

**CONVERSION, THE NEW EVANGELIZATION,  
AND THE CALL OF VATICAN II**

Presidential Address

SUSAN A. ROSS

One day last fall, I walked to the library after class with one of my students as we continued our unfinished discussion. I was teaching an Honors Capstone course on “Moral Responsibility and Conscience” with a group of 26 very bright juniors and seniors. This particular student was the kind we always dream of having: prepared, thoughtful, imaginative, challenging, and funny. As we got to the library entrance, he asked me the question that I have been asked many, many times over the last thirty or so years: “Professor Ross, could I ask you a question: how can you stay Catholic?” I must say that I saw this one coming, since the student had pressed me with questions in and out of class all semester. And as I have done many times in response, I answered by saying that no institution is without flaws, that I needed to be reminded weekly about what was really important in life, that the church is about so much more than the hierarchy, that the tradition is so rich, that the liturgy is not all about me, that I am a part of a worldwide community, and where else do I get to go sing every week. I said that while I struggled with a number of things in the church, overall, I found that my faith was a part of my life that was not optional, and that despite my questions and concerns, the church continued, mostly, to nourish me. In short, I need the church.

I am fairly sure, however, that I did not convince my student that he should return to the faith in which he had been baptized, and for that I might well be considered a poor evangelizer. Our class had taken on a number of issues of conscience, and I made sure that my students read widely and I pressed them as well to read deeply. But I have often thought of this student, and so many of the other students I have taught, as I have reflected on the theme of this convention and on this particular address over the last year. As theologians and teachers, we encounter students like this every day. How do we respond to their questions and challenges? My answer to my student was not a simple one, and I think that the questions that the New Evangelization poses require complex answers as well. And while I can honestly say that I need the church, I also need to say that in order to carry out the New Evangelization, the church needs theologians.

In the *Lineamenta* for the Synod on the New Evangelization, published last October, we read: “We are living in a particularly significant, historic moment of change, of tension and of a loss of equilibrium and points of reference...it [is] increasingly difficult for us to listen, to transmit an appreciation for the past and to share values on which to build the future for new generations...In a word, the situation is requiring the Church to consider, *in an entirely new way, how [it] proclaims and transmits the faith.*”<sup>1</sup> I do not think that anyone here doubts that we

---

<sup>1</sup> XIII Ordinary General Assembly of Bishops, “The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith: Lineamenta,” (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2012), no. 3, available at

are in a situation of change and tension, if not crisis, both within the Church and in relation to the wider world. CTSA convention themes have addressed and will continue to address the impasses and fragmentation in our own community, of the difficulty of carrying out the theological task in a world, and sometimes an institutional church, that is not hospitable to what we do or say. But I think it is fair to say that one basic truth emerging from the New Evangelization is that both the world and the Church are continually in need of conversion and that the message of the Gospel offers us, in the words of one of the first converts to its message, “the words of eternal life” (John 6:68).

Our theme for this convention is “Conversion,” a theme that has given us many rich treasures to consider over the last three days. My remarks this morning will reflect on the New Evangelization in a way that tries to relate it to our contexts as scholars and teachers and to ask how we can be witnesses to the New Evangelization through our profession as theologians in a complex world. While the New Evangelization identifies some significant problems and issues badly in need of attention, I will underscore that what its documents and much of the accompanying literature ask for is an imaginative, thoughtful, and compelling presentation of Christian faith. In order to do this, we need an understanding of our situation as theologians in our postmodern context for those whom we teach and for whom we write. More speeches, more catechism, more institutional crackdowns will not do the job. So, after a brief look at some themes in the New Evangelization, I turn to the work of Richard Kearney, particularly his book *Anatheism*, to suggest some possible ways to think anew about conversion and evangelization. I will then turn to the work of women religious who responded to the call of Vatican II with their own continuing conversion of life and ministry to the changing context of the world. Their efforts in education, particularly theological education, have produced rich fruit for the church. My point is this: if we are called as theologians to evangelize, to call ourselves and others to a conversion of mind and heart to the vision of the Gospel, I argue that we can hardly do better than to model ourselves after women religious, whose interior and exterior conversions are a model of living out the Gospel message.

## **I. The New Evangelization: Proposing a “New Way”**

The New Evangelization has its origins in the papacies of Paul VI (in *Evangelii nuntiandi*), John Paul II and, following him, Benedict XVI, who recognized the need, particularly in the present context, to reach out to those who have been baptized but do not know their faith, who have drifted away from their faith, or who may feel alienated from their faith. At the heart of the New Evangelization is witness to the person and message of Jesus Christ at a time that, in the words of the *Lineamenta*, requires the Church to consider, in an entirely new way, how it is to proclaim and transmit that faith. The document outlines six “sectors” in which it sees the world in need of conversion. These are: culture, and in particular, secularized culture; society, which is in flux due to increasing globalization and migration; social communications, which are increasingly international; the economy, with its massive

