

Respect the Holy Spirit in church life, theologian says

Thomas C. Fox | Jun. 10, 2011



Maureen Tilley addresses Catholic Theology Society of America (photo: Jan Jans)

SAN JOSE, Calif. -- Maureen A. Tilley, professor of theology at Fordham University, opened the 66th annual gathering of The Catholic Theological Society of America here June 9, asking a straightforward question: "What does it mean to be Holy?"

Her artful talk weaved its way through patristic history, models of church reaction to sin and disunity, examined recent Vatican handling of "wayward" brethren, and ended with an appeal to collectively implore the Holy Spirit for inspiration and direction.

The theme of this year's CTSA gathering deals with holiness in so far as it centers on saints and sanctity. Officially, the conference theme is "One Wholly Catholic: Saints and Sanctity in the Post-Apostolic Church," which appears to leave a lot of room for theological discussion.

Her plenary address followed a warm welcoming address by San Jose Bishop Patrick Joseph McGrath.

"The predominant use of 'holy' concerned the Holy Spirit active in the united Christian community," said Tilley, referring to early church communities. "The Spirit is the source of unity. So holiness is not an individual project but a communal one. It is the church and not individuals who are called holy in the New Testament."

This model worked early on, but eventually ran into problems as the church grew. It became increasingly difficult, said Tilley, recently tenured (her second tenured theology post) at Fordham, particularly when it came to dealing with church members who acted against unity, including sinners within the church.

She then sketched several early church responses to the dilemma of accommodating sinfulness in a pure church filled with the Holy Spirit. Somehow there had to be a place for human frailty.

Over time, she said, the church witnessed "an eventually diminishing connection between the Church and the Holy Spirit and holiness or lack thereof."

Can a bishop or sinful priest convey grace in the sacraments? Are the baptisms of those they baptize valid and grace filled?

“Gradually,” Tilley continued, “the individual sins of members of the Church ceased to matter to the issue of unity or holiness. Teaching on the indwelling and action of the Holy Spirit was what had held them together and that too was greatly diminished,” she said.

“So we can see in the evolution of Western patristic thought a movement from a strictly bounded church with no place for evil to a church in which evil must be tolerated to some degree until the end of time for the sake of those whom God knows will repent before the Harvest at the end of the world.”

Then turning to 20th century church history, Tilley said she saw church leaders appealing to different “models” of church as they become forced to accommodate or confront wayward brethren.

She contrasted the way the Vatican, on the one hand, dealt with the Priestly Society of Saint Pius X and Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association; and, on the other, with bishops and theologians.

“The desire for unity for the first two cases, the Priestly Society of Saint Pius X and the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, reveal a model of church that feels it can take care of itself and is focused on concerns for the welfare of individual souls.”

Vatican disputes with bishops and theologians worked out of a different model, she said.

Repeatedly John Paul II and Benedict XVI, she said, reached out to the Society of Saint Pius X and to the Catholic Patriotic Association in China. That was not the case, however, with the way it handled members of its on flock.

“For people who are not on the outside or even on the edges, for active Catholics, the Vatican response to their perceived evil of disunity is different.” Here, she said, unity demanded “personal holiness which in turn is recognized, not in the sharing of the Spirit as it once did, but in adherence to orthopraxis, elevated to the status of orthodoxy.”

Tilley used as examples Vatican treatment of:

- Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen of Seattle, to whom a coadjutor was assigned who removed him from diocesan leadership.
- Bishop Jacques Gaillot who was demoted from bishop of Évreux, France, to titular bishop of Parthenia, a place with no Christians in Algeria.
- Multiple bishops deposed from sees in the last few years in sub-Saharan Africa.
- And Bishop William Morris of Toowoomba, Australia was forced to resign last month



Meanwhile, multiple theologians, she said, have had their work deemed

unacceptable to the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith. "The response to these men and women has been different. Errant bishops now find themselves outside circles of power, or out of office, and theologians find their works condemned without a hearing."

Tilley asked: "Is the church less able to deal with bishops and theologians than with schismatics? Do the acts of bishops and theologians pose more of a threat to the unity, holiness and catholicity of the church than the Priestly Fraternity or the CPA?"

Quoting Pope Benedict XVI, the answer is "yes," said Tilley. He says that "[T]oday we are seeing it in a really terrifying way: that the greatest persecution of the Church comes not from her enemies without, but arises from sin within the Church."

She concluded, saying this phenomenon reveals two different ideas of the Church as one, holy and catholic at work. "One seems to be confident that the church has what it takes to care for errant sinners and bring them back to the fold. The other is afraid that the evil world, outside the church and especially inside, is able to lure away the sheep."

"One might say, well, different problems require different solutions. That too might be true. But the different solutions themselves tend to reflect back on the conceptions of the Church and to engender, form and reinforce different concepts kinds of churches, one confident and one fearful.

"Who is to choose? The saints themselves. They are already choosing when they admit to communion divorced and remarried Catholics. They are already choosing in what they buy and read. Are they making good choices? Are they directed by the Holy Spirit? How are they "you" to make good choices?"

Tilley finished by saying that there needs to be a recovery of respect, not merely lip service, for the role of the Holy Spirit in engendering unity and holiness in the church.

[Tom Fox is *NCR* editor.]

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