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

Theologians, bishops called to dialogue, trust

NCR Editorial Staff | Jun. 20, 2011

Reconciliation rests at the heart of our Christian faith. It does not mean simply splitting the difference with an opposing force. Rather it requires true transformation, and this cannot be achieved without a sense of humility, self-reflection, and an appreciation of the gift of grace. The life of Jesus is both the measure and means of Christian reconciliation. While the sacrament of reconciliation involves the forgiveness of sins, in the wider context it is about transformation centered within the love of Christ.

Stories of reconciliation, some successfully accomplished, others waiting to happen, keep finding their ways into our paper. And given the painful divisions we face both in our church and through the wider world, it makes sense we keep getting drawn back to the need for true reconciliation. Some examples:

After a May suspension imposed by Chicago Cardinal Francis George, Fr. Michael Pfleger was returned to full-time ministry at his parish, St. Sabina, a month later (See **Pfleger back at St. Sabina; transition plan agreed upon [1]**.)

The cardinal had objected to remarks Pfleger made on radio, saying that if he had to choose between moving to the presidency of a local high school as the cardinal wished or being forced out of the priesthood, ?then I would have to look outside the church? for ministry opportunities.

The archdiocese was besieged by demands that this ?disobedient? priest be put in his place, while parishioners and other supporters weighed in with prayers and petitions, rallies, and a picketing of the cardinal?s mansion.

However, after three days of negotiation involving George, Pfleger and five other Chicago priests, the dispute was resolved. Pfleger said the meetings provided a good conversation. ?Everyone was concerned for the people and what was best for everyone.?

In his homily after being reinstated, Pfleger said: ?You?ve got to know somebody?s story, and then you?ll look at them differently. ... Crises will pass, if people stay in God?s presence and expect something beautiful to come out of troubled times.?

Two lessons might be gleaned here. One, reconciliation is served by looking to the greater good, in this case the needs of the people both Pfleger and George are called to serve. Two, staying in God?s presence. Doing so has a way of deflating self-importance, opening the door to transformation.

On another front, we have been following the story of the March findings by the U.S. bishops? Committee on Doctrine, which saw theological error in Fordham University professor St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson?s book, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*. The committee?s judgment and the process by which it came to judgment have caused a rift in the Catholic community between some bishops and some theologians.

Bishops and theologians have been trying to figure out how to work together and sort out their proper roles --

pastors, scholars, educators -- since the early church. Along the way they have often stepped on each other?s toes, causing pain and the eventual need for reconciliation. We appear to be at such a moment once again.

The problem, as noted, is not new. Tensions rose between U.S. bishops and theologians in the 1970s and through the 1980s. It was in 1989 that, in an effort to reconcile, a ?Doctrinal Responsibilities? statement was formally approved by the bishops? conference. Under the heading ?Ecclesial Responsibilities,? which considers the responsibilities and rights of both bishops and theologians, it stated: ?It is inevitable that misunderstandings about the teaching of the Gospel and the ways of expressing it will arise. In such cases, informal conversation ought to be the first step towards resolution.?

Following widespread criticisms from theologians concerning the doctrine committee?s action, Capuchin Fr. Thomas G. Weinandy, executive director of the bishops? Secretariat for Doctrine, sent a letter to the faculty at Fordham University in New York, saying the committee had never intended to tarnish Johnson?s reputation or impugn her honor or dedication to the church. The committee, he wrote, ?in no way calls into question the dedication, honor, creativity, or service? of Johnson. One might think the committee should have known that its findings that she was not adequately grounded in authentic teaching and her presentation of the Trinity is ?undermining? the Gospel would, at least, ?tarnish? her reputation. Johnson?s place in the theological academy is secure, but the committee judgments expose her to hostile forces in the church that have long wanted to diminish her influence. Certainly this was not the intent of the bishops on the doctrine committee.

Nevertheless, Weinandy expressed an openness to enter into conversation with Johnson -- an elementary step on the road to reconciliation.

Johnson took up the offer and issued a 38-page response to the bishops? critique of her book. (See our story and Johnson's entire response here: **Fordham theologian strenuously defends 2007 book** **[2]**.)

The bishops, meanwhile, meeting in Bellevue, Wash., said they would respond to Johnson?s response. As in the George and Pfleger case, the parties in conflict are in dialogue.

Reconciliation, it should be added, does not mean settling all differences by winning the other side to yours. Rather it means being open and honest and respectful in attitude when working to resolve conflict. In weighty doctrinal matters? seemingly small differences, the meaning given to even a single word can cause separation.

Maintaining honest differences, however, is separate from allowing reconciliation, or transformation of spirit, to occur. Reconciliation is made both possible and desirable by common goals to serve the larger Christian community and to be one in Christ.

We have come to see that our clergy and theologians need to devise new ways to build trust. There was a time a generation or longer ago when theology was almost entirely the exclusive domain of our clergy. No longer is this the case. Bonds of trust that once grew out of shared lifestyles have gone by the wayside. New methods of trust-building are required.

In Joshua McElwee?s report on the College Theology Society gathering (See: **Religion professors' convention shows theology's new lay face** **[3]**), Bradford Hinze, president of the society, says that 30 years ago ?almost all? theologians were priests. They played golf and racquetball with the bishops, and ?there was a context for a relationship.?

Now our theologians are largely from the laity, and there is less episcopal and theological intermingling. Hinze?s prescription for this dilemma: Bishops and theologians need to create a culture where there?s ?no pressure to say we all have to agree,? a culture of more open and honest conversations.

Talking over serious theological differences is, of course, easier said than done. Scholarship, deeply held beliefs, entire perceptions about the nature and purpose of church can quickly get involved. These are heady matters; egos get involved.

Lest we walk away discouraged, think of Tom Fox?s reporting on the meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America in San Jose, Calif., and in particular what he reported regarding Bishop Patrick McGrath?s welcoming remarks.

Wrote Fox: ?It took the soft-spoken and self-deprecating prelate less than two minutes to break through any tension in the room, telling his audience he respected their work and found it vital for the health of the church. Noted McGrath: ?There was a time when the church?s best theologians were bishops.? He paused and then added, ?But that was a long time ago.? ?

Think of this. A little episcopal generosity of spirit and ego-deflating humor transformed the entire American theological academe, at least momentarily.

Sometimes it doesn?t take much.

More NCR coverage of Sr. Elizabeth Johnson's *Quest for the Living God*:

- **Bishops to discuss Johnson's defense of her 2007 book[2]**
- **Full text of Johnson letter to the U.S. bishops' doctrine committee[4]**

Coverage of the CTS and CTSA gatherings:

- **Religion professors' convention shows theology's new lay face[3]**
- **Theologians' meeting sets tone of reconciliation[5]**
- **Theologians, bishops called to dialogue, trust[6]**

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