---

[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/synod/documents/rc\\_synod\\_doc\\_20110202\\_lineamenta-xiii-assembly\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20110202_lineamenta-xiii-assembly_en.html), (accessed on July 4' 2013).

scope and inequalities; scientific and technological research, which raise issues previously unconsidered; and, finally, civic and political life. The *Linneamenta* argues that in its evangelization the church needs to have the “boldness to raise the question of God in the midst of these problems,” to “engage in dialogue” as a “form of *martyria* in today’s world.”<sup>2</sup>

What is that message that the New Evangelization preaches? Ultimately, it boils down to “a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, in the Spirit, thereby leading to an experience of his Father and our Father.”<sup>3</sup> In this encounter, we are able “to share the Son’s relationship with his Father and to experience the power of the Spirit...From this perspective, transmitting the faith in Christ means to create the conditions for a faith which is *thought-out, celebrated, lived and prayed*; in short, this means participating in the life of the Church.”<sup>4</sup>

But I think it is clear that many of our students find that “participating in the life of the Church,” especially in its institutional forms, is precisely the obstacle to their personal encounter with Christ. During my fall course, my students and I read many texts on conscience, and I continually stressed the need for a thoughtful formation of conscience by engaging the teaching of the church in conversation with classic and contemporary writers on our topics. It was interesting and gratifying to read student papers on such contested issues as women’s ordination and same-sex marriage, and to hear my students, after researching these issues, come to the stunning realization that church teaching was not irrational but actually thoughtfully and carefully argued. But ultimately, many were not convinced. They pointed to the institutional church’s treatment of women religious, of official church teaching opposing same-sex marriage, of episcopal rhetoric in relation to elections as examples of their own disengagement with the Church. College students are at an age when openness, honesty and transparency are key values, and many found institutional church teaching and actions sorely lacking in these qualities.

Yet, I want to be clear that I am not arguing about the need for the New Evangelization; I could not agree more that there are profound gaps in our students’ knowledge of the Christian faith or that their social and even some religious contexts are often vacuous. Students are searching for meaning in their lives and I am convinced that we have something very important to offer them, both in our work as scholars and in our vocation as teachers. But conversion, which is what I understand the New Evangelization to be all about, is a complex process. As the documents of the New Evangelization continually stress, we need new ways to reach people and to communicate the transforming vision of the Gospel message. And our students’ conversion, as well as our own, is a process that demands honesty and integrity.

The many documents related to the New Evangelization encompass papal speeches, the Vatican *Linneamenta*, various responses given by theologians and popular writers, articles by bishops (there is no shortage of literature on the topic) and they have some common themes. Much of this literature is critical of the “old ways” of catechesis, such as Bishop Leonard Blair’s contrast of his former,

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

memorization-based preparation for confirmation with the current practice.<sup>5</sup> We read of the need to “reanimate... a living sense of the Gospel,”<sup>6</sup> for a “reproposing [of] the Gospel to those who are convinced they already know the faith and it holds no interest for them,”<sup>7</sup> to “present others with a powerful and credible narrative,”<sup>8</sup> and for “a more nuanced conversation about the relationship between faith and reason.”<sup>9</sup> What has been done is no longer adequate, and all Catholics are encouraged to consider how best one can proclaim the Gospel, since we are all evangelizers. One can point to the imaginative social media work of Fr. James Martin of the Society of Jesus as an innovative way of reaching people. And one can also turn to the crucial work of Bernard Lonergan, in the context of the post-Vatican II church, who wrote that “the old foundations will no longer do...one must not patch an old cloak with new cloth or put new wine in old wineskins.”<sup>10</sup>

A further point that is stressed throughout the literature of the New Evangelization is the importance of *witness*. Repeatedly, popes, bishops, theologians, and popular writers emphasize that one cannot overemphasize the importance of the example of those who live out the faith with integrity. “Modern man [sic],” as the *Linneamenta* says, “listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”<sup>11</sup> In his comments on the New Evangelization, for example, John Cavadini remarks on the power of narratives and how stories of personal engagement stir up imaginations and demand a response.<sup>12</sup>

I would like to take up this challenge of finding “a new way,” and so I first turn to the work of a philosopher of religion, Richard Kearney, for some insights into the fragile condition of faith in a postmodern world. Kearney’s book is an effort to forge what he calls a “third way, beyond the extremes of dogmatic theism and militant atheism: those polar opposites of certainty that have maimed so many minds and

---

<sup>5</sup> Bishop Leonard Blair, “Where are we in Catechesis? Situating the National Directory for Catechesis,” available at <http://old.usccb.org/education/ndc/blaireng.shtml> (accessed on July 4, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> See Richard Rymarz, “Conversion and The New Evangelization: A Perspective from Lonergan,” *Heythrop Journal*, LI (2010):753–767, at 753.

