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Theologians revisit the prodigal son

by Sr. Camille D'Arienzo



A painting titled "The Return of the Prodigal Son," by an unknown artist, is pictured at the Museum of Biblical Art in New York. (CNS photo/Bob Roller)

Commentary

There are times when the past seems prologue. History, contained in its specific context, shatters time's boundaries and assumes an unanticipated reincarnation. This appears to be the situation confronting our sister, Elizabeth Johnson.

As the keynote speaker at assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious on Aug. 2, 2008, Johnson, a Sister of St. Joseph, spoke of the universal need to extend and accept forgiveness. Its healing grace, she asserted, enriches community.

She described a situation that occurred in 1986, involving her colleague at The Catholic University of America, Fr. Charles Curran. At issue was his dissent from *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul VI's encyclical condemning the use of artificial contraception. At the time of its promulgation 18 years earlier, Curran, a moral theologian, had criticized the encyclical's ecclesiology and methodology.

He had contended further that "spouses may responsibly decide according to their conscience that artificial contraception in some circumstances is permissible and indeed necessary to preserve and foster the value and sacredness of marriage." Six hundred theologians signed onto that statement. As a result, Curran was fired from Catholic University; however, after a five-day, faculty-led protest, he was reinstated.

The Vatican, however, had not laid to rest Curran's dissenting opinion. Eighteen years later Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, then head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and now Pope Benedict XV, summoned Curran to Rome. The theologian emerged from that meeting knowing he had failed to convince Ratzinger of his position. The disagreement was bound to engender personal, professional disaster for Curran. His writings would be condemned, he would not be able to maintain a teaching post in a Catholic environment and, moreover, his humiliation would blanket other theologians who shared his views. All of this did, in fact, come to pass.

Johnson described the way in which Curran was encouraged to come to terms with his humiliation:

The next day was Sunday. Bernard Haring, the influential moral theologian who taught in Rome and was Curran's old professor and mentor, celebrated Mass in a chapel at the Alphonsianum for Curran and his six university advisers. The Gospel happened to be the prodigal son. Looking at Charlie, Haring's homily went something like this: At this time the church is the prodigal son. It is taking your treasure — your training, talent, reputation, contribution — and wasting it, feeding it to the pigs. The Spirit of Jesus calls you to be the father in this parable, not rejecting, but welcoming back the prodigal. Do you forgive the church?

She concluded: "Haring went from person to person, grabbing them by the necktie or the sweater and looked them in the eye with this question. The Mass could not continue until they wrestled with their anger and allowed the Spirit to move them to a different place."

Johnson upheld the need for individuals hurt by the church to understand that forgiveness does not imply condoning. She said, "Forgiveness — means tapping into a wellspring of compassion that encompasses the hurt and sucks the venom out, so we can go forward making a positive contribution, without hatred."

Curran took his pearls to the non-Catholic academic arena. Since 1991, students and faculty alike at Southern Methodist University in Dallas have revered him. A recent press release said of Curran, "He is considered by fellow theologians to be one of the greatest moral theologians of the 20th century." Praise comes from many fronts. Professor of ethics Robin Lovin said, "Curran is certainly one of the leading teachers and scholars in Christian ethics in North America. Through his many books and his work as a teacher, he has made a whole generation of Protestants more aware of Catholic moral traditions, and he has introduced Catholic scholars to a more ecumenical approach."

Curran's contributions have been acclaimed beyond the Texas border. He has served as president of three national academic associations: the American Theological Society, Catholic Theological Society of America, and the Society of Christian Ethics. He also has been named *The New York Times* Man in the News and ABC TV Person of the Week. He has authored and edited more than 50 books in the area of moral theology.

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Now, a quarter century later, Johnson may have to ponder the question Haring put to Curran. The circumstance, though neither as dire nor as punitive as was Curran's, is hurtful. This time it is not the Vatican, but the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Doctrine, which criticized her theology following an investigation into her 2007 book, *Quest for the Living God*. Despite their harsh criticism, the bishops did not demand that Johnson be fired from Fordham University or forbid her to continue speaking and publishing. But their sudden attack, issued without warning, process or invitation to discuss the book, charged that the book is marred by "misrepresentations, ambiguities and errors" and "completely undermines the Gospel and the faith of those who believe in the Gospel."

The board of directors of the Catholic Theological Society of America issued a statement criticizing the Committee on Doctrine for ignoring the bishops' own established guidelines in evaluating the work of prominent theologians. The board's statement characterized the doctrinal assessment as "deficient" because it misrepresents her views and explanations. The board expresses surprise that the bishops would not understand Johnson's desire to find new ways to express the beauty and mystery of the divine.

Since the announcement of the bishops' criticism of Johnson's work, her book sales have escalated, and supporters and students from across the country have expressed their admiration for her person and her theological contributions.

Johnson is aggrieved by this failure of the bishops to discuss their concerns with her. She, nevertheless, is responding to them with far greater respect than they extended to her.

This unfortunate affair continues to attract attention. Johnson will have time to contemplate a familiar question: "Can you forgive the church?"

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo is a former elementary-school teacher and college professor who for a time served as the president of her community, the Brooklyn, N.Y., region of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, and as the president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.]

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