

## A RESPONSE TO CONSTANCE FITZGERALD

For more than forty years, Carmelite theologian Constance FitzGerald has devoted her intellectual life to explication and interpretation of the writings of the great Spanish Carmelite mystic, John of the Cross. In that endeavor, and true to her spiritual mentor, the leading edge of her theological work has been to illuminate the meaning and power of *passion* in the spiritual life—above all, passion as love and desire for union with God and, through that passion, passionate compassion for the world, for others. Indeed, “Impasse and Dark Night,”<sup>1</sup> which sets the theme for our convention, written twenty-five years ago, continues to capture, sustain, and nourish the hearts and minds and souls of thousands of seekers, who hunger for God, yearn to embrace the world in passion and compassion, and, yet, who are painfully self-aware of personal, cultural, and societal limitation and powerlessness—of impasse.

Sister FitzGerald’s address this morning, “From Impasse to Prophetic Hope: The Crisis of Memory,” presupposes the confusion, the forfeiture, the anguish of impasse as well as its foreclosure, its failure before logical or rational solutions, its chilling grasp that there is “no way out of, no way around, no rational escape from, what imprisons one, no possibilities in the situation.”<sup>2</sup> Although adverting to themes in her more recent work on transformation and desire, hope and prophecy, this presentation offers a direct, perceptive, unnerving challenge to theologians—to us—and to the work of our minds, our souls, our hearts, our lives. Here, the shadow of impasse falls across the disorientation and fragmentation of our cultures; worries the absence of moral, civic, and civil virtues in our societies; tracks the cynicism and sadness in our church; haunts our halting and fitful movement toward Divine Mystery. What Sister FitzGerald proposes is counter-intuitive to the world in which we live—purification of memory, which *feels* achingly like an erasure of social and cultural histories long ignored and denied; yielding unconditionally to God’s future, that is, to hope, which throbs with uncertainty and ambiguity; and dispossession of self, which troubles and disturbs. What is being proposed is that intimate and terrifying call to conversion—to prayer even when prayer becomes, as FitzGerald observes, a “prayer of no experience,” to a journey through darkness to a prophecy not of our choosing but of our responsibility and

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<sup>1</sup>Constance FitzGerald, O. C. D., “Impasse and Dark Night,” in *Living with Apocalypse, Spiritual Resources for Social Compassion*, ed. Tilden H. Edwards (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1984), 93-116.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 94.

beyond our capacity, and, perhaps, even, to silence as an apophatic spiritual practice. This is an invitation to a theology of radical openness, not so much as the processing of words, but the process of the work and will of the Word in our lives concretely, specifically, and particularly. This is an invitation to a spiritual orientation, a way of being in the world and being for the world that opens us to the sorrow and suffering, intimacy and beauty of life; that opens us, Beverly Lanzetta writes “to be pierced by the generosity of the world, and to be felled by life’s sensitivity to grace. It is a discipline that constantly seeks to remain literate in the things of the heart: to bear wounding and betrayal, but to disallow closure and retribution.”<sup>3</sup>

The challenge Sister FitzGerald lays before us arises from integrity, mature spirituality, and penetrating insight. I dare say no one has spoken to us quite like this since William Hill of the Order of Preachers, in his presidential sermon, reminded us of the absolute necessity of a life prayer for a theologian.<sup>4</sup> Quite likely, we all are willing to assent to the significance of this summons. I, for one, find it compelling and resonant with my own deepest desires, yet because it is so radical, I find it unnerving, costly. I would like to raise two issues for ongoing reflection: purification of memory and dispossession of self.

Memory is a powerful, subtle, and protean faculty. Memory is as likely to stabilize as to destabilize, to repress as to recognize, to confuse as to clarify. At an existential level, our memories do make us who we are and their loss or collapse not only robs us of identity, of the past, but also estranges us from our very selves and strands us in an amorphous present. At cultural and social levels, the already complex operations of memory may provoke paradox: the more the human community is urged to remember in hope of not repeating acts of massive social oppression and cruelty—the Shoah, slavery, rape, ethnic cleansing, torture, and abuse—the more the recital of such violence preys upon our ever faltering hold on the good.

An accomplished historian, FitzGerald adverts to the distinction between history and memory. As a political theologian, I wrestle alongside her “to hold in tension both the power of memory and the importance of history in giving us context, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the need to forget and be open to the radical transformation of the self and the memory.” But, what if a cultural community resists history, is self-regarding in its forgetfulness, self-congratulatory in its memory? We may find ourselves in Canada, but the heartbreaking narrative of Africa’s children follows us even here to Nova Scotia, where black people have

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<sup>3</sup>Beverly Lanzetta, *The Other Side of Nothingness: Toward a Theology of Radical Openness* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2001), 120.

<sup>4</sup>William J. Hill, O.P., “The Theologian: On Pilgrimage with Christ,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* vol 40 (1985): 230-232.

sought freedom since the seventeenth century.<sup>5</sup> Certainly, purification of memory is not to be misunderstood as the eradication or manipulation of history, but neither critical history, nor memory is innocent. For peoples forcibly deprived of memory, “the quest for memory [becomes a] search for history.”<sup>6</sup> Yet, in our very fear of obscurity, our panic at potentially being forgotten or disregarded or belittled, we may obscure the transforming power of hope.

Surely, we all affirm FitzGerald’s critique of autonomy as will-to-power, of obscurant individualism, of evolutionary irresponsibility. But, she would take us further, deeper, beyond the boundaries of our lives/ourselves to a new way of being in the universe, in God’s future. Dispossession of self implies the absolute surrender to God of all our cultural and social and religious and personal securities, the purification of our memories, the reorientation of ego. Dispossession of self is the costliest fruit of passion for God; it fructifies only in losing one’s self and receiving the self that is returned from the loving hand of God.

Purification of memory prophetic hope, dispossession of self—these are profound spiritual experiences to which even the most eloquent and learned among us cannot respond, but which, in fact, must be lived. Constance FitzGerald is challenging each of us to risk all that each of us has staked our lives upon in order to become a “doorway” to that “unimaginable future to which God is alluring us.” She is calling us to mysticism and a martyrdom. Some of the best contemporary interpreters of religious experience have been intimating for some years now that we are witnessing the death of that civilization, which has nurtured most of us in this room, and, perhaps, the death of the Church that funded that civilization. We know that the superstructure is crumbling, the authorities apprehensive, the priesthood shamed, religious and laity anxious. And, we theologians are coming to understand even more clearly what Bernard Lonergan tried to teach us—that the push for approval, for the right connections, the best appointment, and career success represent nothing more than “the shabby shell of Catholicism.”<sup>7</sup> We may take courage from the words of a sermon by John Henry Newman. With sorrow and conviction and hope, Newman said: “That old Church in its day became a corpse (a marvelous, an awful change!); and then it did but corrupt the air which once it refreshed, and cumber the ground which it

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<sup>5</sup>See, Simon Schama, *Rough Crossing: Britain, the Slaves, and the American Revolution* (New York: Ecco, 2006).

<sup>6</sup>Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,” in *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, ed., Geneviève Fabre and Robert O’Meally (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 289.

<sup>7</sup>Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 327.

once beautified. So all seemed to be lost.”<sup>8</sup> The Church in our time too may die, yet it shall rise again. The Church is and is not, and shall be again. And, its rising in God’s future is worthy of the martyrdom to which Constance FitzGerald summons us.

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<sup>8</sup>John Henry Newman, “The Second Spring,” *Sermons Preached on Various Occasions by John Henry, Cardinal Newman*, reprint ed. (1857; Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, Inc., 1968), 170.