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Theologian, citing communion of saints, calls for renewed solidarity with poor

by Thomas C. Fox



(Photo: Jan Jans)

SAN JOSE, Calif. -- The need for solidarity with the poor, a prerequisite for Christian identity, liberation and redemption, can better be understood with a renewed appreciation for the traditional Catholic notion of the communion of the saints, a theologian told her peers here today.

Christine Firer Hinze, professor of theology at Fordham University, in a plenary address at the 66th annual gathering of the Catholic Theological Society of America, said that a serious, critical theology of the communion of saints can help paint a richer imagery, can help build a stronger gospel disposition, and can help guide the church into a deeper political solidarity with the most marginalized of the world.

Hinze began her talk admitting that in these modern and post-modern times it is a struggle to respond to the joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties of a world marked by an explosion of the complex interdependencies we now called globalization.

Then she began to build on the Catholic Theological Society of America's theme this year "All the Saints" and based her talk on examining the implications of deeper understanding and application of the traditional Catholic notion of the Communion of Saints, a basis, she said, for founding a true solidarity with the poor of the world today.

Said Hinze, "Reflecting on solidarity and the saints can also help social ethics incorporate the persistent call in post Vatican II Catholic teaching for the church of Christ to be the church of and for the poor. To this end, solidarity, oriented by a preferential option and love for poor and oppressed peoples, is a hinge/essential virtue."

She said that in her research it had become clear to her that from the vantage of the communion of saints solidarity and the option for the poor are not simply invitations to help the poor, but rather they disclose the very identity of the church.

"The universal church, she said, subsists in the communion of saints as the church of the poor."

Drawing on the writings of Sally Scholz, professor of philosophy at Villanova University, Hinze proposed a framework for understanding the meaning of solidarity with the poor, saying it involves going beyond abstract notions of human solidarity into social, civic and political solidarity.

Hinze said Scholz has observed that Catholic teaching focuses on civic solidarity, an interdependence of varied sorts.

Said Hinze: "Championing the development of all peoples, papal rhetoric of civic solidarity seeks to hold the international community and powerful nations responsible for providing for and protecting the most vulnerable populations in the world."

Political solidarity, Hinze went on, unifies a group not by shared attributes, location, or even shared interests, but a shared commitment to a cause.

Said Hinze, "Only political solidarity involves overtly political group action marked by multiple moral commitments, aimed at combating injustice or oppression and advancing in particular ways, the communal good."

Hinze said Scholz's description raises the question: If political solidarity is inherently oppositional, does this make it inimical to solidarities with those outside the political solidary group?

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Hinze's answer: Political solidarity need not conflict with broader human solidarity, and in fact may be its condition.

"Scholz's analysis illumines official Catholic treatments of solidarity as strong on social and civic solidarity, but chary of speaking in terms of political solidarity, even in the interest of what [Pope] John Paul II calls the "preferential, but neither exclusive nor excluding" option for the poor."

Added Hinze: "On this count, Bryan Massingale [professor of theology at Marquette University] is

correct: official Catholic social teaching privileges a discourse of solidarity without struggle.

Given church leaders' keen awareness of the suffering and injustice that afflict the majority of the world's inhabitants, why is oppositional, political solidarity so timidly treated? Hinze asked. Can Catholics and Catholic institutions eschew political solidarity, and still credibly aspire to be a church of and for the poor?

Here, she said, the communion of saints might shed some light.

Its strangeness to modern secular sensibilities notwithstanding, this peculiar solidarity, traversing boundaries of time, space, culture, even death -- has been confidently invoked by Christians from the days of the first Christian martyrs up till the present moment. It is confirmed daily in the Eucharistic prayers of every single Mass celebrated throughout the world, and the even more ubiquitously, as we speak, in a vast whispered and spoken chorus across the earth of prayers offered on others' behalf.

The communion of saints, Hinze said, frames human and Christian solidarity within an enriched, relational picture of the human person. By positing efficacious spiritual relationships among the living, among the dead, and between the living and the dead, this ancient article of faith invites late- and post-modern selves to rediscover and embrace a radical porousness to God, to neighbor, and nature, in fresh, creative 21st century forms.

How do we recognize the members of this communion? Hinze asked.

While this question gets answered variously by ecclesiologists, canon lawyers, and bishops, we have good scriptural grounds for supposing that the Beatitudes of Matthew and Luke offer a reliable guide for identifying friends of God. By this measure, the communion of saints comprises all souls who have loved and suffered in poverty, in hunger, in thirst for justice, in meekness and mercy, all who have been abused and persecuted for God's sake.

Hinze added that considering solidarity in light of the mystery of the communion of saints fruitfully connects social ethics to liturgy (especially the Eucharist), as well as to popular prayer and piety.

Again Hinze asked: Entangled in consumer culture, trained to cling fearfully to our comforts and our comfort zones, don't we elites need, more than ever, to call on the creative, hope-inspiring energies of our blessed living and blessed dead, indeed, all the angels and saints?

But is engaging explicitly political, or conflictual solidarity a moral requirement for all disciples?

Certainly, all disciples are called to live as members of the church of and for the poor, she said. Then she quoted the late Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero:

When we say for the poor, we do not take sides with one social class, please note. What we do . . . is invite all social classes, rich and poor without distinction, to take seriously the cause of the poor as though it were our own -- indeed, as what it really is, the cause of Jesus Christ. To do this one must follow Jesus by following the poor and oppressed. For, the poor have shown the church the true way to go. A church that does not join the poor in order to speak out from the side of the poor against the injustices committed against them, is not the true church of Jesus Christ.

All in the church of the poor, said Hinze, are obliged to practice solidarity in some form, through their particular calling. Not all saints join movements or explicitly political groups. People have different gifts and roles to play, and as Romero notes, you won't get everyone to join an organization. However, as

Jesus' life and the lives of contemporary saints attest, authentic solidarity of any kind --human, social or civic?is likely to be perceived as dangerous political solidarity by guardians and beneficiaries of an unjust status quo.?

Hinze said that "if solidarity is key virtue for combating structural sin in an interdependent but fractured world, the witness of the saints helps us see concretely how other virtues, and the beatitudes, ground, and support flow from it."

Quoting St. Vincent De Paul, reflecting on discipleship, Hinze said, humility and charity must be the guidelines going forward into this newfound solidarity.

She drew her talk to a close quoting Jesuit Father Dean Brackley who has written that as the world as become globalized Catholics also need to globalize the practice of love.

Concluded Hinze: "As our bruised, blessed cloud of witnesses attests, taking up Brackley's call to an educated and yes, political Catholic solidarity will mean facing many dangers, toils, and snares. But attuning our hearts and imaginations to our true identities as poor, loved-sinners, in humble and grateful communion with the blessed living and dead, can buoy us up to embrace this arduous, at times conflictual and dangerous, work."

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