<sup>7</sup> Donald Wuerl, “Bishops, Theologians, and the New Evangelization,” *America Magazine*, September 26, 2011, available at <http://americamagazine.org/issue/787/article/new-relationship> (accessed on July 4, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Frank Matera, “The Use of Scripture in the New Evangelization,” available at <http://www.usccb.org/about/doctrine/intellectual-tasks/upload/intellectual-tasks-of-the-new-evangelization-matera.pdf> (accessed on July 4, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Ralph Del Colle, “The *Kerygma* and the New Evangelization,” available at <http://www.usccb.org/about/doctrine/intellectual-tasks/upload/intellectual-tasks-of-the-new-evangelization-del-colle.pdf> (accessed on July 4, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Bernard Lonergan, “Theology in its New Context,” in Walter E. Conn, ed. *Conversion: Perspectives on Personal and Social Transformation* (New York: Alba House, 1978), 11.

<sup>11</sup> *Linneamenta*, 22.

<sup>12</sup> John Cavadini, “A Reflection on the Intellectual Tasks of the New Evangelization,” available at <http://www.usccb.org/about/doctrine/intellectual-tasks/upload/intellectual-tasks-of-the-new-evangelization-cavadini.pdf> (accessed on July 4, 2013).

souls in our history.”<sup>13</sup> We are in a situation, he says, that calls for a much more adequate approach to faith, an approach that recognizes the failures of other methods, that knows the emptiness of easy answers. Let me be clear on this point: I am not suggesting that I find Catholic theology to exemplify what Kearney calls “the extremes of dogmatic theism.” Certainly, at times it has done so, but as a theologian, I know there are far too many riches in the tradition for it to be so mischaracterized. Rather, I find Kearney’s reflections to be richly suggestive of potentially new and imaginative directions for theology, so I do not take him as a blueprint but rather as inspiration. His work is, in a sense, about conversion and a kind of “new evangelization,” although not at all in the language used by the Pope or the US bishops. So I ask you to bear with me as I try to mine his ideas for resources.

## II. Kearney and *Anatheism*

In an article for *America* magazine in September 2011, Cardinal Donald Wuerl wrote:

For many, the Gospel has lost its taste, its freshness, and its luster. We live in a time that treats religion as a purely private matter. It is a time guided by an ingrained consumerism and materialism, by an isolating individualism and a pervading relativism that erode confidence in the truths of faith and in human reason itself. For too many people, their religious instruction failed that at several levels. Something went wrong.<sup>14</sup>

I will not try here to diagnose what exactly “went wrong” in relation to Catholic catechesis. There is plenty of literature that tries to identify the source, such as the “ten doctrinal deficiencies” that the Catechetical conference of the USCCB has identified.<sup>15</sup> Others might find fault with the reforms of Vatican II, and still others the “culture of Narcissism”—the list could go on and on. But I think it is clear that there is such a crisis and that we all encounter not only students but people from all walks of life, including some of our academic colleagues in other fields, who have little to no religious literacy, and, to make matters worse, they do not see it as a problem.

For Kearney, dogmatic theism and militant atheism are not options at all; he wonders whether it is possible to retrieve a sense of the wonder and newness of an encounter with the divine. While he does not include a vague indifferentism as a further option, which I would, I think his comments are worth considering. His entry into his own “third” possibility is through his development of the idea of “the uninvited guest,” a theme he develops as common to the three Abrahamic religions. *Anatheism* is, as the term suggests, “about repetition and return,” to what Kearney describes as “a primordial wager...the *option* of retrieved belief.”<sup>16</sup> This “wager,” as Kearney puts it, is how one responds to the encounter with the “divine stranger:” with hospitality or with hostility. Moreover, this wager, Kearney insists, “needs to be

---

<sup>13</sup> Richard Kearney, *Anatheism [Returning to God After God]* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 3.

<sup>14</sup> Wuerl, “Bishops, Theologians,” 11.

<sup>15</sup> See Blair, “Ten Doctrinal Deficiencies,” n. 5 above.

<sup>16</sup> Kearney, 6–7.

renewed again and again, anatheistically.”<sup>17</sup> Kearney describes the wagers of Abraham, of Mary, and of the Prophet Muhammad as they encountered the stranger. For Mary, at the moment of the Annunciation, her wager was “to choose grace over fear...she dares imagine the impossible as possible. She says yes. Amen.”<sup>18</sup> The point that Kearney stresses is that we are called to respond to the invitation of the unexpected, the uninvited Guest, the One who will not be domesticated or captured—or, I might add, ignored.

