News



Daughter of Charity Sr. Carol Keehan addresses graduates, faculty and guests of the Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University at All Souls Episcopal Parish church in Berkeley, California May 25. (Courtesy of Santa Clara University)



by Thomas C. Fox

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Daughter of Charity Sr. Carol Keehan, speaking before graduates of the Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University May 25, encouraged them to keep the Gospels front and center in their academic pursuits while avoiding simplistic solutions to the various problems facing the church today.

She called the sex abuse scandal and episcopal cover-ups "an unprecedented crisis of historic proportions," saying they stem from attitudes of imperialism inside the church and not strictly from its clerical structure. "I propose that we do not need to focus so much on clericalism as on imperialism in the church," she said.

Keehan, who received an honorary degree, is the retiring president and CEO of the Catholic Health Association. She was cited in 2010 as one of Time magazine's "100 most influential People in the World" and by National Catholic Reporter as its "Person of the Year" for her interventions in helping pass the Affordable Care Act.

She spoke at All Souls Episcopal Parish here, addressing school administrators, academics, and friends and families of 44 graduates from 11 nations, including Uganda, Jordan, India, Nigeria, Uruguay, Benin, Taiwan, Rwanda, Philippines, Vietnam and the United States.



Jesuit Frs. Michael Engh and Kevin O'Brien place honorary degree regalia on Daughter of Charity Sr. Carol Keehan. (Courtesy of Santa Clara University)

She began her address by thanking the young academics for pursuing theological degrees. "We are muddling through fairly well with our computers and sciences, but the disarray in our journeys to live life to its fullest as individuals, as church, as a country or a world is so painfully evident."

"As a world, we see tensions significantly on the rise. Threats and counter-threats from nations with massive nuclear weapons, corruption and violence that impacts most especially the poorest, and the urgent and serious threats to our planet crowd whatever form of media you look at.

"This calls for inspired and creative leadership that helps individuals and groups step back and focus on the meaning and value of life, the inherent dignity of each person, the noble duty to make the world better for everyone, to be attentive to the common good.

"Historically we have looked to our church to be the lodestar in sorting out these issues and leading the way," the woman religious said, before adding this is not the case today because the abuse crisis has left us "stunned, ashamed and angry." It has sapped the church its credibility in so many venues, she said, "from the parish to the world stage.

"The incredible message of God's love for each of us, the wonders of his plan for each of us individually and as a people risks being completely drowned out. It is only this message that calls and guides us to be our best selves and experience the joy of life that effectively helps us deal with the myriad of issues we face."

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She said emphatically: "It is imperative that we all work to transform our church to the church Christ calls it to be."

"Many are trying to find quick fixes, sole causes that range from homosexuality to clericalism. Many have a suggested cure. My fear is that we will focus on one symptom and fail miserably," she went on.

"We hear Pope Francis talk so frequently about becoming a humbled church that models the behavior of Jesus. He also talks about what the church becomes when it

does not do this," Keehan said, citing passage from *Gaudete et Exsultate*, in which he wrote:

> Not infrequently, contrary to the promptings of the Spirit, the life of the church can become a museum piece or the possession of a select few. This can occur when some groups of Christians give excessive importance to certain rules, customs or ways of acting. The Gospel then tends to be reduced and restricted, deprived of its simplicity, allure and savor. This may well be a subtle form of Pelagianism, for it appears to subject the life of grace to certain human structures. It can affect groups, movements and communities and it explains why so often they begin with an intense life in the Spirit, only to end up fossilized or corrupt.
>
> Once we believe that everything depends on human effort as channeled by ecclesial rules and structures, we unconsciously complicate the Gospel and become enslaved to a blueprint that leaves few openings for the workings of grace.

Keehan said we must all be especially attentive that "our efforts to transform our church do not do so in ways that complicate the Gospel and leave the church fossilized."

"We hear," she said, "that clericalism is what we must root out, and that will fix it. Indeed, a case can easily be made that many abuses have occurred because of the abuse of power by clerics."

"However, look at history," she continued. "How many times have we seen countries, groups or organizations get rid of an abusive dictator only to have their liberator become the new abusive dictator? What I fear is that we could easily do this. I propose that do not need to focus so much on clericalism as on imperialism in the church."

She defined imperialism as "the imposition of power, authority and/or influence on others," adding it can and has been done by clerics. "But you do not need a Roman collar to do it."

Keehan warned that many groups today are vying for power and leadership and using money, media, connections and other means to impose their viewpoints on

the church. "If they are successful, the last state will be worse than the first."

She proposed a different path: building a church "guided and governed by the message of the Gospels and not by special interest groups, be they clerical or non-clerical."

Again, citing Francis, Keehan warned against "the new Pelagians," who, in Francis' words "insist on taking another path that of justification by their own efforts, the worship of the human will and their own abilities. The result is a self-centered and elitist complacency, bereft of true love."

Francis, she said, finds this expressed in a variety of seemingly unconnected ways of thinking and acting, including "an obsession with law, an absorption with social and political advantages, a punctilious concern for the church's liturgy, doctrine and prestige, a vanity about the ability to manage practical matters and an excessive concern with programs of self-help and personal fulfillment."

According to Francis, Keehan went on, these Christians "spend their time and energy on these things, rather than letting themselves be led by the Spirit in the way of love, rather than being passionate about communicating the beauty and the joy of the Gospel and seeking out the lost among the immense crowds that thirst for Christ."



Sr. Carol Keehan, left, and Jesuit Fr. Michael Engh, president of Santa Clara University, leave All Souls Episcopal Parish church after the commencement ceremony May 25. (Courtesy of Santa Clara University)

Asked later how she could imagine a "post imperial" church coming to life, she said, "We must continue to force honesty, integrity and transparency. ... If we lost all influence but we still were true to the Gospels, we would be an incredibly powerful force for the good of people, not for our own aggrandizement."

Keehan finished her talk lamenting that many are being deprived today of the joy of the Gospel, "especially our young people." She called upon the new graduates to use their education to help people know Christ "in ways that help them live more joyful lives."

According to the school's strategic plan and history online, Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University is an international center of scholarly and ministerial formation. It is rooted in the Ignatian tradition while engaging in "ecumenical, interfaith and intercultural dialogue."

The school was established in 1934 as Alma College in Los Gatos, California, to serve the needs of the Jesuit provinces of California and Oregon. "In February 1969, the school relocated to Berkeley to become one of the member schools of the Graduate Theological Union," a consortium encompassing eight graduate schools of theology in the Bay Area. In 2009, it became "integrated as a graduate school of Santa Clara University."

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