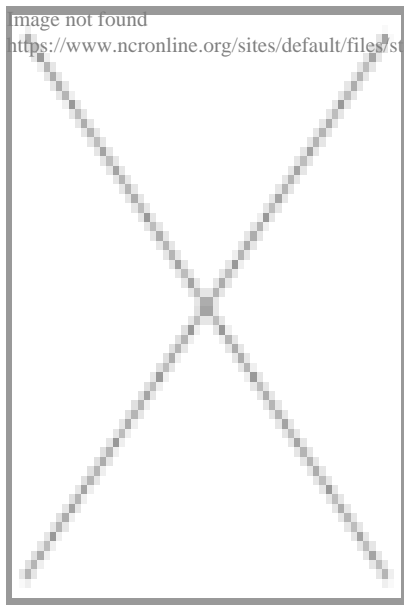


Bill Callahan steps down as Quixote Center leader

Thomas C. Fox NCR Staff | Oct. 17, 2008

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For decades, Bill Callahan has embodied a call for justice, one shared by a

generation of U.S. Catholics moved by waves of idealism first thundering through their church in the 1960s.

Intelligent, confident, sometimes brash, but always hopeful, Callahan, then a young Maryland province Jesuit, cofounded at age 47, with Dolly Pomerleau, the Quixote Center in 1976. It was to be the answer to their emerging commitments to bring reform to their church and healing to the wider world.

Last week, the 78-year-old Callahan, now a soft-spoken man with a jutting, grey beard, deep-set eyes and solid jaw, still has his passions though his body weakened is by advancing Parkinson's disease. He recently underwent brain surgery to help stave off the illness.

This month he stepped down from his official leadership post at the center.

"Bill summons us to dream greater dreams," Pomerleau told *NCR* "to achieve more than we think ourselves capable of doing."

"His ability to imagine a just world and a just church is paralleled with creative strategies that advance the issues and create grass-roots momentum."

The Brentwood, Md.-based Quixote Center has been involved with a host of church and global justice activities, most notably its efforts on behalf of women's equality and solidarity with the people of Nicaragua. About a dozen people currently share the work of the center.

When the center began its annual budget ran around \$50,000. In recent years, depending on the project being undertaken, it has expanded to as much as \$1.8 million.

At the outset, the Quixote Center was one of several dozen like-minded progressive groups hopeful that radical change was imminent in the Catholic church after Vatican II. Today, it remains a radical holdout in a church that has grown more conservative.

Born in Scituate, Mass, Callahan was initially raised to be a farmer, but became a priest. Trained to be a physicist, he became a Jesuit planner. Little was predictable about his career path until Callahan, like many other priests and women religious of their time, experienced his ossified church colliding with modernity. It was a slow motion crash and happened over three years, in Rome, during the Second Vatican Council.

Fittingly, Callahan was ordained a priest in 1965, the year the council ended. He was ripe to move on.

If the council provided the paperwork, the 1971 synod of bishops on justice sealed the deal. At was then that the world's bishops published their formal cry for justice, one that was to have unintended consequences for both the bishops and those who took them seriously, among them, Bill Callahan.

"While the church is bound to give witness to justice," the bishops wrote at the synod, "it recognizes that anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes."

Looking back, said Callahan in a telephone interview, "those were heady days, moments of wonder and optimism."

He recalls the wonder of change and hope for a better church and world "infected" his thinking. .

Equality for women priests became the center's first major undertaking. As Callahan recalls it, Pomerleau said to him one day: "You priests talk a good game, but do nothing."

From then on he decided to do something. In 1975 he formed a group called "Priests of Equality" dedicated to promoting equality between women and men in the church and in society. The number of priests swelled quickly to 2,300 before bishops began to ostracize them and the list was forced to become private.

By 1980 his actions had caused him to be silenced by the superior general of the Jesuits for supporting women's ordination. By 1981 his superiors were demanding he separate himself from the center. Finally, in 1991 his continued advocacy on behalf of women's equality led to his dismissal from the Jesuits altogether under pressure from Rome

As part of the work on gender equality, the Quixote Center has worked to publish inclusive scriptures. This work has continued to the present day. The center last year published the entire Bible using inclusive language, a work that was 20 years in the making.

"The core idea has been the Archimedes principle," Callahan explained recently. "It's all about leverage. We find a good lever point, stick in the lever and with a little bit of motion create a large force."

Many, of course, might be quick to describe Callahan as an activist. Those who know him best find within him a quiet and contemplative center and a spirit that enjoys life and seeks fun. Despite his advancing age and affliction, "for fun" he continues each year to run a 10-mile race in Washington, D.C.

He is also a gardener and especially enjoys caring for fruit trees.

One of Callahan's most notable accomplishments came with the publication in 1981 of *Noisy Contemplation ? Deep Prayer for Busy People*.. It has been a Catholic best-seller ever since.

Nicaragua and the causes of the poor in that nation have been another hallmark of the Quixote Center under Callahan and Pomerleau's tenure. In 1983, during the visit of Pope John Paul II to Nicaragua, they coauthored a letter denouncing the pope's lack of sensitivity toward the poor of that nation. The letter was published in *NCR*.

In 1985, in the midst of the Reagan-supported war in Nicaragua, the Quixote Center mounted a campaign to match the \$100 million in U.S. military aid to the contras in Nicaragua with the same amount in humanitarian aid, to be channeled through their partner organization in Managua, the Institute of John XXIII.

The Quixote Center's ties with Nicaragua were further cemented in 1991 when it assumed responsibility for the Nicaraguan Cultural Alliance, an initiative of the Embassy of Nicaragua in Washington during the 1980s. Since 1983, Callahan has made some 80 trips to Nicaragua.

In 1996 Callahan was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. He remains active despite declining physical abilities. Part of his ministry involves celebrating liturgy with several local religious communities in the Washington area.

"I've always admired Bill's work to support women and I think how things might have been different if we had listened to that generation of women religious," said David O'Brien, historian and professor of Roman Catholic Studies at the College of the Holy Cross. "Bill has always represented the Jesuit blend of faithfulness, intelligence and a confidence grounded in genuine hope. I always found him smart, tough-minded but very funny, with a balanced good nature."

Callahan likes to tell the story of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger who was said to have given Communion to Br. Roger Louis Schütz of the Taizé community in France. If the story was true it was an intercommunion and a breach of canon law. For Callahan the story represents hope for change. He believes the changes he advocates will come. This keeps him going. It's just that he doesn't know exactly when that change will be.

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