

Theologians focus on prophetic commitments

Thomas C. Fox | Jun. 21, 2010



At the conclusion of the Catholic Theological Society of America's 2010 convention in Cleveland, President Fr. Bryan N. Massingale hands over the gavel to Sr. Mary Ann Hinsdale of Boston College, who assumes the organization's presidency for 2010-2011. (Mary Hembrow Snyder)

CLEVELAND -- Looking up at the stage before them, the 400-plus who gathered for the first full day's plenary session of the Catholic Theological Society of America saw three of their esteemed colleagues: two men and a woman. Each is married, each a parent, and each has made notable contributions to Catholic theology.

What was remarkable about the moment was its utter ordinariness. It was business as usual. A plenary gathering. Yet, such a moment would have been unimaginable a generation ago.

In the relatively short span of three decades, the ranks of Catholic theologians in North America have been transformed -- at least twice. The first involved the influx of women, mainly women religious. The second saw a new wave of lay theologians. These young theologians were now balancing family life with the pressing academic demands of teaching and publishing.

There was a time when the Catholic Theological Society of America, known as the CTSA and claiming a 1,300 membership, was comprised almost entirely of clerics who taught in seminaries. Now it is more common to find members, when not at their universities, shuffling their children to soccer games, buying groceries, and worrying about finding money to send their young ones to Catholic primary and secondary schools

The Catholic Theological Society of America, the principal association of Catholic theologians in North America, is the largest professional society of theologians and religious scholars in the Catholic church.

In Grand Ballroom A of the Renaissance Cleveland Hotel on the morning of June 11, Terrence W. Tilley, former society president and chair of the department of theology at Fordham University in New York, introduced Stephen J. Pope, professor of theology at Boston College, who gave an address titled, "Restorative Justice as a Prophetic Path to Peace?" After he finished, Kristin E. Heyer, a CTSA board member recently tenured as a theologian at Santa Clara University in California, responded.

In those talks and the discussion that followed, the idea of restorative justice was solidly linked with the healing

process for both crime perpetrator and crime victim. Pope raised questions about how restorative justice might be applied in the handling of the church's sex abuse crisis.

Much attention was given during the June 10-13 gathering to notions of prophetic action. It was no accident. The convention theme was "Theology's Prophetic Commitments." It was chosen by then president-elect and now president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, Mary Ann Hinsdale, an Immaculate Heart of Mary Sister of Monroe, Mich., and professor of theology at Boston College.

She told *NCR* she chose the conference theme conscious of the many pressing challenges Catholic theologians ponder today as they consider their church and wider society.



These include in the wider arena, she said, two wars, ecological disasters,

a crushing economy, and a growing secular mindset. Within the church, she cited episcopal backtracking; clergy sex abuse and episcopal cover-ups; twin Vatican investigations of U.S. women religious and their leadership; church polarization; and alienation, especially among the young. "It's a long and fatiguing list," she said.

Out of this, she added, comes a sense of widespread malaise. She said it has to do with a feeling of powerlessness and a sense that church leadership is somehow not listening, not connected to people's concerns and realities.

Another plenary session with two other lay theologians, Catherine Clifford of St. Paul University in Ottawa and Richard R. Gaillardetz of the University of Toledo, Ohio, more specifically addressed the malaise of which Hinsdale spoke.

"As we reflect on the vocation of the theologian today there is much to celebrate," they said in a joint speech. "If we but consider the membership of our own theological society, we have witnessed -- in the span of our own lifetime -- a shift from a membership that was once exclusively male and clerical, most often white and dedicated primarily to seminary education, to a membership which better reflects the diversity of the people of God in North America. Today, more than half of the theologians belonging to the CTSA are lay men or women. Our members, both lay and ordained, come from a much broader range of social and cultural backgrounds of theology in today's church."

They went on to say that even though Catholic theology has never been more rich and diverse, it remains dominated by episcopal suspicion.

