

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

Nov 20, 2014

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We have no shortage of vocations. What we have is a shortage of vision

by Christine Schenk

Simply Spirit
CTA 2014

I recently participated in a lively interactive panel about people and priests working together for renewal and reform in the church.

Two priests, Redemptorist Fr. Tony Flannery and Fr. Gerry Bechard, and two laywomen, Deborah Rose-Milavec and me, talked about our experiences of working in various clergy-lay coalitions. (In case you were wondering, nuns are laity, and we're proud of it.) The room was packed for this presentation at the annual Call To Action conference on Nov. 8.

Flannery founded the Irish Association of Catholic Priests and was midway through a 15-city U.S. tour, giving talks on conscience and his own experience of being unjustly censured by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. He was punished for saying what biblical scholars have taught for decades: Jesus did not institute the priesthood at the Last Supper. This apparent lack of biblical literacy on the part of curial officials is surprising.

In Jesus' time, priests were responsible for slaying animals for temple sacrifice, not for presiding at eucharistic meals. Christian priesthood wasn't institutionalized until much later, and even then, it was quite different from the priesthood we know today. Jesus sought to renew his own religious tradition, calling for a return to the values of a just and loving God. The Twelve Apostles were to be signs of the newly restored twelve tribes of Israel. To sanction someone like Flannery -- who ignited the faith of thousands through a decadeslong ministry of parish missions -- because of his perceptive biblical acumen

is scandalous in itself. But I digress.

Rose-Milavec helped organize Flannery's U.S. tour and represents the U.S. reform community at biannual gatherings of various international priest organizations from Europe, North America and Australia. She posed this provocative question: "I'm a layperson. I don't have a calling to be ordained, but I am called to decision-making. My question is: Can there be true equality between priests and laypeople? If so, what does it look like? Who has the model?"

My own contribution was to share the experience of a priest-sister-lay coalition that over 40 years ago spread ideals of the Second Vatican Council throughout the Cleveland diocese despite a less-than-enthusiastic bishop. These inspirational leaders are the shoulders on which FutureChurch stood in founding a new clergy-lay coalition in 1990. As a co-founder with a big background in community organizing, I was nevertheless clueless about how the clerical system worked. Our early priest leaders, Fr. Louis Trivison and Fr. Paul Hritz (both now deceased), were invaluable in helping us learn where and how to find leverage in a relatively secretive system.

Bechard is the founder of Elephants in the Living Room, a 2,000-member coalition of Detroit Catholics that includes 250 priests. For over 11 years, this courageous group has regularly talked about the large gray mammals crowding church halls that too many bishops try to tell us aren't there. Intrepid priests like Bechard, Flannery and Fr. Mike Tegeder insist on discussing what church leaders want to deny.

Tegeder recently hosted Flannery in his St. Paul-Minneapolis parish against the wishes of the archbishop. When called in to the chancery, Tegeder pointed out that Flannery was raising issues similar to ones discussed at the synod on the family, concluding: "If these issues can be raised in the Vatican, they can be talked about in a small, little parish in south Minneapolis."

Far and away the biggest "elephant" the panel grappled with is the severity of the international priest shortage and its irreversible impact on the future of our church.

Both Bechard and Flannery believe lay leadership is inevitable because we will soon be dealing with an essentially priestless church. "In 15 years' time, there will be almost no priests in Ireland," Flannery said. "The future of the church is in the hands of the laity, and I tell them not to wait around. Priests are largely of the past; you are the future."

Pointing to a severe priest shortage that precipitated parish closings in the Detroit archdiocese, Bechard said, "In just 10 years, the archdiocese will have only 65 priests under the age of 70. Bishops come from priests. Soon, we will have no priests and no bishops. And so I say, we must decrease, and they [laity] must increase."

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Sadly, none of this was news to me, nor to most in the room. I have been tracking the priest shortage since 1990. It is still hard to fathom how church leaders can in good conscience avoid opening ordination, especially in light of so many parish closings, most recently in the New York archdiocese. "Bishops are doing nothing about it," Flannery said. "Eucharistic famine is right here in front of us, and they are doing nothing about it."

So it was not surprising that the question-and-answer exchange turned to strategies of how to dialogue with bishops today and what tomorrow's decision-making leadership would look like. One Jesuit

seminarian expressed gratitude that church reformers continue to seek conversations with bishops. Another attendee encouraged more house church lay-led liturgies.

At one point, I asked how many of the estimated 150 people in the room had master's degrees or better in theology. Fully one-third of those present raised their hands, giving credence to my oft-repeated mantra: We have no shortage of vocations. What we have is a shortage of vision.

While the future of an exclusively male celibate priesthood is in doubt, panelists emphasized that the Holy Spirit is faithful and has gifted the church with all we need to carry out the mission of Jesus. The priesthood of the future will include married and celibate, male and female, gay and straight.

Flannery believes reformers should be pushing to expand women's roles at every level of church life, not just ordination. Yet because governance can be exercised only by the ordained, it is difficult to see how that alone can lead to gender-balanced decision-making. Many on the panel and in the room favored linking church governance to baptism rather than to ordination, opening the way for newly inclusive structures at all levels in the church.

Such a vision is undoubtedly pie-in-the-sky at the present time. But if increasing numbers of priests and people work together, a critical mass could eventually help our bishops get with the program.

But first they need to stop denying the elephant in the church's living room. And don't look now, but I think she's pregnant.

[A Sister of St. Joseph, Sr. Christine Schenk served urban families for 18 years as a nurse midwife before co-founding FutureChurch, where she served for 23 years.]

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