonstrated its fundamental difference to that other calling and ministry within the church, hierarchical leadership and service.

I deliberately use those two words "leadership" and "service" because that is what I believe should be the experience or feeling of any person who encounters a bishop like me, or the hierarchy as a whole. My own experience of my life and ministry as a bishop for the past 19 years has led me ever more deeply to the realization and profound belief that people need to hear Jesus' words in my human words, that people need and should only experience in me and all I do the presence of a loving, compassionate God who is deeply one with them in their total context of life, sometimes/often a "mess", and who walks with them so that they may gradually find that his desire for them is true, viz. that they may have "life, and life in abundance" (cf. John 10:10).

This is Jesus' challenge to me as a bishop, I believe. In this I, personally, cannot find any place or reason for the use of power and control over people on my part, for a presumption that I have all the answers to extremely complex human realities and experiences which absolutely degrade the dignity of people made in God's image, and especially the poorest and most vulnerable "little ones" of the diverse societies which make up our church and world.

For me there can be no place for domination and power in such a reality which I know so well from my own context of the appalling poverty and misery of so many in dreadful shack settlements. Domination and power would only reflect a very different vision to the God whom I believe Jesus revealed (the God articulated so well by Sister Schneiders), and to the values of the gospel which should be the fundamental and only norm for me in my calling and mission as a bishop.

I believe hierarchical leadership and service today, as always, should be characterised by a humble, trusting, and searching relationship with all the People of God, empowering and affirming the gifts of the Spirit in every person and, together with all the People of God, ministering with a passion to transform the degrading reality of the "little ones" of our world.

There will naturally be tension in different forms/ways between religious who are striving to live their prophetic calling in very diverse socio-economic-cultural contexts - and hierarchical leadership and service which should invite, encourage and promote coordination, subsidiarity and collaboration between all the different callings in the church, including that of religious and of the lay faithful.

All the key principles of Catholic social teaching (or doctrine) are equally applicable and relevant to the internal life of the church community and how it functions in practice, as for the reality and life "out there" in the socio-political world as it is.

I think it is a mistake to think that different expressions of life and ministry (in all aspects) between religious and hierarchical leadership and service can or should be controlled and brought into uniformity which is deemed orthodox by those who have authority in the church, viz. the hierarchy. That would be to potentially stifle the Spirit and the workings of the Spirit.

After all, most of the differences and divisions being discussed in these articles are not about defined doctrine as such, but about "opinions" or "understandings" concerning pastoral policies, the vision, theology and ecclesiology of Vatican II, ethical and moral approaches to complex questions and so forth. There can be legitimate and different "opinions" at the level of the Vatican dicasteries, conferences of bishops, individual bishops, communities of religious and lay faithful. And there can be such a thing in the church as loyal dissent.

Tensions and differences should be expected among thinking Catholics, therefore, but they should be managed by people who follow, not the route of power and control, but the way of discernment in the Spirit. Then all those concerned will consciously allow God to be God, and be open to recognizing the "fruits" and that "by their fruits you will know them?". This calls for a respectful encounter between religious and hierarchy, with a

conscious commitment to listening to what is deeper than the words, to what God may be saying through the other.

And in the end, the vital importance of conscience needs to be addressed with reverence. I believe one can do no better than reflect on the words of the then Father Ratzinger in his capacity as theological adviser to the Second Vatican Council:

Over the Pope as expression of the binding claim of ecclesiastical authority, there stands one's own conscience which must be obeyed before all else, even if necessary against the requirement of ecclesiastical authority. This emphasis on the individual, whose conscience confronts him with a supreme and ultimate tribunal, and one which in the last resort is beyond the claim of external social groups, even the official Church, also establishes a principle in opposition to increasing totalitarianism.

(Joseph Ratzinger in: Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II ,Vol. V., pg. 134 (Ed) H. Vorgrimler, New York, Herder and Herder, 1967).

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