Kearney describes five moments in the wager of response to the uninvited Guest: imagination, humor, commitment, discernment, and hospitality.<sup>19</sup> With regard to imagination, Kearney says, “One cannot wager unless one has freedom to choose. Such choice presupposes our ability to imagine different possibilities in the same person, to see the Other before us *as* a stranger to be welcomed or rejected.”<sup>20</sup> This “response of imagination,” Kearney writes, is the condition for the possibility of the act of faith: “as belief in the possibility of the impossible, of a possibility beyond the impossible.”<sup>21</sup>

Kearney’s emphasis on imagination is not new in the literature of conversion. As Lonergan points out, it is in the self-transcendence of the person that one can imagine a different way of thinking and acting when confronted with a reality that offers unconditional love. As Stephen Happel and James Walter point out in their book *Conversion and Discipleship*, imagination plays a key role in being able to respond to others with thoughtful moral deliberations.<sup>22</sup> We could go back as far as both Augustine and Aquinas to hear of the role of the imagination: recall Augustine’s going over and over his experience of youthful theft and Thomas’s emphasis on the conversion to the phantasm. And in more recent times, the work of our late and beloved colleague Phil Keane in *The Moral Imagination* or William Lynch’s *Images of Hope* also point to the significance of imagination. Imagination presents us with an alternate vision and invites us to respond. I want to venture the suggestion here that our imaginations need rekindling in our evangelizing efforts.

Kearney’s second moment is humor. Humor may not seem immediately to be so significant when it comes to conversion: in humor, as Peter Berger put it so well in his classic *A Rumor of Angels*, we are confronted with incongruity: the dignified person slipping on a banana peel, or, as someone like Jon Stewart does so well, the juxtaposition of mutually contradictory statements by prominent politicians or news organizations.<sup>23</sup> Kearney also notes incongruity. He describes humor as “the ability to encounter and compose opposites: what I see as impossible and possible at one and the same time.”<sup>24</sup> Recalling Bergson, Kearney notes that humor is “a creative

---

<sup>17</sup> Kearney, 19.

<sup>18</sup> Kearney, 24.

<sup>19</sup> Kearney, 40–56.

<sup>20</sup> Kearney, 40.

<sup>21</sup> Kearney, 41.

<sup>22</sup> Happel and Walter, *Conversion and Discipleship: A Christian Foundation for Ethics and Doctrine* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1986, 2007), 108.

<sup>23</sup> Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural*, (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969), 69ff

<sup>24</sup> Kearney, 42.

response to enigma, contradiction, and paradox.”<sup>25</sup> Kearney goes on to argue that “Jesus’ own life is itself divinely comic. . . ; it is ‘filled with paradox,’ sees life ‘upside down,’ and is a reminder that we are deeply and invariably creatures of the earth (*humus*).”<sup>26</sup> But ultimately, he says, humor is about *not knowing* and our realization that our ordinary expectations will be constantly disrupted and overturned in the face of the divine.<sup>27</sup>

Humor reminds us that we are not in control, no matter how hard we try to be so. Our response to this lack of control can be anger, rigidity, or just being overly serious, but once we let go of our expectation that we can predict or control all consequences, we can appreciate the uncanniness and incongruity of the human situation. No less an authority than Thomas Aquinas argues that “the lack of mirth” can actually be a vice. He says that the one “who is without mirth not only is lacking in playful speech, but is also burdensome to others, since [that person] is deaf to the moderate mirth of others.”<sup>28</sup> While Thomas was not concerned in this context with conversion *per se*, I think it is fair to say that he would agree that a life, including one’s religious life, that is lived without humor, is flat and lifeless and certainly not one that will witness to new possibilities. The further point, as Kearney reminds us, is that humor is related both to *humus* as well as to *humility*.<sup>29</sup> Humility is an acknowledgment of our lack of control, our groundedness in the earth, not so much in a way that accentuates the worst of the unexpected, but that shows how this unexpected dimension can be the source of new life. It’s not up to me!

The third moment is commitment. This, it would seem, is the key moment in conversion: when one decides, chooses, responds. As Kearney puts it, this moment is “the movement of the wager that makes truth primarily—though not exclusively—a matter of existential transformation (*metanoia*).”<sup>30</sup> Even a lack of response *is* a response, as the old motto from the 60’s put it: “Not to decide *is* to decide.” One can think of Dag Hammaskjöld’s knowing that there was a “yes” at some point in his life. I would also observe that this point is, as Hammaskjöld suggests, not always a conscious and deliberate commitment—the “altar call,” so to speak, when one’s commitment becomes readily identified. The moment of commitment is when one’s convictions become more than aesthetic or intellectual, although the aesthetic and the intellectual certainly play a crucial role.

The fourth moment is that of discernment, and Kearney notes that this moment is not “*after* the other aspects but simultaneous with them.”<sup>31</sup> Lonergan would no doubt identify this particular moment with intellectual conversion. As Kearney puts it, “One cannot be naïve in assuming that we, humans, are capable of unconditional or indiscriminate welcome to every other who approaches.”<sup>32</sup> As Lonergan so helpfully puts it, “Knowing is not just seeing; it is experiencing, understanding, judging, and

---

<sup>25</sup> Kearney, 42.

<sup>26</sup> Kearney, 43.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *ST II-II*, q. 168, a. 4.

<sup>29</sup> Kearney, 43.

<sup>30</sup> Kearney, 44.

<sup>31</sup> Kearney, 44.

