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CTSA concludes with examination of new evangelization

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It is perhaps the biggest catchphrase in Roman Catholic ecclesial renewal: the new evangelization. Yet it remains a phrase in search of a definitive definition.

At the conclusion of this year's Catholic Theological Society of America meeting, outgoing President Susan Ross offered a final address reflecting on the ways the new evangelization might relate to professional theologians, particularly in light of this year's conference theme of "conversion."

Ross, a professor of theology and chair of her department at Loyola University, Chicago, based her talk on an experience common to many theological scholars teaching in Catholic universities these days: being asked a bright, thoughtful and engaged student why she stays Catholic.

Ross' response seems consistent with many Catholics who struggle to answer that same question:

> I answered by saying that no institution is without flaws, that I needed to be reminded weekly about what was really important in life, that the church is about so much more than the hierarchy, that the tradition is so rich, that the liturgy is not all about me, that I am a part of a worldwide community, and where else do I get to go sing every week. I said that while I struggled with a number of things in the church, overall, I found that my faith was a part of my life that was not optional, and that despite my questions and concerns, the church continued, mostly, to nourish me. In short, I need the church.

The heart of the problem, Ross says, is that these answers were probably not enough to convince the student to return to the church in which he was baptized.

Like so many of the presentations offered at this weekend's conference, Ross contemplated the fragmentation in both the church and scholarly community, and the difficulty of carrying out the theological task in a world and, sometimes, an institutional church that is not hospitable to theologians.

"I think it is fair to say that one basic truth emerging from the new evangelization is that both the world and the church are continually in need of conversion," Ross said, evoking the theme of this year's convention.

And as much as Ross needs the church, she remains convinced that the church needs theologians, too.

"How can theologians, in cooperation with the institutional church, engage in the new evangelization through imagination, humor, commitment, discernment, and hospitality?" Ross asked her colleagues.

The answer, she believes, lies in dialogue with the institutional church. "Unfortunately, we do not live in a time of thoughtful and respectful dialogue," Ross said, "so this poses a real challenge."

Nevertheless, Ross has dedicated much of the past year of her presidency inviting bishops and theologians to meet for dinners and discussion. "I am gratified to see that some of these have borne fruit. My hope is that these

dialogues can continue on their own power," she told members of the society.

The project was in inspired in part by the response of women religious to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's criticism of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in April 2012. She said she believes theologians are in an analogous situation.

Ross also suggested that women religious are our strongest models for the new evangelization. "Before the Second Vatican Council, women religious represented for many Catholics the most stable and un-modern population in the church," she explained. They " 'left the world,' wore habits, and lived in enclosed communities."

"But they were in fact very much in touch with the needs of those to whom they ministered, and in the 1940s and '50s, increasingly to their own communities," Ross continued.

As they responded to Vatican II, the sisters became a model of ecclesial innovation, developing "peer to peer relationships, an authority of expertise, collaboration and consensus, and the virtues of creativity, originality, adaptability, and proficiency."

"We can hardly do better than to model ourselves after women religious, whose interior and exterior conversions are a model of living out the Gospel message," she told her colleagues.

Ross wrapped up her remarks by hearkening back to the student who asked her why she stays Catholic. The student, it turns out, is son of a Chilean exile who was forced to leave his country 40 years ago. "He had learned from his parents something about totalitarian regimes, taking risks, seeking the truth. And he found in the witness of women religious a model of what it meant to live faithfully," Ross said.

"In this humility before the Absolute," Ross concluded, "we may hope to be credible witnesses to a life-giving Mystery. We owe ourselves and our students nothing less."

Members of CTSA expressed their gratitude for Ross' words and insights with a sustained standing ovation.

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