"Sadly, too many theologians report that they are seldom consulted by their local bishops on theological questions. In some regions, lay men and women find themselves almost systematically denied the necessary *nihil obstat* to teach in ecclesiastical faculties. Many bishops continue to prefer the counsel of those clergy who possess advanced theological training, often in Rome."

They said such suspicion is hardly new, noting it has been around through much of church history. They said it has gotten particularly pronounced in the past 20 years. They said theology's prophetic task "demands that its

primary loyalty be to the word of God? and that it can exhibit loyalty to the magisterium only insofar as the magisterium exhibits its own proper service to God's word.?

?The true prophet is a humble servant of the word, ?one who speaks for another.? The genuine prophet is not interested in popular opinion or worldly measures of success, but acts as a self-effacing interpreter of the divine intention for the people of God,? they said.

Clifford and Gaillardetz, noting that tradition and the word of God ground the church in faith, said that critical studies have shown that tradition ?can distort as well as disclose, it can reveal and conceal aspects of the word and has at times been co-opted to convey the values of ideology and dominant self-interest.?

Drawing on the writings of the French Dominican and Second Vatican Council advisor Fr. Yves Congar, the authors said the baptized faithful, the theologians and the bishops all contribute to receiving the word and maintaining the truth. They all need to work together.

The critical role of the theologian, they said, is to preserve ?the priority of the lived faith of the church over its doctrinal formulations.?

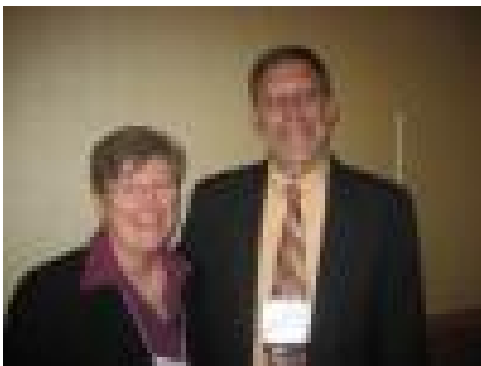
?The primary act of ecclesial reception is not that of the faithful obediently embracing the decrees of the magisterium, but the humble reception by the magisterium of the pluriform witness to the Gospel by the whole people of God.?

For the theologian, they said, this requires a deep sense of humility, one that recognizes that bishops, theologians and the entire Christian community need to engage in ?respectful conversation, critical inquiry and mutual correction.?

In a separate address, Bradford Hinze, another lay theologian and a professor of theology at Fordham University, expanded on the theme of theological prophecy, saying there is a whole other area of prophecy needing further exploration.

The more common understanding of a prophet, he explained, is the person who receives a message from God and delivers it to the people.

Then he offered another way of looking at prophetic character, a transverse view in which the prophet hears and heeds ?the laments of suffering people of God and the groans of a chaotic and damaged world.?



He said that the struggles of individuals and communities ?with the very substance of the faith? can also be a part of the prophetic legacy

?To be quite concrete, consider the laments of the faithful surrounding *Humane Vitae*, or the teaching authority of the U.S. bishops on health care, or the pope and the curia on homosexuality, women's ordination, and religious pluralism, to name but a few. The cacophony in the church on these issues needs to be understood in terms of the exercise of the prophetic office in the church, not only as message faithfully received and witness

given, but also in terms of the crucible of lamentations in the messy transmission of the living faith of the church. This is why the two prophetic frameworks must work in tandem in ecclesiology and in the pastoral practices of the church.?

So, he asked, what is prophetic obedience?

?The prophetic obedience of individuals and communities issues forth in prophetic witness that heeds, receives and responds to the word by receiving the living word of God and the cry of the Spirit, especially in the voices of the marginalized, the outsiders, the poor, and the people who raise critical issues in the church and the world. In the final analysis prophetic obedience must stand the test of discernment.?