<sup>32</sup> Kearney, 45.

believing.”<sup>33</sup> What is so important here—and I will return to this below—is that, as Kearney puts it, “There is *always* a discernment to be made.”<sup>34</sup> At times, this discernment involves an intellectual judgment, and at others it involves courage and perseverance.

The fifth moment that Kearney describes is hospitality, and again, it is to be understood in connection with the other four moments. As Kearney phrases it, “If discernment is integral to the atheist wager...this does not mean that knowledge trumps love.”<sup>35</sup> Hospitality represents a profound openness to “other possibilities of being,” which require a kind of self-dispossession. Real hospitality is putting oneself in the place of the other, being willing to be dispossessed, to love the alien and the Stranger, as difficult as this is.<sup>36</sup> Kearney notes that “Unconditional hospitality is divine, not human,” and that we can only hope to live out this hospitality in some human way. But a crucial point he makes is that we are never absolutely sure that we can absolutely grasp the absolute. I would also note that Kearney goes on to develop the idea of hospitality in relation to interreligious dialogue, a task that I do not have the time for here. I would observe that this is indeed a necessary task, one that has been taken up very seriously by some in this room today. Without this kind of hospitality, we arrogantly assume that we have the truth and others do not.

As I have observed throughout this brief exposition of Kearney’s insights, these ideas are not in themselves radically new and find many echoes within the tradition. But I find them to be a helpful heuristic in thinking through what it means to try and witness to the Gospel in a way that can give freshness both to the New Evangelization and to those whom the New Evangelization encounters. In the present context of dogmatism, atheism, and indifference, these five moments have the potential to help us rethink how we might best approach the current crisis of the Catholic Church. Along with the importance of *witness*, I want now to turn to the example of women religious as models for the New Evangelization, particularly in their response to the call of Vatican II for *aggiornamento* and in their present ministries in the church.

### III. Women Religious and the New Evangelization

Before the Second Vatican Council, women religious represented for many Catholics the most stable and unmodern population in the church. Unlike the priests from our parish who would occasionally come for dinner, take off their Roman collars and have a couple of drinks, smoke cigarettes or have a cigar after dinner, women religious “left the world,” wore habits, and lived in enclosed communities. I can still recall as a ten year old being shocked when my mother purchased an elegant but modest nightgown for my aunt, who was a nun. (“She has to sleep in something,” my mother said; I thought, she doesn’t sleep in her habit?) This is, of course, a familiar story and one that I need not rehearse here, particularly to think of it nostalgically. And my own snapshot is also a very misleading one, since women

---

<sup>33</sup> Lonergan in Conn, 16; see n. 10 above.

<sup>34</sup> Kearney, 46.

<sup>35</sup> Kearney, 47.

<sup>36</sup> Kearney, 48.



religious may have been *perceived* as out of touch with the world, but they were in fact very much in touch with the needs of those to whom they ministered, and in the 1940s and 50s, increasingly to their own communities.

In the decades before Vatican II, a number of women religious realized the need for greater education for their young sisters. The Sister Formation Conference was founded in 1954, but it was the culmination of years of efforts on the part of farsighted women religious leaders to bring their communities more in line with the mission of the church.<sup>37</sup> The resistance that these communities faced often came from their own bishops who feared that women religious might become “overstimulated with the speculative.”<sup>38</sup> But these communities forged ahead, developing their own approaches to education and renewal by thinking inductively and turning to their own experiences.<sup>39</sup> Sr. Audrey Kopp, one of the early leaders of the SFC, defined “the elements of the professional mode,” that is, the mode under which women religious needed to operate—as “a model that she proposed for the entire church: peer to peer relationships, an authority of expertise, collaboration and consensus, and the virtues of creativity, originality, adaptability, and proficiency.”<sup>40</sup> This understanding is key to the role of women religious in the post-Vatican II church and one that we all could do well to model.

Vatican II, as we know, changed everything, or at least it seemed to. I will not get into the hermeneutics of the Council today; that is a task for another time. But it is fair to say that religious life was no longer the same after Vatican II, to the dismay of some and the relief of others. With the Council’s attitude of openness to the world and the promulgation of *Perfectae Caritatis* and its call for renewal, communities of women religious responded enthusiastically. Let me just summarize briefly some of the main features of this renewal, since they will bear heavily on my point that women religious embody the New Evangelization and offer a way forward for theologians in particular and the church as a whole.

There is of course, no one better equipped to turn to on this topic than our esteemed colleague Sandra Schneiders. In a chapter of a book of essays entitled *Women and the Church*, published in 1986, Schneiders describes how women religious undertook their process of renewal. (It has been instructive to read so many “anniversary” commentaries from the 1980s on Vatican II.) She enumerates six principles and how they emerged from what she terms “such generally unadventurous documents [into] the radically new forms we are living today.”<sup>41</sup> I will just go through these briefly. The first of these is that “the Gospel itself is the ‘final norm’ and ‘supreme rule’ of religious life.”<sup>42</sup> She describes how religious communities “shifted their attention from rules and custom books to the Gospel,” in particular, to the “call of evangelical equality within the community of Jesus’

---

<sup>37</sup> See Angelyn Dries, “Living in Ambiguity: A Paradigm Shift Experienced by the Sister Formation Movement,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 79/3 (July 1993): 478–87.

