

A rabbi and archbishop connect, and thoughts for new theologians

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 11, 2011 All Things Catholic

It sounds like the setup to a classic religion joke: A rabbi, an archbishop and a reporter walk into a bar.

Instead, it was my Tuesday night, as I moderated a public conversation in New York between Archbishop Timothy Dolan and Rabbi Naomi Levy, staged at the city's famed 92nd Street Y.

The occasion was the launch of my new interview book with Dolan, titled *A People of Hope: Archbishop Timothy Dolan in Conversation with John L. Allen Jr.*, published by Image Books.

It was quite a night, with something compelling to say on at least three fronts: the state of Catholic/Jewish relations, the future of religious moderation (as opposed to extremism and fundamentalism) and how people of both deep convictions and goodwill can find common ground even when they don't agree on everything.

Dolan, of course, is the dictionary definition of a rising star in the American Catholic hierarchy -- named archbishop of New York at 59 and elected shortly thereafter as president of the U.S. bishops' conference. Levy, too, has long been on the fast track. She's the first female conservative rabbi to head a congregation on the West Coast, she cracked a *Newsweek* list of the 50 most influential rabbis in the country and she pops up with frequency in the national media. She's the founder of *Nashuva*, an organization devoted to reaching out to nonpracticing and sometimes disenchanted Jews.

At first blush, Dolan and Levy make an odd couple. She's a pioneer female leader in Judaism, part of the first class of women to enter the Jewish Theological Seminary's rabbinical school, while Dolan represents a church that doesn't permit women clergy. Levy is a married mother of two; Dolan, a celibate male. Although Levy lives in Los Angeles, she grew up in New York, while Dolan hails from St. Louis. Based on the sound of their voices, you would swear Levy, not Dolan, is the gritty, street-wise pastor from the Big Apple.

Yet beyond those surface contrasts, there's a vast stretch of common ground, not only between Levy and Dolan, but the traditions they represent. (Among other things, both Levy and Dolan have a terrific sense of humor. Before the event, a staffer told us that comedians Gilbert Gottfried and Ricky Gervais were at the Y this week. I predicted Tim Dolan would still be the funniest act of the week, and the staffer told me later I was right. As it turns out, Levy is no slouch herself.)

First, almost without trying, the evening was a testament to the underlying strength of Catholic/Jewish relations.

The crowd at the Y was almost evenly mixed between Jews and Catholics, and there was a great spirit of friendship in the room. Both Levy and Dolan voiced admiration of the other's tradition. Dolan praised Jewish tenacity, and suggested that in some ways Judaism and Catholicism find themselves in the same cultural boat. Both are traditionally "inherited" religions, he said, but these days neither can count on a mere sense of birthright to keep people coming to either church or synagogue.

Levy, meanwhile, said while Jews created a precious sanctuary in time -- the Sabbath -- the Catholic tradition

has generated dazzling sanctuaries in space, meaning not just the great cathedrals, but the whole legacy of art, music and architecture inspired by the faith.

At the end of the evening, I asked Levy and Dolan what they would take away from the experience of being together. Levy stressed how remarkable it was that a conservative rabbi and a Catholic archbishop could come together in such an open, relaxed way, without having to justify it to anyone. Her mother, she said, was born in Poland, shaped by centuries of resentment and suspicion about the Catholic church, and for most of her life a night like Tuesday would have seemed almost unthinkable.

"I feel like we're living in a new world," Levy said.

Second, both Levy and Dolan agreed that it's critical for the moderate mainstream to reclaim the public narrative about religion, as opposed to allowing it to be hijacked by extremists. Dolan cited Pope Benedict XVI's recent call to that effect during his interreligious summit at Assisi, which Dolan attended.

Levy said the "new world" of Catholic/Jewish friendship creates a whole series of possibilities to join forces, if the moderates on both sides can overcome their habitual inclination to, well, moderation, and become passionate about getting something done.

Third, the rapport between Levy and Dolan was all the more impressive, given that they clearly don't sing from the same hymnal on every possible point.

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For instance, at one stage, Dolan talked about a new Catholic emphasis on evangelization. He used the analogy of a fish tank: "You may take great care of the fish you've got," he said, "but if you don't also go looking for new fish, sooner or later the tank's going to be empty."

I could tell Levy was bristling, so when Dolan finished, I asked: "Does it make you nervous to hear about a new missionary push from the Catholic church?"

"Yes," she said, insisting that Jews have suffered a great deal over the centuries from Christian efforts at conversion.

Dolan quickly added that when the church talks today about "evangelization," it usually means, in the first place, outreach to lapsed Catholics. Levy smiled and said, "Great, fish in that pond all you want ... just leave us minnows alone!"

In fairness, Dolan had said earlier that the Catholic church does not target Jews for conversion "as a matter of policy," and had also carefully laid out the distinction between evangelization and proselytism. Still, Levy's reaction was a reminder of how raw Jewish sensitivities about Christian evangelism sometimes remain.

At another point, someone in the audience raised the question of women in the church. Dolan gave more or less his standard answer, which is that while it's true women can't be priests, anyone who knows the Catholic church from the inside realizes that in most of the other ways that matter, women actually run the show.

When I asked Levy to chime in, she said she couldn't address the debate over women in Catholicism -- "That's your problem," she joked, at which point Dolan quipped, "Is it ever!" She did, however, talk about the shifts in most branches of Judaism in favor of female clergy, and it seemed clear she thought such an evolution might be a good idea elsewhere.

