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Sr. Theresa Kane speaks on effective liturgy at Celebration conference in Chicago

Theresa Kane | Aug. 9, 2010

Mercy Sr. Theresa Kane was president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in 1979 when she was asked to make a welcoming address to Pope John Paul II during his first visit to the United States. In the address, Kane urged the pope to include ?half of humankind? in ?all the ministries of the church.?

Mercy Sr. Theresa Kane spoke July 22 in Chicago during the second annual Celebration Conference on Effective Liturgy., ?A Knock at Midnight: Celebrating Christ in Urgent Times.? The title of her talk, presented on the Feast of St. Mary of Magdala, was ?Woman, Why Are You Weeping??

Sr. Kane is internationally known for her 1979 welcome to Pope John Paul II during his first visit to the United States with an appeal for the inclusion of women in all ministries in the church and her subsequent public support over the years for the ordination of women.

She began her talk with a brief history of the current biblical scholarship to recover the figure of Mary of Magdala from layers of distortion in order to recognize her role as a significant leader in the early church. Sr. Kane praised the organization Future Church, founded in Cleveland in 1997, for its work in assessing the projected impact of the priest shortage and promoting creative approaches to meeting the church?s need for liturgical and pastoral leaders.

Sr. Kane reminded her audience that Mary of Magdala is mentioned prominently in all four Gospels as a companion and disciple of Jesus, one of a group of women who accompanied and supported him in his ministry, were present at his death and burial and the first witnesses to his resurrection. Mary?s status as ?the apostle to the apostles? was celebrated in the early church and is still preserved in the Eastern church. But by the fourth century in the West, as part of an official suppression of female leadership, Mary of Magdala was represented in sermons and iconography though a conflation of scriptural passages that identified her primarily as a prostitute and public sinner.

In the second half of her talk, Sr. Kane spoke of the current situation of women in the church and the inspiration to be found in examining the witness of St. Mary of Magdala. An edited version of her remarks follows:

Woman, why are you weeping?

?Let us place ourselves for a moment in the garden where Mary was. This is a woman who has just experienced the torture and most brutal form of death of a very close friend, a death that was indeed an execution, capital punishment, with very few supporters. The disappearance of people after his death and burial was more out of fear that they would be captured and arrested and perhaps tortured.

?But we get the image of Mary of Magdala as someone who was a close, intimate friend, a companion, certainly a benefactor to Jesus, and a disciple. So each of us here, we also weep openly or we weep interiorly at the death of loved one, whether that death be from what we call natural causes or much more traumatic and sudden. But

we need to enter into that garden scene, feel the depth of grief, the anguish and pain at so horrible a death, and we know the relationship that Mary had to Jesus, certainly a close, intimate friend and companion. And at his death, we can conclude that she probably had a conviction that a grave injustice had been done. When one has a clear vision and insight about injustice, one weeps not only with anguish but from anger, with rage. Rage comes from courage, and at any injustice, all of us should be filled with rage.

?The scriptures have said continually, ?God is slow to anger.? God is not without anger. Why does God have a sense of anger? Because of injustice. Why do we have a sense of anger? Because of injustice. So such an emotion is core to righting the wrong, core to bringing about justice. So I feel that her weeping in the garden is certainly because of a great a loss, but also because she was facing of a grave injustice.

?And then the question, what do we do about that?

?Let me speak now of the women of our Catholic community today. Why do we weep? Without the full incorporation of women into leadership, discipleship and all church ministries -- which was the vision of the church council -- without full incorporation into and participation at the liturgy, we do not experience community as women at liturgy, and we do not experience life-giving worship. Our presence at liturgy has become and continues to be a source of anguish, sadness, even emptiness. We continue in severe tension over the basic language to describe humanity, and this has gone on for decades, the sexist language that we refer to as exclusive language The continued use of terms like ?man,? ?his,? and ?mankind? denies our very presence. It certainly doesn?t give recognition and respect; and we are surely invisible. The anguish, the distress, the absence of a sense of worship in community has gotten much more severe.

?In 1978, Pope John Paul I said publicly, and I have never forgotten this and continue to proclaim it. ?We need to call God mother as well as father.? It was a powerful statement. I can still remember him being quoted. Actually I saw him on television at the end of a conference he was having. Because until we do that, our language of God is exclusive, patriarchal, militaristic.

?And one of the severe tensions we have in the church is between the vision we have of community and governance that is monarchical. I have been with bishops who say, ?We are not a democracy.? And the question to the bishop is then, what form of governance are we? And do we not respect cooperation and participation and inclusion? We talk of community but we still have the governance of a monarchy.