<sup>38</sup> Dries, 481.

<sup>39</sup> Dries, 481.

<sup>40</sup> Dries, 484.

<sup>41</sup> Sandra Schneiders, “Self-Determination and Self-Direction,” *Women in the Church I*, ed. Madonna Kolbenslag (Washington: The Pastoral Press, 1987), 160.

<sup>42</sup> Schneiders, 160.

disciples.”<sup>43</sup> The second principle is “the recognition of the Spirit-inspired diversity of religious congregations.”<sup>44</sup> This involved retrieving the charism of the communities’ founders and was “born of the risks taken by our founders and was to be invested...with creative ingenuity in hopes of a new harvest in an unknown future.”<sup>45</sup> The third principle was that communities were called “to make the church’s initiatives...their own.” As Schneiders notes, “No group in the church plunged into this adventure with more zeal than women religious.”<sup>46</sup>

The fourth principle was “that religious were to have a proper understanding of humanity and the modern world.”<sup>47</sup> The whole idea of the cloister and the appropriate mode of being in the world for women religious became a serious issue, and along with this came a critical look at the structures, not only of their religious communities, but also of the church to which they had committed their lives. As Schneiders puts it, “Religious women began to realize that their claim to full adult personhood in the church, including the recognized right to self-determination and access to all ministries in the church, was fundamental to their agenda.” She goes on to note, with considerable prescience—this was written in 1987—that “The struggle between an increasingly feminist religious life in the United States and a resolutely patriarchal Vatican is only beginning.”<sup>48</sup> The fifth principle is the need for spiritual renewal, to which these women gave themselves, in Schneiders’ words, “with zeal.” Schneiders comments, “from the years of renewal emerged a spiritually mature group of women whose struggles for justice in the church and world were solidly rooted in a deep union with Christ.”<sup>49</sup> The final point is that ministry is “not a secondary end” of the search for perfection. In other words, those called to religious life should not see themselves as primarily in their own personal situation to “be perfect,” but rather that they are called to serve the whole church.

These changes were not welcome to everyone in religious life. My aunt, who had entered religious life in 1951, found these changes to be completely unsettling and, after a breakdown, left her community in 1968. She was so accustomed to doing what she was told by her superiors, that the new freedom seemed incongruous with her conception of religious life. It was both a shock and something of a scandal in our family, and especially upsetting to my grandparents. She eventually made for herself a life of saintly devotion to her church and to the poor through her work with her parish and in her job as a secretary. She was hardly alone, as we know, although unlike her, many others left not because of the loss of structures, but because they found other options outside of religious life. But for those who stayed, and for those who chose, and continue to choose, to join these women, the development of new ministries, a reconception of what it means to be in religious life, new understandings of community, a critical sense of one’s role as a woman in a patriarchal church, provide us a model of what conversion means. Contrary to those who judge that

---

<sup>43</sup> Schneiders, 160.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

religious life for women has entered a period of terrible decline and is a sad shadow of its former flourishing, I argue the opposite and suggest that these women can provide for us a very helpful model for understanding our vocations as theologians and the call to conversion of the New Evangelization.

Women religious heard the call of Vatican II for renewal and conversion as one that required their response in a new way as (re)conversion to the Gospel, not to their community's rules and constitutions. Their response required a shift in imagination, a willingness to see what was really at the heart of their vocations. Peter Phan has observed in a very helpful treatment of conversion, that "[t]he first and abiding consequence of turning to Jesus is becoming his disciple."<sup>50</sup> He also points out that "There was no evidence...that Jesus himself wanted to found a religious society."<sup>51</sup> His point is that one's conversion is primarily to a person and a message, not to an institution. I am not suggesting that the institution is unnecessary—we need institutions—but rather that the institution must serve the message, not the reverse. If the institution is not adequate to the needs of the mission, then the institution must change. Women's religious communities found their structures in need of change in order to be of genuine service to the church's mission, and therefore they were changed.