In thinking about the role of women inside religious institutions, she said she was reminded of a Jewish saying: When someone asks if you keep kosher and you don't, you shouldn't answer "no." Instead, you should say, "Not

yet!"

They also struck different notes on the question of whether religious faith is essential for sustaining hope. Levy felt it's not, while Dolan argued that, sooner or later, earthly hopes will disappoint, and therefore some concept of the transcendent is crucial.

Yet both Levy and Dolan approached these potential flash points with a gentle touch, and both were eager to put the accent on what they share.

Levy, for instance, told a moving story of losing her father when she was just 15. (He was killed in a mugging, a crime the police never solved.) Levy said it wasn't just her father who died that day. Her mother, in the sense of the joyful woman she had been, also died; Levy herself, in the sense of the bubbly young girl she had been, died; the beauty of Jewish festivals died, because the father who was supposed to be at the head of the table was no longer there. As a result, she said, she didn't doubt God's existence, because atheism "just isn't in my DNA"; instead, she came to hate God.

Only later, she said, did she come to accept that the problem was actually her concept of divinity. God, she said, is not Superman to our Lois Lane, and if only we squeal loudly enough he'll swoop down from the sky and beat up the bad guys.

Similarly, Dolan told the story of watching a beloved niece struggle with cancer, and of going through an almost Job-like frustration with God's failure to act. At one stage, he said, he told God point-blank in prayer: "This is no way to run a railroad!" He said he, too, had to work through the somewhat arrogant assumption that God ought to run the universe in accord with Dolan's own sense of how things ought to be.

The impression was that both Levy and Dolan have walked a similar path, wrestling with some of the same questions and arriving at some of the same answers, albeit expressed in slightly different argot. Levy said repeatedly that she felt honored to be with Dolan, and Dolan said he found himself "cheering" for virtually everything she said.

In other words, Tuesday night was a celebration of the possibilities of friendship when people are willing to emphasize what unites them more than what divides them. If that's not a message of hope, all by itself, I'm not sure what is.

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Last Saturday, I was in Toronto for the annual convocation at the University of St. Michael's College, where I received an honorary doctorate from the faculty of theology. (Oddly enough, my wife of 18 years still doesn't seem inclined to address me as "doctor," even though I've got the piece of paper to prove it.) The other honorees were retired Bishop Anthony Tonnos of Hamilton, and Eric McLuhan, the son and intellectual disciple of Marshall McLuhan, who taught at St. Michael's.

I was presented by my friend and colleague, Basilian Fr. Thomas Rosica, CEO of the "Salt and Light Media Foundation" in Canada. The doctorate was conferred by the university's chancellor, Archbishop Thomas Collins of Toronto.

As part of the deal, I was asked to deliver the convocation address, which presented a rare opportunity to speak directly to a sample of the next generation of theologians. Here's a synopsis of what I said.

First, I delivered a simple two-word message, one that, in my experience, theologians don't hear nearly often enough: "Thank you."

Thank you, I said, for putting your intellect, your passions and your lives at the service of faith seeking understanding. It's an arduous enterprise, and you're probably more likely to hear from people mad at you than from those quietly grateful. The vitality of the church, however, depends in no small way on your work.

Since the powers that be invited a journalist to deliver this address, I said, perhaps the most useful thing I can offer is a crash course in media literacy. As theologians, you are now certified as experts on church affairs, and from time to time you'll doubtless be sought after by reporters seeking comment on whatever's percolating in the church. I'll suggest three qualities to project in those moments when you're in the spotlight.

First, I said, try to bring a global perspective.

We live in a church in which two-thirds of the Catholics in the world live in the southern hemisphere, a share that will reach three-quarters by mid-century. This shift from north to south is the most dramatic demographic transformation of Catholicism in more than 2,000 years of church history. In consequence, it is inadequate to see the church primarily through the prism of North American experiences, concerns and priorities. If you can help people perceive the global dimension of Catholic life, I told the young theologians, you'll be making an enormous contribution to better understanding.

Second, try to foster a "post-tribal" ethos.

It's no secret that Catholicism suffers from chronic internal divisions. Conventionally, we talk about those divisions in terms of "polarization," as if everyone is clustered into either the left or the right. A more sociologically satisfactory term is "tribalization," because if we look around, what we see is a cluster of Catholic tribes -- pro-life Catholics, peace-and-justice Catholics, Vatican II Catholics, neo-con Catholics, liturgical traditionalists, the movements, and on and on.

In principle, that diversity is a great blessing, but it becomes dysfunctional when these tribes start seeing one another as ideological and theological enemies. If our resources continue to be consumed by internal tribal warfare, the church won't rise to the occasion of the challenges of the 21st century -- it'll be steamrolled by them. I challenged the young theologians to bring a post-tribal spirit to their work, drawing on all the voices and striving to create zones of friendship across tribal lines.

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Third, try to have a sense of humor.

One of my great professional frustrations as a journalist covering the Catholic church, I said, is that 95 percent of my time is consumed covering scandal, crisis and division. Those are, of course, important matters, but they are hardly the only Catholic story. Seen from within, the Catholic church, in most places and most times, is also full of friendship, life and laughter. Part of any successful evangelical strategy, it seems to me, is letting the outside world in on that secret. If theologians can project a sense of humor when they're addressing whatever controversy happens to be in the headlines, maybe some of the inner reality of Catholic life will gradually register in public perceptions.

To drive home that last point, I tossed in a couple of pope jokes. It wasn't exactly in keeping with the otherwise formal tone of the affair, but the people on hand seemed to take it ... well, in good humor.

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