

Sisters 'are living in a time of new birth'

Monica Clark | Aug. 11, 2011



GARDEN GROVE, CALIF. -- Life for women religious in the United States is in labor, undergoing birth pangs from which new life will emerge.

That was the message Dominican Sr. Barbara Reid delivered Aug. 10 to more than 600 sisters gathered here for the annual assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

LCWR has approximately 1,500 members who are the elected leaders of some 370 religious orders across America. They represent more than 50,000 women religious.

In her hour-long keynote address, Reid, who is vice president and academic dean at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago as well as a professor of New Testament studies, explored Scriptural foundations and biblical images as the context for her belief that religious life is being born anew.

Her insights drew enthusiastic response among community presidents and leadership teams struggling with an aging membership, few new members and resultant financial constraints.

The sisters are spending three days here in contemplation about the future direction of religious life, and Reid's presentation provided a theological framework for that reflection.

"We are in a wonderful position to be here with one another and to recognize together that we are living in a time of new birth," said Sr. Barbara Blesse, a Dominican of Springfield, Ill., after Reid's presentation. "We can celebrate that."

Monica Clark wrote about the process the women religious leaders are using at their gathering in this story: [LCWR begins next step in reexamination of religious life](#) [1].

This resurgence of hope doesn't mean that whatever is being reborn will come without great cost, just as a woman in labor must undergo intense pain for her child to emerge from the womb.

To explore the complexity of this birthing metaphor, Reid set forth an exegesis that led the sisters from the Book of Genesis's recounting of God's creation out of chaos through to the death of Jesus that opened up new

life.

She noted that images of birthing occur in two crucial and painful times in the history of Israel -- the slavery in Egypt and the exile in Babylon -- when God brought goodness out of suffering.

Likewise the Fourth Evangelist used the birthing metaphor to describe a moment in Jesus' crucifixion when -- one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out? (John 19:34).

Thus, the birthing of a renewed people of God through Jesus' death is symbolized by the breaking of the amniotic fluid, accompanied by uterine blood, Reid said.

The image is extended when Jesus' body is wrapped in linen, just as a newborn is swaddled with bands of cloth.

Jesus' last words, --It is finished,? likewise support the birthing image. It can be heard, said Reid, as the declaration of a mother who cries out in joy when the birth pangs are over and her child is born.

During a discussion after Reid's address, Holy Spirit Sr. Sara Murrieta of Santa Ana, CA noted that just as Jesus didn't remain on earth to see the emergence of the church, perhaps religious women today are being asked to give birth to a new form of religious life in the church and world that they will not live to see fully realized.

Part of the current dying, Reid said, is manifest in a changing understanding about the origins of the universe and the workings of the cosmos.

This shift, she said, --is influencing almost every realm of life, both secular and religious. We are relinquishing mechanistic and dualistic views of the universe, and the mistaken notion that it was within our province to understand the workings of the universe and to gain complete mastery over physical matter. --

--Things we thought we knew with certitude are no longer so, and a way of life that seems predictable and secure is not. Chaos is not just a scientific theory, but characterizes our daily lived reality.--

Reid recalled the first Creation story in which God demonstrates mastery over the chaos, creating an order that puts everything in right relationship. And after each new creative act, God --saw that it was good.? (Gen. 1, 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31).

She points out two important theological affirmations in this account -- the world and everything God has created is good; God is more powerful than the forces of chaos.

She adds that this story invites contemporary women religious to contemplate --the fecundity of chaos? and to recognize that divine creativity works --from the inside out, abiding deep within, drawing us into love, and impelling us outward in mission in ever creative patterns of generative love.--

As sisters find the forms and structures of their lives realigning (including the merging of communities and the formation of new alliances with other religious and lay people), Reid concludes, they --are in concert with the creative rhythms of our universe.--

Drawing on the LCWR assembly theme of --Embodying Holy Mystery,? Reid also spoke of another affirmation in the first Genesis account -- that the mystery of God goes beyond gender, embracing the equality of male and female.

This, she said, was an --astounding? insight in the ancient Near East where hand-made images of god, usually in the form of an animal or human being, were thought to make the god present.

In contrast, Israel forbade the use of divine images because it is in human beings, both male and female, that the presence of God is made manifest.

Nothing in this creation narrative, said Reid, points to the superiority of the male. Rather humankind is spoken of as a unity, within which there is differentiation of male and female.

Reid said that the second Genesis account, which culminates in the creation of woman, also shows clearly that woman is the result of a deliberate decision by God, not an afterthought, nor as a second best derivative of man.

In fact, said Reid drawing on the work of Phyllis Trible in "God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality," the rhetorical movement of the creation story has God improving on creation with each act.

For example, when there is no plant or greenery, God creates a garden; when there is no water to nurture the plants, God creates a stream. And when the human being needs a companion, God creates woman. "The literary structure," Reid said, "points to the creation of woman as the pinnacle of creation."

Rather than seeing woman as subordinate to man, these and other Scriptural texts, which Reid illustrated with specific Hebrew words, show that both man and woman are created in God's image as equals.

To bring about relationships between men and women that reflect this equality both in the church and society, however, will require much work, she said.

Women religious, she emphasized, can play a unique role in advocating for equality and justice for women and girls and in embodying ways of relating in equal partnership.

It is not too far-fetched, she said, to believe that the rebirthing of religious life can have transforming consequences that reach all realms of the cosmos.

But to give birth to such new ways of thinking, relating and living will require both risk and courage on the part of sisters.

"Like Jesus, we plead to let the cup pass us by, but still we are asked to choose to drink it. What death or deaths are we to undergo as the birth pangs for Holy Mystery's new creation," she asked.

That is likely to be the question the sisters will ponder as they sit in contemplation together each afternoon of this assembly.

Said Sr. Barbara Blesse, "I believe we are giving birth to something new. It is mysterious and unknown. We are seeking together what God is doing from within. And we have the responsibility as mid-wives to assist in this new birth."

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