This conversion also required patience in living with contradiction and incongruity: in Kearney's words, a healthy sense of humor, for women who had committed themselves to living what Margaret Brennan calls a "dynamic, non-hierarchical prophetic. . . life" within a larger institutional structure that ". . . is static [and] stratified."<sup>52</sup> The tensions that women religious experience today with regard to hierarchical structures are not at all new, and, I think, remembering this helps to explain the patience and longer sense of history that is evidenced in the LCWR's thoughtful but firm responses to the CDF. In her forthcoming book *Conscience and Calling*, Anne Patrick recounts some of the stunningly horrific encounters that women religious had with local priests and bishops before and after Vatican II that revealed how utterly differently they conceived religious life and how utterly powerless women religious often were in response.<sup>53</sup> Yet their sense of mission and purpose was nevertheless strengthened. Kearney notes that humor is ultimately a recognition of the fact that we do not know everything; the one who does claim to know everything is the one with no humor at all. "Lord High Executioners and Grand Inquisitors are incapable of laughing at the divine comedy of existence."<sup>54</sup> As any number of biblical scholars have observed, the message of the Gospel involves a radical shift in orientation, where the least are the greatest, the smallest seed turns into the largest tree, the good-for-nothing bum of a son gets the fatted calf

---

<sup>50</sup> Peter Phan, "Conversion and Discipleship as Goals of the Church's Mission," *SEDOS Bulletin*, 34.1 (Ja 2002): 19–28, at 19.

<sup>51</sup> Phan, 22.

<sup>52</sup> Margaret Brennan, "The Experience of the Essential Elements in the Lives of U.S. Religious," in *Religious Life in the U.S. Church: The New Dialogue*, eds. Robert J. Daly, Michael Buckley, Mary Ann Donovan, Clare Fitzgerald, John W. Padberg (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1984), 134.

<sup>53</sup> Anne E. Patrick, *Conscience and Calling: Ethical Reflections on Catholic Women's Church Vocations* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

<sup>54</sup> Kearney, 43.

slaughtered in his honor when he returns home. And while women religious may not strike us as the comedic leaders of the New Evangelization, their ability to live with incongruity and paradox is unequalled and can serve as inspiration to all of us.

The commitment of women religious needs little comment, except to note its depth and seriousness. While I ordinarily find the use of spousal theological language to be extremely problematic in relation to Christian discipleship, largely because of its patriarchal and heterosexist assumptions regarding the feminine, Kearney uses it appropriately in talking about commitment: “Commitment, in this sense of betrothal, is the movement of the wager that makes truth primarily—though not exclusively—a matter of existential transformation.”<sup>55</sup> Commitment is, of course, not exclusive to religious life. All serious commitments involve risk; if they did not, they would not be serious. Here again, the words of Sandra Schneiders are helpful: “Unless a person, the artist of her own life, makes choices that involve her life in its deepest springs, unless she puts down relational roots through commitment, she continues to drift through life collecting ‘experiences’ that cannot be fitted into any frame of reference within which they have genuine or abiding significance, within which her life becomes a whole...It is an act of courageous self-determination that is the highest expression of freedom in the human being.”<sup>56</sup>

Discernment is, I think, one of the most important moments in the process of the ongoing conversion of women religious. How to respond in a given set of circumstances? How does one know if one is welcoming “the one who loves” or “the one who lies”?<sup>57</sup> One of the most powerful stories of discernment that I know is that of a Kenyan religious superior who had to discern how to deal with a situation in her community. A few of the local priests were approaching the nuns in her community for sex and promised them money. Since many of these women came from extremely poor families who were in desperate need of money for food, shelter, and education for their brothers, sisters, nieces, and nephews, they felt compelled to give in. When they became pregnant or, worse, were diagnosed with HIV, they left their communities in shame while the priests involved either suffered no consequences for children they fathered or were given retroviral treatment. This superior went to her bishop to ask that he forbid this behavior on the part of his priests. And for her presumption in telling a bishop what to do, she was sent back to her home village and stripped of her responsibilities. Undeterred, she appealed to the Congregation for Religious and, after years of waiting, was finally vindicated and able to return to her ministry in Nairobi. This is a powerful example of the courage of a woman to discern her difficult responsibility despite the risks she faced and consequences she suffered and of the strength of the institution to do what was right.

Finally, hospitality, and it too comes with risks. “We run the risk of being mistaken. . . but such risk is not groundless.”<sup>58</sup> Women religious have been open to the new possibilities of renewal, not knowing what would eventually result. While some might argue that the numbers provide proof of their failure, I would respond

---

<sup>55</sup> Kearney, 44.

<sup>56</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders, *Selling All: Commitment, Consecrated Celibacy, and Community in Catholic Religious Life* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2001), 89, 90.

<sup>57</sup> Kearney, 45.

<sup>58</sup> Kearney, 47.

with Kearney's words: "We never have absolute knowledge of the absolute."<sup>59</sup> Our own tradition is grounded in the work of one who died a failure and whose followers abandoned him. To suggest that sheer numbers alone are the hallmark of the success of women's religious life is most decidedly to get it all wrong. This story is not over.