He explained that in such discernment ?the judgment of the prophet may coincide with the judgments of the hierarchy on the one hand, or of the majority and consensus, on the other, or both simultaneously.?

The sense of the faithful, or *sensus fidelium*, he said, ?is often inchoate, not explicit, in the life of the church, but it can become more explicit through communal discernment and can grow in the church through synodal and conciliar modes of discernment and decision-making.?

He added that ?at every level of the church, bishops, theologians and the faithful are to have an active role in teaching and, by extension, governing.?

Hinze concluded: ?Based on this approach to the *sensus fidelium* and the prophetic character of the church, one could hypothesize that the bishops do not fulfill their distinctive prophetic office unless they actively engage theologians and the faithful in communal dialogue and discernment.?

Alluding to the ?malaise? of which Hinsdale spoke, theologians here spoke both privately and publicly about a sense of disenfranchisement they feel in the church today. Women religious used the example of not being consulted in any way by the Vatican before it initiated investigations into their lives and ministries.

The theologians seemed to speak more out of a sense of frustration than out of bitterness. These theologians met in the wake, for example, of the public split between bishops and many women religious leaders over health care legislation ([see related Catholic health care story](#) [1]). Meanwhile, the growth of the ranks of lay theologians has meant that lay perspectives are getting more attention in fields of Catholic scholarship, but a complicating corollary appears to be that this is happening when the church?s bishops place a greater emphasis in distinguishing between the clergy and lay state. In some instances, bishops aren?t used to working with lay theologians. In others, lay theologians and bishops are still struggling to find common footing.

Hinsdale hopes the discernment emerging from the look at prophecy might lead to some further action. She noted that this year is the 25th anniversary of the ?Kairos document,? an ecumenical church statement that played a role in ending South African apartheid.

In 1985, a group of South African theologians, based predominantly in the black townships of Soweto, challenged their church?s theological complicity in upholding the status quo. The authors anonymously drew up the document that quickly became the focus of debate and Christian reflection. Contained in the document were biblical themes of justice and reconciliation.

So, Hinsdale said, the document might offer clues to help the church forward, possibly to restore health within it or to lead to prophetic witness.

Another conference session drew together three ?wisdom figures,? two men and a woman who stand out in a passing generation that holds on to a living memory of the pre-Vatican II church and the council of the mid-

1960s that ushered in historic reforms .

Anne E. Patrick, a Sister of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary; retired Detroit Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Gumbleton; and Gregory Baum, a former president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, offered personal insights, drawing on their experiences.

Patrick said the Kairos document involved three commitments useful to the church today. First, that it was rooted in the experiences and sufferings of those who lack voice in the systems of power. Second, it effectively balanced notions of collaboration, courage and prudence. Third, it revealed the authors' desires to share their thoughts with wider lay audiences.

These commitments, she said, all require continued courage. She used as an example of this courage the 2000 Catholic Theological Society presidential address by the now retired Yale Divinity School professor Mercy Sr. Margaret Farley, who called upon church leaders to "de-center" their abortion political agenda and revise their priorities for political action.

"I simply want to point out," Patrick said, "that 10 years ago Farley took on a topic that was far from safe and comfortable, and called prophetically for a change of heart and strategy."



From his experience, Baum said, the most neglected idea in the church today is an idea that was central at the Second Vatican Council, which he attended: "the notion of collegiality."

For his part, Gumbleton singled out as the church's most demanding prophetic need "the call to a consistent total rejection of war."

"It is irrational to think of war today," he said emphatically. "We must take this stance in history at this moment."

In other conference developments, Fr. Peter C. Phan, Georgetown professor of theology and former society president, was chosen as the recipient of the John Courtney Murray Award, the highest honor bestowed by the society on a theologian, and Susan A. Ross, professor and chair of the department of theology at Loyola University Chicago, was elected vice president, meaning she will assume the presidency in 2012.

[Thomas C. Fox is *NCR* editor and can be reached at tfox@ncronline.org.]

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