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Theologians' meeting sets tone of reconciliation

Thomas C. Fox | Jun. 21, 2011

Theologians vote 147-1 to support Elizabeth Johnson, on the left. (Jan Jans)

SAN JOSE, Calif. -- There was uncertainty among the theologians who gathered June 9 for the opening of the annual meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America. In the weeks leading up to the conference, relations had soured between the U.S. bishops and theologians.

Now San Jose Bishop Patrick J. McGrath was set to welcome the theologians to his diocese and he would be the first person to address the entire group, possibly setting a tone for the sessions to come.

It was last March that relations between the bishops and scholars turned south. The U.S. bishops? Committee on Doctrine had quietly examined a 2007 book by one of the society?s most respected members, St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson, former society president and professor of theology at Fordham University in New York. The committee found the book, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*, had failed to provide ?authentic Catholic teaching.? The committee additionally found *Quest for the Living God* to contain theological errors and to undermine the Gospel, heavy judgments against the work of a theologian.

Making matters worse, it soon came out that the committee had adjudicated without communicating with Johnson.

Within weeks the Catholic Theological Society of America?s 10-member board shot back, charging the bishops had misrepresented the book?s intention and contents, had misunderstood its arguments, and had failed to follow U.S. episcopal guidelines aimed at resolving conflicts between bishops and theologians.

The back-and-forth continued. The committee?s head, Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington, defended its action. Johnson, meanwhile, came forward with a meticulous defense of her own (see story on Page 11).

Now it was McGrath?s turn -- and he was stepping behind a podium ready to say something to the more than 325 theologians in the audience. It took the soft-spoken and self-deprecating prelate less than two minutes to break through any tension in the room, telling his audience he respected their work and found it vital for the health of the church.

Noted McGrath: ?There was a time when the church?s best theologians were bishops.? He paused and then added, ?But that was a long time ago.?

His audience burst into laughter. McGrath then praised one of Johnson?s books, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*, reading a passage from it while emphasizing his personal respect for Johnson.

By the time he finished his welcoming address, the theologians were on their feet offering a lengthy standing ovation.

?People felt he was extraordinarily gracious and reconciling in his remarks,? John Thiel, professor of religious studies at Fairfield University in Connecticut, later said. ?He repeated twice that the work of theologians is essential to the life of the church.?

As then president-elect of the society (he is now president), Thiel organized the conference and chose its theme: ?All the Saints.? In plenary addresses and through more than 40 presentations, the theologians spoke about aspects of saints? lives and theologies pertaining to them. The theologians worked their way through historical, mystical, sacramental, liturgical, social and political perspectives.

It was noted early on that the very idea of the ?communion of saints,? goes back to the early church; it was likely the last addition to the Apostles? Creed. The ideas of the communion of saints, living and dead, and the notion of saints as all those on the way to heaven are fundamental to our ideas of church, Thiel said.

The idea of inclusiveness was likewise core to McGrath?s short welcoming talk, which was widely viewed as an invocation for reconciliation between bishops and theologians.

?It was very much appreciated,? Thiel said.

For its part, the society appeared to be sending out a message of its own: that its members? theological pursuits come out of fundamental church traditions.

?I think theologians are often misunderstood, even by bishops,? Thiel said. ?A tradition is an ongoing exercise. Theologians work to understand how this ongoing exercise is being lived out by us today.?

Saints and holiness

Maureen A. Tilley, professor at Fordham University, was the first theologian to address the entire group, exploring the idea of saintly holiness. ?What does it mean to be holy?? she asked.

?The predominant use of the word *holy* concerned the Holy Spirit,? said Tilley, referring to early church communities. Holiness, she explained, was not an individual attribute as much as it was a communal one. ?It is the church and not individuals who are called holy in the New Testament.?

This model worked well early on, she continued, but it eventually ran into problems as the church grew and clearly members within it were not acting in ?holy ways.?