#### **IV. Theologians and the New Evangelization**

In this final section, I want to bring these reflections to bear on our own work as theologians. In doing so, I want first to acknowledge the powerful influence that women religious have had on my own development as a theologian and that of many of my colleagues in the theological guild. It was a woman religious who inspired me in my first college course in Old Testament and one of her sisters in community who encouraged me to go to graduate school, and walked me through the application process. As the daughter of a salesman and a secretary, I had no idea what going to graduate school involved. My friends and colleagues have had similar experiences. Were it not for Mary Brady, R.S.C.J., Jean McGowan, Mary T. Clark, R.S.C.J., Adele Fiske, R.S.C.J., Anne Carr, B.V.M., Mary Emil Penet, I.H.M., Marie Augusta Neal, S.N.D. de N, Joan Leonard, O.P., Mary Ellen Brennan, I.H.M., and a host of other women religious whom many of us hold dear in our hearts, I would not be here today nor would many of us as well. Their process of renewal in the years after Vatican II can inspire us theologians to recommit to what we do in a way that opens the Gospel message to those we teach and for whom we write and give us courage along the way.

As Schneiders shows, it was important to stress that fidelity to the Gospel and not to community rules or constitutions was to be foremost in renewing their vocations. Coupled with an imaginative retrieval of the original vision of the founders of these congregations, women religious were able to chart a path to a new understanding of their ministry. The task facing us as theologians is not so different. We too are engaged in a process of better understanding our faith in ways that serve the church and the world as a whole.

I now want to return now to the point I made at the beginning of my remarks this morning: that theologians need the church, but that the church needs us as well. How can theologians, in cooperation with the institutional church, engage in the New Evangelization through imagination, humor, commitment, discernment, and hospitality? I would venture to guess that most of us here got into this profession because we were moved by the Gospel, our imaginations were enflamed by gifted teachers, such as the ones I mentioned above, and because we had a desire to seek the truth. This too is what inspires at least some of our students and inspires our research. And if it is any example, the work that I see my colleagues do with students in various forms of outreach, from practicing ethical eating to hearing the stories of the marginalized to advocating for better legislation, the question of commitment to what the Gospel stands for is alive and well.

I would like to close by suggesting three strategies for moving forward theologically and evangelically that are inspired by women religious. These are a commitment to dialogue, to diversity, and to ongoing development. These are also, I

---

<sup>59</sup> Kearney, 47.

think, faithful to the heritage of Vatican II. First, to dialogue. As women religious have insisted on continuing dialogue and discussion, so should we. Without dialogue and discussion, there is no evangelization; consider how the work of the Jesuits in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries and that of the Maryknoll priests and sisters in China in the 20<sup>th</sup> was characterized by dialogue. Genuine dialogue means that there is mutual respect for the competencies of each partner, and that there is a willingness to listen and learn. This dialogue needs to go on at every level in and out of the church: between bishops and theologians, between theologians of differing views, between different groups of believers, and between believers and atheists, many of whom, as Pope Francis recently suggested, also seek the truth and to do good. Unfortunately, we do not live in a time of thoughtful and respectful dialogue, so this poses a real challenge. I tried to help move this process along over the last year by inviting bishops and theologians to meet for dinner and discussion and am gratified to see that some of these have borne fruit. My hope is that these dialogues can continue on their own power. But this dialogue is not so much a question of who has the right answers but of faithful witness to the Gospel.

Second, to diversity. We need to take to heart the fact that people who look like me (as a white, middle class woman), and perhaps even those who think like me, are increasingly in the minority in our church. Reading over the evaluations of our convention structure recently was a helpful reminder that those of us in the post-Vatican II generation need to be hospitable to the stranger and to consider putting ourselves in the position of the stranger. I would like to issue a challenge for us to consider going to the session of a group that we do not ordinarily attend, to read books and articles about our future church, to not only be the one who welcomes the stranger but also to put ourselves in the position of the stranger.

Third, to continuing development. Our faith is not a static reality and needs continual reinterpretation in relation to our changing times and contexts. Without theological development there can be no living faith. While we need always to consider how our theology is in service to the Gospel, our efforts are always tentative, preliminary, more or less adequate to the situation or the time. Here again, Kearney is helpful: "No human can be absolutely sure about absolutes."<sup>60</sup> Dogmatic fundamentalism is as serious an issue as any other kind of fundamentalism, and in this, I suggest, we need to be courageous in our efforts, despite notifications and official statements, something that some of our women religious theologian colleagues know all too well. To say that we should return to the full convents and to the catechesis of the 1950s is simply looking to the past. Without continuing and faithful development, our students will go away empty-handed and our faith will become a relic. Faith is a *living* reality, not a deposit kept intact, locked up in a box.

My student, the son of a Chilean exile who was forced to leave his country forty years ago, knew something about authenticity. He had learned from his parents something about totalitarian regimes, taking risks, seeking the truth. And he found in the witness of women religious a model of what it meant to live faithfully. I think that we theologians are in an analogous situation. We may come from different theological traditions but we seek ways of rethinking what it is that our vocations call

---

<sup>60</sup> Kearney, 5.

us to do. We need imagination, humor, commitment, discernment, and hospitality in our thinking, teaching, and writing, and in this we may, perhaps, kindle the hearts and minds of our readers, students, and colleagues. In this humility before the Absolute, we may hope to be credible witnesses to a life-giving Mystery. We owe ourselves and our students nothing less.