

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE AS A SOURCE OF RECONCILIATION

- Topic: *Witness to Integrity: Theological Implications of the Crisis of the Immaculate Heart Community of California* (Liturgical Press, 2003)
- Convener: Susan Marie Maloney, University of Redlands
- Moderator: Jean Molesky-Poz, University of San Francisco
- Panelists: Anne Patrick, Carleton College
Mary Ann Hinsdale, Boston College
Susan Marie Maloney, University of Redlands

In 1970, under the leadership of Anita M. Caspary, IHM as Mother General, over 400 nuns of the Immaculate Heart Sisters of California (IHMs) relinquished their vows as a Catholic religious order and created a new ecumenical lay community of women and men. This dramatic moment in contemporary U.S. Catholic history was preceded by a series of conflicts in which the IHMs rejected the intrusive male authority of the Catholic hierarchy and claimed their experience and interpretation of the Vatican II directives for religious life as sources of authority for their renewal. In *Witness to Integrity* (WTI) Caspary not only chronicles these events and relationships but also provides an example of historical/theological truth-telling which is a necessary step toward reconciliation in Church relations.

The three members of the panel offered differing perspectives on the significance of this award winning book. Patrick explored Caspary's work as a source of history of women's conflict with patriarchal religious authorities and what this truth-telling of injustices offers the contemporary Church about reconciliation. Approaching her analysis from a moral theology perspective, Patrick argued that WTI provided data about the consequences of choices made in the past yet not fully understood. The church and the theological community are indebted to Caspary and the Immaculate Heart community for this conscientious stand in the face of oppressive clerical power. Patrick calls for further historical work from the IHMs on their current community and from other women's congregations as well. Her ethical argument for further information is twofold. First, the additional knowledge will help us keep aware of the complexities of governance in the church and better prepare women who hold future bureaucratic leadership positions to avoid the abusive use of these structures against others. Second, further knowledge of conflicts between women and male church authorities may teach us more how to resolve differences locally and thereby avoid high stakes—controversies that ensue when the principle of subsidiarity is not followed.

Hinsdale's reflections centered on the ecclesiological implications of prophetic impulses in the church and the spiritual challenges that arise from these movements. Hinsdale defined religious life as a particularized historical manifestation of the Holy Spirit and a gift to the church. Religious congregations are unique expressions of the ecclesia as "covenanted communities." Starting from this ecclesial role Hinsdale outlined some prophetic ecclesiological elements that

were evident in the IHM 1967 Chapter Decrees (appendix D of WTI). A few she mentioned were: (1) structures of authority were nonhierarchical, developed under the influence of humanistic psychology and functioning through communal discernment derived from the "lived experience" of the members; (2) communication processes were important at every level; (3) personal autonomy was harmonized with the common good; (4) women are full and equal persons before God; (5) collegiality, understood as the relationship between the Pope and bishops, the IHMs attempted to practice it in their congregational governance. Hinsdale concluded that WTI represents one more example of the Vatican's refusal to accept an inculturated U.S. Catholicism. This led to the loss of a distinctive prophetic charism which weakened the U.S. Catholic Church.

Maloney discussed the theological issue of "boundary crossing" by the move of the IHMs from canonical to an ecumenical community. This is not only a challenge for the entire church but may be an option for the future development of religious orders of women in the church. With the decrease in vocations of religious orders of women as a premise, Maloney highlighted four implications WTI provides for religious congregations of women. First, the IHM female leadership articulated a vibrant theological vision of religious life based on Vatican II documents and (with the majority of members) moved that vision into a practical reality of renewal. This vision has sustained the new IHM ministries and attracted new members. Second, the IHMs integrated the concepts of personal responsibility, obedience to the Spirit, communal discernment and women's experience as a source of authority in making their decisions. This process enhances a collective ownership of the community endeavors. Third, the IHMs understood their congregational history as a story of risk taking and change. Their charism included an element of change which was viewed as a means to further their ministry for the church. Finally, Caspary's work provides the theological and practical argument of why contemporary religious orders of women need to consider noncanonical status as part of their future options. In conclusion, Maloney mentioned that WTI has won two distinguished book awards, is in its second printing and has book reviews which have appeared nationally. These facts indicate not only a great interest in the IHM story but also the need for the experience of women to be an integral part of the church's historical record. Maloney acknowledged that WTI has been an excellent text in college (graduate and undergraduate) courses dealing with women, religion, moral theology, ethics and social change.

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