Turning to 20th-century church history, Tilley said she saw church leaders similarly appealing to different models of church as they became forced to accommodate or confront ?sinners.?

She contrasted, on the one hand, the way the Vatican has dealt with the Society of St. Pius X and the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association; and, on the other, dissident bishops and theologians.

?The desire for unity for the first two cases, the Priestly Society of Saint Pius X and the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, reveal a model of church that feels it can take care of itself, and is focused on concerns for the welfare of individual souls.?

The other Vatican model, she said, is ?for people who are not on the outside or even on the edges.? She said the Vatican response to perceived disunity is quite different. Here, she continued, unity demands that personal holiness rests not in a sharing of the Spirit, but ?in adherence to orthopraxis, elevated to the status of orthodoxy.?

Her point was that ?holiness,? measured as degrees of unity, is not uniform in the church today. The Vatican deals with bishops inside the church -- she named Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen of Seattle, Bishop Jacques Gaillot of Évreux, France, and Bishop William Morris of Toowoomba, Australia -- more harshly than with bishops outside the church, as are those in the Society of St. Pius X.

The Fordham professor asked: ?Is the church less able to deal with bishops and theologians than with schismatics? Do the acts of bishops and theologians pose more of a threat to the unity, holiness and catholicity of the church than the Priestly Fraternity or the [Catholic Patriotic Association]??

Tilley finished her remarks by saying the church needs to recover respect for the role of the Holy Spirit in engendering unity and holiness in the church.

Saints and humility

Paul Lakeland, professor of Catholic studies and chair of the Center for Catholic Studies at Fairfield University, was the second person to address the entire group. In a talk titled ?I Want to Be in That Number: Desire, Inclusivity and the Church,? he used contemporary literature and Gospel imagery, primarily the parable of the good Samaritan, to build a case for more Christian humility within the church.

?Why should we focus on the virtue of humility in a presentation on the conference theme of ?all the saints??? Lakeland asked, before answering his own question, explaining humility is a defining virtue of saintly holiness.

The more important ecclesiological reason for attention to humility, he said, is that without it any examination of the saints leads to the vice of exclusion.

?Indeed, I feel comfortable saying that many of our ecclesial ills today are products of the sin of exclusion and can be addressed by attention to the virtue of humility,? he said.

?Whether we are engaged in invidious and often ignorant comparisons between the holy church and the sinful world or spiritually empty comparisons between the fullness of truth in ?our? tradition and the defects of others, we are about the business of exclusion, sweeping aside God?s holy mystery to impose our fallible human considerations about where saints can be found.

?Inside the church similar crimes are being committed when a subgroup of the community, in the name of its convictions of what purity looks like and persuaded that it can speak for God, marginalizes others, whether they are the divorced, or gays and lesbians, or religious sisters going about their jobs, whether they are working in Catholic hospitals or in Congress, or, indeed, even if they are just theologians.?

Lakeland concluded by saying a critical ecclesiology is one that takes seriously the limitations of the church. ?Because the world needs the Gospel as much as ever, it needs a church that doesn?t think it has all the answers but that is prepared to work in solidarity with others in the search for the truth that will set us all free, a church that sees dialogue with our secular world as an encounter of grace with grace, and sinners with sinners, and saints with saints.?

Saints and solidarity

The third speaker to address the full body of theologians was Christine Firer Hinze, professor of Christian ethics at Fordham University. She argued for the need to forge a real Catholic solidarity with the poor. Such solidarity, she said, is ?a prerequisite for Christian identity, liberation and redemption.? She said that such solidarity ?can be better understood with a renewed appreciation for the traditional Catholic notion of the communion of the saints.?

Reflecting on solidarity and the saints, she said, ?can 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.? ?

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.?

She argued for a solidarity that is not abstract, but rather is political in nature. Given our 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?? she asked.

?Can Catholics and Catholic institutions eschew political solidarity, and still credibly aspire to be a church of and for the poor??

