

## THE GLENMARY RESEARCH CENTER'S APPROACH TO INCULTURATION

The Glenmary Research Center was established in 1966 by the Glenmary Home Missioners to explore the context for home mission work in the United States. The Center's primary interest and the overall purpose of its studies is evangelization. What the Center perceives as "evangelization" is not an effort to change church membership, but the promotion of the values and behavior reflective of the reign of God as proclaimed in the gospels. The Center believes that the gospels encourage us to recognize that those values and behavior are found in many peoples and places. Dialogue between people and cultures, all of whom experience the saving activity of God in a greater or lesser degree, will mutually enrich the church and those with whom it engages in such dialogue. The theme of the convention has absorbed the interest of the Center since its foundation. There are two principal dimensions of the Center's work which are relevant to the theme. The first is an understanding of inculturation in the United States as more than simply directed to a national context. It must include the many ethnic, racial and regional contexts within a nation. The second dimension focuses on the the sources for theological reflection, namely the raw material or religious experience of people from which the theologian reflects upon the scriptures and tradition.

The workshop looked at these two dimensions first and then briefly outlined the Center's current three major studies. The greater portion of the discussion focused on one of the studies, *Walking in Faith: a social-theological analysis of a changing community*.

### THE CENTER'S DUAL EMPHASES

1. Much attention has been given to inculturation in the United States. It has, with much justification, been focused on rooting the Catholic tradition in the mainstream American cultural experience. The interests of the Center, however, are not satisfied with this dimension. The Center sees the United States as a "family of cultures." Mainstream American culture is too abstract to be a workable tool for evangelization with specific people. One needs only to reflect on the differences between what constitutes white, middle class in metropolitan New York and Amory, Mississippi to understand its practical limitations. Each reflects its own uniqueness, while at the same time being clearly related to its surroundings by shared values and behavior, which we call the American culture pattern. The many cultural communities of the United States must not be harmonized into a "single" cultural expression. Such an eventuality would rob us of the richness of religious expressions and, at the same time, render the efforts at evangelization ineffective. Imagine the inadequacy of a single cultural approach to evangelization, for ex-

ample, in the Hispanic; Black; Appalachian; Rural, Southern White; Native American; and urban, ethnic communities. Imagine, then, the loss to the church's own cultural heritage if we fail to recognize the diversity of peoples and their contribution to our understanding of God.

2. The Center is also excited by the prospect of a methodology which offers an opportunity for theology to return to a community of people and to examine and reflect on their faith and experience. While scripture and tradition remain obviously two sources for the theologian, only too frequently this third source of theological reflection has been spoken of often, but frequently neglected. All three of the Center's current studies reflect a primary interest in uncovering the experience of people.

We have come to appreciate that efforts to uncover the experience "out there" beyond the academic circles in which we are so often confined theologically, demands more than a turn to cross-disciplinary efforts. The challenge is no longer adequately understood as simply cross-disciplinary or even as field research. Presently, the issue reflected in our efforts has moved beyond these to participatory, field research, which is assuredly cross-disciplinary as well. We feel that it is this approach which is most fruitful in uncovering a more authentic interpretation of people's experience of God's ongoing activity in their lives. The Catholic Committee of the South put the challenge to the Center well: "It is the people who live it, who speak it best."

#### THE THREE STUDIES

The Center's studies particularly relevant to the convention's theme are: *Bare Threads: human life in the service of profit* (Veronica Grover, SHCJ); *Walking in Faith* (Helen Lewis and Mary Ann Hinsdale); and *Black and Catholic in Natchez, Mississippi 1890-1990* (Richard Tristano). Each has taken a different approach both in the social science study and the theological reflection.

The first is an historical study of the experience of women textile workers with particular emphasis on the stress experienced in their families. Its accompanying theological reflection was the fruit of a group of eight reflectors. The third study is a social history of a specific community of people. Its accompanying theological reflection will be done by a black theologian. The workshop turned to the second study for a detailed discussion with two of its authors Helen Matthews Lewis, a sociologist, and Mary Ann Hinsdale, a theologian.

#### WALKING IN FAITH: A SOCIAL-THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF A CHANGING COMMUNITY (A WORKING TITLE)

The authors shared their experiences over a three-year period in Ivanhoe, Virginia, an Appalachian mountain community which has lost all of its local industry. In an effort to revitalize itself, the Ivanhoe Civic League was founded in the hope that it would be able to attract a new industry to the community.

The League's leadership is largely women, although there are a few men involved. The Highlander Center and Helen Lewis were asked to assist the League

through workshops on economic development. Employing an educational methodology modelled on Friere's, Lewis began working with the League. Glenmary's involvement began when it explored the feasibility of a study and Lewis suggested Ivanhoe as an excellent site. Glenmary's goal for the study was to raise the consciousness of Catholics and/or any outsiders to a better understanding of the experience, religious and secular, of a rural, mountain people. The plan included a theologian who would work with Lewis and bring theological interests and insight to the study. Mary Ann Hinsdale was designated.

Lewis and Hinsdale rejected the more traditional "outside-observer" role and opted for a "participant-observer" role and a participatory mode for the community (insiders) itself. This led to much discussion. The advantage of such an approach is the insight it provides the outsider who is more intimately involved with local people. Furthermore, the inclusion of local people in the shaping of the goals, processes and writing of the study itself was seen to offer a more authentic picture of the local situation. (A third coauthor of the study is the president of the League, Maxine Waller.) The disadvantages were hardly overlooked. Discussion of the objectivity lost in such a study was explored without denying the richness of its possibilities. The methodology of Orlando Fals-Borda was cited as support for participatory research. There was also concern that the "outsiders" brought with them an agenda of change for which they may not be fully cognizant, and their responsibility for raising expectations without seeing these met. This was particularly noted in the example of the League membership's increasing dissatisfaction with local religious leadership in the civic community.

The discussion led to interesting revelations regarding the League's religious priorities; its changing civic priorities and the significant role of religious language in rallying the community and shaping its issues.

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