

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

November 7, 2009 at 8:14am

'Were it not for Call To Action...'

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NCR Today



Jim Fitzgerald, the new executive director of Call to Action for the

first time in his new role stood before more than 2,000 gathered delegates to the 2009 conference held in Milwaukee this weekend.

These were his remarks:

Good evening Call To Action! Peace be with you.

As I complete my first 12 weeks as Call To Action's new Executive Director, in this month of Thanksgiving, I find so much for which to be grateful.

First, I am profoundly grateful for Dan and Sheila Daley. Their visionary and prophetic leadership at CTA for over 30 years created a beloved organization that has kept countless of Catholics in the Church. CTA has given me a home in the Catholic Church and for that I owe Dan and Sheila my love.

Secondly, CTA owes tremendous gratitude to Pat O'Connell, CTA's Transitional Executive Director.

Thanks to Pat's experience and professionalism, CTA continues to successfully weather the current economic recession while many other non-profits are closing their doors. Pat has been and continues to be a blessing to Call To Action.

Finally, our national board of directors is a very engaged board and all board members give a great deal while serving. But the Co-Presidents have shouldered far greater demands. Travel, speaking engagements, fundraising, countless of weekend and evening meetings ? all of which is volunteer work on top of already intensely busy professional lives. Patty Hawk and Paul Scarbrough bring to a close the six years they have served as CTA's Co-Presidents. They have offered a model of co-leadership that has served Call To Action well and this organization is a better one in large part because of these two remarkable individuals. At this time, I'd like to invite everyone gathered in this room please join me in offering thunderous thanks and gratitude as Paul and Patty come forward to receive a token of our appreciation.

?I don't think I would be Catholic if it weren't for Call To Action.? It is a comment I have heard so many times in my 12 years with CTA. While I was a college student at The College of Saint Rose in Albany, NY, I voiced my doubts about remaining Catholic to Sister Nancy Langhart, a Franciscan sister who was my campus minister. I told Nancy that I feel Catholic in my spirit, but I have such difficulty staying in the Church when the Vatican says other religions are deficient, that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people are intrinsically disordered, and that the priestly women in my life are not suitable to be ordained or serve in official leadership because of their gender. Regardless of what the Vatican said, I knew in my heart and soul that it is not one's sexual identity or gender that is disordered; it's homophobia and sexism in the name of Jesus that's disordered!

Nancy smiled compassionately as if she knew exactly what I was feeling, leaned over and asked, ?Have you ever heard of Call To Action?? In 1997, Nancy drove me to Detroit and introduced me to the Call To Action conference experience and I was home! Tonight, I'm thrilled to say Nancy is here and once again we get to share together this wonderful gathering. Thank you Nancy for bringing me home.

I can remember driving home from Detroit's Cobo Hall after my first conference thinking the inclusive vision of church would be ushered in with the election of a new Pope who would stand on the balcony of St. Peter's and make a sweeping announcement of inclusion and reform. Even in my fantasies about church reform, I still gave all power and responsibility to the hierarchy.

I have come to fully understand what was expressed at a recent gathering of CTA chapter leaders ? we can no longer be knocking on the doors of the hierarchy seeking change, we must BE the change we wish to see in the church. This inclusive vision of church we seek has not, cannot, and will not come from anyone else ? but ourselves.

Call To Action (and the entire church reform movement for that matter) is at an exciting transition.

Positive change is happening in ways we never thought possible. My partner, Jaimy and I had often wondered if we were blessed with a child, would we raise our child in the Catholic Church? We had doubts because we want our child to experience an inclusive environment ? where no one was going to be judged for who they are or what ideas they find persuasive. A community where not only women are viewed as equal but the feminine that resides in all of us is celebrated.

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Just 19 days ago, Jaimy and I welcomed into our arms our first child, Nathan. In a few months, Nathan

will be baptized into the Spirit of Life Catholic community - one of the many Catholic communities emerging at the grassroots level. In this Catholic community, where there are two pastors, one female, the other male, where the community makes decisions together, where no one is judged for what they think, where the sacrament of marriage is open to love between people regardless of their gender, and everyone is committed to peace, non-violence, and social justice.

This will be our son's Catholic experience ? IF we continue the important and sacred work of Call To



Action.

It is sometimes difficult to be so optimistic. All one needs to do is look around to see inquisition like investigations of women religious and the firing of church employees ? all because they have voiced with integrity insights intended to improve the church. This threatens those with institutional power so much that 1.1 million dollars is needed to silence such prophetic voices. In talking with several women religious, their suggestion ? ?let us raise a million dollars, give it to women religious so that they can investigate the Vatican!?

But we at Call To Action believe in a different kind of church.

We believe in a church that instead of investigating one another, we hold honest, transparent, and open dialogue, especially when we disagree.

- a church that not only advocates for the poor and oppressed but does so from a place of love, peace, and non-violence.
- a church that not only works for equal opportunity for women in church leadership, but also recognizes the holy feminine that dwells within us all? in men as well as women.
- a church that not only addresses racism in our communities and organizational structures, but also honestly confronts white privilege and racism in ourselves.
- a church that not only values its youth, but invites every generation to fully participate so that the wisdom generation can learn from youth just as much as youth can learn from those most experienced in life.
- a church that not only affirms and celebrates LGBT people, but believes these sisters and brothers should be welcomed to all sacraments, not just some of them.

This vision of church will happen, but it has to come from us. Never before has Call To Action been so needed! The kin-dom of God is near and we are being called to co-create with God an inclusive church where everyone is celebrated for being the person they were created to be.

There have been and will always be distractions that will tempt to discourage us.

The lack of accountability and abuse of power has hurt children, women, and men, closed beloved parishes, and weakened the church's moral credibility.

Disagreements offered in good faith are met with one's Catholic identity being questioned, punishment rendered, and excommunication threatened. And this is done ALL in the name of God.

It is enough to drive one to the edge. But it is at the edge where we are called to be.

Our CTA staff meetings always begin with prayer or reflection. At her last official CTA staff meeting, Transitional Executive Director, Pat O'Connell offered a reflection ? the words of French poet and philosopher, Guillaume Apollinaire, I conclude my remarks this evening with his wisdom.

He writes:

?Come to the edge,
We're afraid.
Come to the edge,
We can't, we'll die!
Come to the edge.
And they came.
And He pushed them
and they flew.?

My sisters and brothers, it is at this extraordinary time of human history that we're being called to the edge.

Let us together stand on the edge, so that our toes dangle over the side, and together let us invite God in her infinite wisdom and playfulness, push us so that together, we renew our church, and fly.

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