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.?

Additionally, she said 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.?

Johnson vote

At the end of a long day, with the clock reading after six, weary society members took up a resolution intended to emphatically show support for their beleaguered but calm colleague, Elizabeth Johnson. Some society members wanted to present a stronger support resolution, one that took issue with doctrine committee?s theological criticisms of Johnson?s book. However, they decided that opening up theological debates before the entire body could add to divisiveness. In the end, a resolution presented by Jesuit Fr. Michael Buckley of Santa Clara University in California dealt solely with episcopal procedures.

During a 20-minute discussion, one member wondered whether the resolution added anything to the statement released by the board in April. Others said a support resolution coming from the full society would add weight to the board?s statement. Just before the vote, one theologian reminded the assembly that last November representatives from their body met with the bishops? doctrine committee at an annual meeting -- and the bishops never mentioned they were examining Johnson?s book.

That seemed to seal the deal. Minutes later the resolution passed by a hand-count vote 147 to one. The statement reads that the society ?deeply regrets? the bishops did not follow procedures they established in 1989 aimed at resolving conflicts between bishops and theologians. It was the first time since 2006 the full theological society has passed any resolution. The previous resolution expressed solidarity with undocumented immigrants.

?The Catholic Theological Society of America regrets deeply that the provisions established by the American bishops in the document ?Doctrinal Responsibilities: Procedures for Promoting Cooperation and Resolving Disputes Between Bishops and Theologians? were ignored in passing judgment on *Quest for the Living God* by Professor Elizabeth Johnson,? the resolution reads.

Theologians and bishops have wrangled for decades over how best to handle disputes between them. In 1980, working with the bishops, committees of theologians and canon lawyers were formed to assess the question. In 1983, both the theological society and the Canon Law Society of America unanimously approved a paper called ?Doctrinal Responsibilities.? It was then taken up by the by the bishops? Committee on Doctrine, sent to the Vatican for input, and eventually approved by full bishops? body in 1989.

The bishops? doctrinal committee has said it undertook the study of Johnson?s book at the request of unnamed bishops who felt an urgency to do so because it was being used widely in colleges and seminaries. Wuerl said the book had been published for more than three years when his committee undertook the study, making the point that it was under pressure to come to a fast judgment.

The committee reasoned it did not feel it necessary to discuss *Quest for the Living God* with Johnson because the book had already been published. She has responded that had the committee discussed it with her, she could have helped the committee avoid serious misrepresentations and misunderstandings in its conclusions. Both the doctrine committee and Johnson have expressed a desire to keep a dialogue going.

In other matters, the society bestowed its 2011 John Courtney Murray Award, its highest honor, on Fr. James A. Coriden, a popular canon lawyer at Washington Theological Union. It also elected Richard R. Gaillardetz of the University of Toledo in Ohio, and after August, of Boston College, as its vice president. That will put him in line to be president after Thiel and president-elect Susan A. Ross of Loyola University Chicago.

By the time the gathering was closing, the theologians were feeling quite upbeat. Jesuit Fr. Leo O?Donovan seemed to speak for many. When asked, ?What did the meeting accomplish?? he responded that it was ?extraordinary that despite the widespread concerns, anger, discouragement and confusion? around the Johnson situation, ?we still went about our business. First-rate talks were given all the plenaries; some fine smaller sessions were held. The liturgy was grand; friends met again. We went about being theologians in the church.?

?We?re not giving up; we?re not giving in; we know we?ve been given the grace of courageous faith. And, oh yes, Bishop McGrath: Wow!?

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More NCR coverage of Sr. Elizabeth Johnson's *Quest for the Living God*:

- **Bishops to discuss Johnson's defense of her 2007 book[1]**
- **Full text of Johnson letter to the U.S. bishops' doctrine committee[2]**

Coverage of the CTS and CTSA gatherings:

- **Religion professors' convention shows theology's new lay face[3]**
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