?So the language about God is a source great distress to a growing number of women. Catholic women weep because male catholic leaders, many of them bishops and pastors, are culturally ignorant and culturally impotent regarding the presence, the potential, the human aspirations of women to be adult, mutual co-responsible collaborators. A wonderful word. ?collaborate.? It means we co-labor. I am mutually equal with you.

?When I was president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, we were called to Rome and been having meetings with the Vatican year after year after year, since before 1970. If anyone wants to know why this (current) investigation is happening, they have not been listening for 35 years. We have done it repeatedly. So much so that we say, why should we do it again? But, good women that we are, women religious, we go back again. A very difficult issue.

?As Sr. Mary Collins said, she would love to have a conversation with the bishop who told her they worshiped different Gods. I find myself saying, there are so few of them I could have ever had a conversation with. Even if there was a conversation, there isn?t the mutuality, there isn?t the respect, there isn?t the sense that indeed we are radically equal.

?When we finished our meeting in Rome, I said to one of the sisters, find out what they thought about us being there, what they thought about the meeting, and let me know when you come home. Very faithfully, she came

home and said, ?Theresa, they?re saying over there that you sisters came over here as if you were equal.? I said, ?That?s a compliment. Please tell them we are equal!?

?That?s the mindset. How do we have a conversation about that? We need to weep. There is a sense of ignorance about the human aspirations of women to be adult, mutual collaborators.

?Women of the Catholic community. Why are we weeping today? We are in crisis. There are a number of women who have already moved out of traditional Sunday worship. They are still finding where they want to go. We have a number of women who have begun very courageous, strong alternative liturgies, which we believe are valid, mystic, pastoral, spiritual -- all the qualities that are needed for the human soul.

?We have many who are moving to other protestant traditions. We also have a growing number of women who are doing to feminist liturgies, taking turns presiding, co-presiding, perfectly comfortable with it. I think it?s a conscience call. Maybe it is the beginning of a new church. Maybe this is how we have to look at a Pentecost. I think we need to be willing address it. To continue in an exclusively male priesthood is in my judgment both a form and expression of idolatry.

?Why is it we cannot have a woman, why is it in our congregations, or you go into your parish church and 80 to 90 percent of those present are women, and no woman can be up there presiding at Eucharist. If the priest doesn?t show up, we have a wonderful Communion service, but you can?t even give a homily because that isn?t allowed.

?One story. A group of sisters in the Midwest were having their community assembly. Out of courtesy, they invited the bishop. We generally do not invite the bishop because we are such good friends and want to celebrate, but unfortunately ? and I feel very sad about this -- we do it because it is expected and out of courtesy. The bishop wrote back and said, it must be in a parish church and not at the motherhouse, you must have altar boys come in to assist me, and no sister may carry the cross at the beginning of the procession. With real regrets, they met as a group, they really prayed about it and decided not to have liturgy. They didn?t want to disinvite the bishop, so they said that their plans had changed. They should have said, we are disinviting you, because so many of us have experienced being disinvited. When anything is a little bit not quite right, we get disinvited.

?But the real tragedy is that a magnificent opportunity is lost for a bishop to gather with a group of women to worship together.

?So women of the 21st century have done what we have done down through the ages. We weep. But we have also done other things. The material from FutureChurch shows that we can do something about this. We are creating new liturgies, a new space for ourselves

?As a Catholic woman, I continue to hope. Why? At gatherings such as this for these three days, I hear so many women and women who are so open and want to make this a new church. So I go home having been inspired. I don?t really have a need to run back to traditional worship. There are many organizations that are very much alive, spiritual and Vatican II: Call to Action, Women?s Ordination Conference, Future Church., the congregations of women religious ourselves. In many ways we are a counter organization within an organization.

?I?ve had women say to me, ?How do you put up with those bishops??

?I say, ?To be perfectly honest, I really have very little to do with them. How do you put up with your husband??

?Women still me stories that are shocking. ?I can?t drive when he is in the car. He still pays all the bills, and I have to get some money from him.? This goes on on a regular basis.

?But basically I believe that the congregations of women religious have much more equality and I think that the renewal that took place in our communities brought about that equality. We worked hard at this for many years. I think that alternative communities are worshipping and are also ecumenical, which is a major breakthrough.

?And finally I get hope from the words of scripture. In the fullness of time God?s purpose will be revealed. The question is, when will the renewal come? In the fullness of time. It may be tomorrow. Maybe next week. But it?s God?s time, not my time. In the fullness of time. I also have the deep conviction that nothing is impossible with God. People will say to me, ?You can?t do that, it?s not possible.? With God, all things are possible. And those are the things that give me great hope.?

For the edited version of Sr. Theresa Kane's talk read'In the fullness of time, God's purpose will be revealed'[1].

For more on the Celebration conference readMeeting urges persistence for church renewal[2].

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