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Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Charism of administration among theologians

Leo J. O'Donovan | Jun. 17, 2011

Photo by Jan Jans

At this year?s recently concluded Catholic Theological Society of America convention in San Jose, California, the Pentecost liturgy was celebrated June 11 in that city?s grandly renovated cathedral. Theologians from the United States, Canada, Australia and Europe who gathered in great arcs of seats around the high altar will remember much from the inspiring Eucharist, but perhaps nothing more than seeing Dee Christie, the executive director of the society who retires on June 30, and Mary Jane Ponyik, her successor, bringing the gifts to the altar.

?Now there,? many of us thought, ?is Paul?s charism of administration (*cubernesis*) embodied exactly in our Dee.?

Born in Cleveland in 1938, Dee met her future husband Richard Christie at 13 and fell in love with him a few years later (sitting on a radiator in a John Carroll University auditorium). They married in 1960 and had what Dee calls a ?tidy Catholic family: boy, girl, boy, girl, boy, girl?. (And now 11 grandchildren as well.)

Dee had studied biology in college but when Dick returned to Cleveland to practice medicine, she enrolled in the masters program at John Carroll, wrote a thesis on John?s beloved disciple, and having caught the theology bug, commuted to Duquesne for two years to earn her Ph D in 1988, with a thesis on the moralist Louis Janssens

After teaching for ten years at Ursuline College, she returned to John Carroll, teaching courses in moral theology, writing and giving talks, especially in medical ethics, and sitting on various committees (currently, for example, at St. Vincent Medical Center in Cleveland and the Ohio Solid Organ Transplant Consortium). On her desk is a manuscript on moral decision-making that she looks forward now to finishing.

In 1996 came the society?s invitation to serve first as its secretary and then as its executive director. With that life changed for Dee?and for all of us society members.

Innumerable details had to be handled in her office during the course of each year: membership dues, records, the proceedings of the previous year?s convention, the web site, meetings of the board of directors, and on and on. For each of these Dee credits colleagues who contribute to getting the engine to purr. There are also innumerable personal contacts during the year: with the president-elect who plans a given year?s convention,

with local arrangements committees, with publishers who want to sell their books, with the church where the convention liturgy will be celebrated.

But the major job is booking, organizing and supervising the annual convention itself. As the letter of gratitude (Not a plaque! She did not want a plaque.) presented to Dee at this year?s business meeting said: ?With unfailing good humor and charm you have shepherded CTSA conventions in a dozen different cities. From Minneapolis to Ottawa, from Miami (twice) to San Jose (twice), from Milwaukee, to New Orleans, to Cincinnati, to Reston, VA and St Louis, to San Antonio, to Los Angeles, to Halifax, and to Cleveland?whew!? The letter might have added that future conventions have already been booked for the next five years, in Miami, Pittsburgh, Milwaukee, Puerto Rico, and Albuquerque..height="200" width="250"

Dee brought remarkable administrative acumen and ingenuity to each of these conventions. Are hotel rates going up? Then book early and lock in today?s rates. (She could drive a very hard bargain for the society; the rose has thorns to protect itself.) Do the hotels appreciate that many of our members are women? Check the rooms?and the rest rooms near the plenary sessions. Does that strawberry shortcake desert taste tired? Re-order, and test again, and if necessary again. Where can members find cheaper breakfasts and lunches? Are young members anxious? Introduce them around. ?But I?m sure I pre-registered (at the lower rate).? ?Sorry, my dear.? (Omitting the next line: ?Send in the clowns.?)

?Dee Christie has literally ?made? the annual convention?happen for the 15 years of her tenure as executive director,? one CTSA president told me, ?and so, in a very real way, she has made so much of contemporary theology happen.? Dee herself says that ?working closely?with a variety of personalities at a time which is often a major public career event for them gives one insight into the wisdom, compassion, competence, and?yes?sometimes the deepest vulnerabilities of these prominent folks.? So it has been the CTSA?s enormous good fortune to have had not only an unusually organized and dedicated administrator but someone with an equally stunning sense of humor?spirited, salty, as twinkling as her eyes.

We heard it in e-mails (sent quickly in reply to whatever question), at registration desks, in the hallways of hotel after hotel, and with a stand-up comic?s flair on her way to the podium at business meetings to give the Executive Director?s report.

This year, after the whole assembly leaped to its feet with thunderous applause for her, the progress to the podium was a bit more muted. She was then given not only our letter of congratulations, but a travel voucher for some well earned vacation. And theologians lined up one after another: ?Won?t you please use it to visit us??

O?Donovan, former president of Georgetown University, is also a former president of the Catholic Theological Society of America.

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