

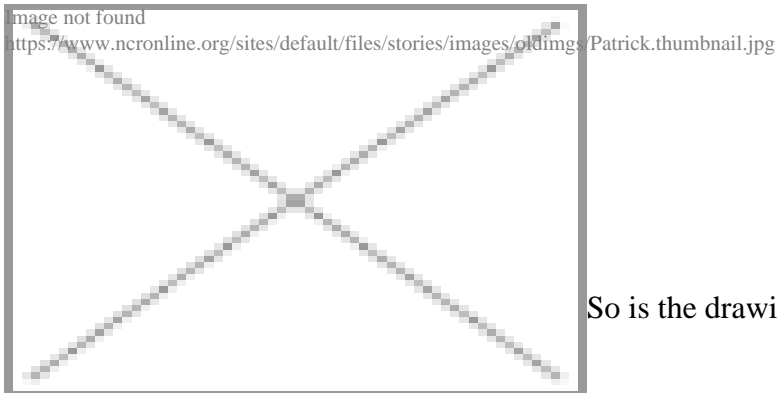
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Anne E. Patrick asks: 'Is this a Kairos moment?'

by Thomas C. Fox

NCR Today



So is the drawing up of a new Kairos document a possible

course for North American theologians to take as a remedy to restore health in our church? This was a question begging for an answer following a talk today by Sister of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary, Anne E. Patrick, during the second full day of the 2010 gathering of the Catholic Theological Society of America in Cleveland.

In a session that drew together three of the most respected 'elders' in the church today — Patrick, Detroit Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, and former CTSA president, Father Gregory Baum, Patrick seemed to indicate the time might be right to consider the commitments made in the Kairos document a quarter century back.

But first a little background. It was in 1985 that a group of black South African theologians based predominantly in the black townships of Soweto, South African, challenged their church's theological complicity in upholding the vicious Apartheid status quo by anonymously publishing the Kairos document. It evoked strong reactions at the time and furious debates not only in South Africa, but world-

wide.

While true reconciliation and peace are the core of the Christian tradition, the authors wrote, these are not possible without justice. Calls for reconciliation, they said, without justice are calls for "counterfeit reconciliation."

The authors wrote, explaining their attempt: "Our KAIROS impels us to return to the Bible, and to search the Word of God for a message that is relevant to what we are experiencing in South Africa today. It does not "pretend to be comprehensive and complete;" it is consciously devised for this situation, and therefore needs to take seriously the need to read the "signs of the times" (Matthew 16:3). It is always a call to action, a call for "repentance, conversion and change." This will involve confrontation, taking a stand, and persecution. It is, nevertheless, fundamentally a "message of hope." It is spiritual: "Infused with a spirit of fearless[ness] ... courage ... love ... understanding ... joy and hope."

Here, then, is what Patrick said today: "When Mary Ann Hinsdale proposed the convention theme she offered a model of one instance where theology's prophetic commitments were evident and effective, the Kairos Document in which South African theologians confessed that some forms of Christian theology had contributed to the injustice of apartheid. Then she proposed a new "prophetic theology" that "confronts the evils of the time and speaks out against them in no uncertain terms," carries a message of hope for the future, and is deeply spiritual, practical and pastoral. These aspects of the production of this document suggest to me three commitments that we should continue to make as theologians who want to express God's gift of prophecy today."

She listed them as follows: 1. "Our own commitment should likewise be rooted in the experiences and sufferings of those who lack voice in the systems of power." 2. "Our own prophetic commitment should likewise aspire to the effectiveness that is made more likely by the balancing act of collaboration, courage and prudence." 3. "I believe another commitment we should make is to share our sense of truth more generously with lay audiences."

Patrick went on to cite two instances where she had personally been edified by theologians exemplifying these three commitments. The first was (Yale Divinity School professor) Margaret Farley's presidential address to the CTSA in 2000 in which she called upon church leaders to "decenter" its abortion political agenda and revises its priorities for political action.

Continued Patrick: "I simply want to point out that ten years ago Farley took on a topic that was far from safe and comfortable, and called prophetically for a change of heart and strategy."

The second instance Patrick cited was (professor of law and theology at Notre Dame University) Cathleen Kaveny's piece on "Intrinsic Evil and Political Responsibility," published in *American Theology* in its October 27, 2008 issue, "days before the last political election." In that essay, Patrick recalled, Kaveny asked whether the concept of intrinsic evil, which was prominent in the 2008 voting guide by the U.S. bishops "was a helpful one for the voters."

Explained Patrick: Kaveny believes that "the prophetic use of the term "intrinsic evil" is meant to start an urgent discussion among people of good will about grave injustices in the world. It does not provide a detailed blueprint for action."

"Her analysis has helped me to grasp more fully how both sides of the divided church see themselves in prophetic roles."

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In the background of many of the discussions taking place at this meeting, including the one stirred by Patrick's address, is the bitter awareness of a deeply polarized and hurting church as well as recognition for the need to get beyond this polarization.

So would a new Kairos document have the potential to achieve this end? Could the spirit of the Kairos document guide us forward in an effort to restore greater health to our church? Who might step forward to consider these needs and respond, knowing well the many risks involved?

These seem to be among the questions CTSA president-elect and organizer of this year's conference, Immaculate Heart of Mary Sister Many Ann Hinsdale, had in mind when she chose "prophecy" as this year's conference theme, planting seeds along the way.

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