

Theologians leave San Jose lifted after pondering saints

Thomas C. Fox | Jun. 12, 2011 NCR Today

SAN JOSE, Calif. -- As Catholic Theological Society of America members wrapped up a four-day sojourn in this thriving, multi-ethnic, technologically driven city of close to a million, a city idyllically tucked onto the southern edge of the San Francisco Bay and protected from harsh climate by mountains on three sides, a city boasting 300 sunny days annually with average temperatures in mid-70s, a city near the wildly confident Santa Clara University, it's easy to leave here imagining, if only momentarily, a loving church unencumbered by division and blatant human frailty, is actually possible and not just a distant dream.

We all like to dream.

The San Jose experience for the 325 plus Catholic theologians from throughout North American and beyond has certainly seemed dreamy in a positive sense. It has been rich in imagination and good will. The dozens of prepared talks and countless discussions, formal and informal -- every one of them -- were aimed at building discourse, community and church. Sure, natural differences on theology separate people of good will, but deeper bonds, recognizing deep hurt within the family, even a sense of mourning, seemed to be the stronger bonding tie.

These church scholars arrived here off balance, perplexed and pained by the recent way one of their dearest colleagues, Elizabeth Johnson of Fordham University, was sideswiped by a group of bishops who gathered in the name of church and doctrine, but appeared to abuse the authority stemming from both.

They also came burdened by decades of bad press stemming from unimaginable sexual abuse within the church and by a hierarchy that seems cut off from the people and set on moving the church backward in time when they feel the most pressing task at hand is to preserve essential traditions while moving forward.

Yet these theologians also brought common commitment to scholarship and deep respect for discourse and reason and, yes, they are still energized by a grand church council now becoming a distant living memory.

Vatican II among these men and women has a positive ring, a good feeling. It says to them that church can be mystical, sacramental, contemporary and relevant all at the same time. It has grounded their faith and directed their careers, be they the elders of the society or the relative newcomers.

When they gather in a room it is noticeable that the days of priests formulating the theologies of our church are also long past. They are now lay by large numbers. Moreover for the first time in more than 20 centuries, our theologians are walking - and thinking - on both feet, male and female.

Together these men and women remain convinced that studying books and pondering ideas about God, church, and world affairs, and the way these heady matters relate to one another can make a difference in the depths and qualities of our lives. But these pillars rest on others called respect, civil discourse and trust. Our Catholic faith, they will proudly remind you, is a "reasoned faith." The gifts of intellect and open conversation matters.

Some of these notions became apparent on the first night the Catholic theologians gathered when a Bishop

Patrick Joseph McGrath, only the second bishop of San Jose, greeted the newly arrived scholars with welcoming remarks that amounted to a large kiss and warm Irish embrace.



McGrath said all the right things, touched on all the right subjects, offering gratitude to people who have dedicated their lives to scholarship and the church. He noted that there was a time when all the best theologians were bishops ? adding, adding with a wink and to an approving audience, ?but that was some time ago.?

McGrath tuned his remarks to the theologians? conference theme: ?All the Saints,? quoting from - would you believe? - Elizabeth Johnson, present in the room and whose writings some of his fellow bishops just weeks back found not to be in keeping with ?authentic Catholic teachings.?

Before he could walk away from the podium every person in the Regency ballroom at the Fairmont hotel was on their feet, offering a sustained applause. If there is an episcopal ? theologian rift in our church, it was not visible that night.

You could sense the drop in blood pressure throughout the room. If there was any lingering sadness, it was simply the idea of how little it takes to build good will among people who want to be respected and acknowledged for their dedication to the church.

And, of course, the men and women who have gathered are bright - and know that insight rests aside a two way street.

Over the years there?s been a lot of talk, especially among younger theologians, that some of their elders have gotten too polarized in the wake of the council. History seems to bear out that church polarization follows every major council. The younger ?recently tenured? and ?the hopefully one day tenured? theologians like to think of

themselves, ideally, as beyond the most dogmatic polarization.



Meanwhile, discussions generated by the language of the council, it is said, are less meaningful to that younger generation. Nevertheless, the notion of a pastoral church as the ideal, if not yet the norm, has been absorbed by virtually all, including the best of the young.

No one could say the theme of this theological gathering, "All the Saints," favored the post-conciliar church. An examination of the Communion of Saints and its meaning and implications for the world today is, at first glance, takes a universal, if not traditional, stage. In this instance it was a magnet for both piety, but more frequently radical imagination.

The scholars gathered here took the theme of saints in many directions, unpacking a deep and rich Catholic mysticism that united the living and the dead, while carrying bonds to the far corners of the earth where the most impoverished of souls languish without food and proper water. The talks and discussions weaved through Catholic sacramental, social, political and liturgical theologies.

Before the conference ended, the theologians gathered for soul lifting Eucharist celebrated at the Cathedral Basilica of Saint Joseph, a liturgy that combined old and new, classical music and rich contemporary hymns. By the time it was finished, those who had gathered were off to a banquet where one of their favorite colleagues, Fr. James A. Coriden, a self deprecating and kind soul, was honored as the recipient of the 2011 Catholic Theology Society of America John Courtney Murray award, the society's highest honor.

With the award announcement, the California reds and whites on the banquet tables seemed to have a special aftertaste.

No single gathering of dedicated colleagues, no one bishop's remarks, no one discussion of what it means to be a saint and to be connected with others over time is going to be enough to heal division and pain. But together they showed surprises happen, blessings continue, and hope can draw us forward together.

We Catholics are known to be a ragtag lot, and that might be our saving grace. We are pretty ordinary people called to do extra-ordinary things.

Having listened to a lot of thoughtful people talk about saints, one can come to realize the best of those saints were also pretty ordinary people, at times discouraged and feeling pain, not all that different from the rest of us.

Not that anyone is claiming halos. Rather the line between saint and sinner is thinner than maybe we've been led to believe. Meanwhile, it seems ordinary people can, indeed, think and do extraordinary things, especially in community and with a little help and encouragement from friends.

And so it seems that many of the men and women who came here left inspired by the thought that they, too, working together, working with others, yes, including the bishops, in the end, just might be in that number when the saints go marching in.

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