

THEOLOGY'S PROPHETIC COMMITMENTS:
INSIGHTS FROM EXPERIENCE

- Topic: Theology's Prophetic Commitments: Insights from Experience
 Convener: James B. Nickoloff, College of the Holy Cross (Emeritus)
 Presenters: Gregory G. Baum, McGill University (Emeritus)
 Most Rev. Thomas J. Gumbleton, Retired Auxiliary Bishop of Detroit
 Anne E. Patrick, Carleton College (Emerita)

The theme of this year's convention took flesh, literally, in the three presenters who shared insights from their own experience of theology's prophetic commitments.

Gregory Baum, a past president of the CTSA, spoke as one of the few remaining witnesses of the Second Vatican Council. He remembered the fraternal dialogue between bishops and theologians and the acknowledgement that, in response to changed conditions, the Church is able to change. He also recalled the young Joseph Ratzinger's assessment of the Council in his 1965 book *Highlights of Vatican II* (recently republished by Paulist Press) in which the future cardinal and pope cites the new teaching on collegiality as a corrective to the Church's centralization in the papacy. Ratzinger also affirms the internal pluralism of the Church, attributing the creativity of the ancient Church to the relative autonomy of local churches, united by loyalty to the bishop of Rome. Many years later, Cardinal Ratzinger/Benedict XVI would strongly oppose his own previous interpretation of Vatican II. In response to Rome's retreat from Vatican II and the "wintery times" (to use Karl Rahner's expression) that have overtaken the Church, Baum recommended what he calls the "minority strategy," i.e., "even when things are dark politically and ecclesiastically, there is always something we can do: think critically, promote new ideas and join a movement to promote renewal. Such a movement may represent only a minority, but the time may come, under changed historical circumstances, when it will flourish and affect the dominant structures." Ever the pragmatist as well as visionary, Baum concluded: "To avoid depression, we must pray and we must act; we must do something, even if it is a small gesture anticipating renewal."

In his remarks, Bishop Thomas Gumbleton came to the point quickly: our greatest challenge today is war, he said. In the years, since John XXIII wrote *Pacem in Terris* (1963), it has become increasingly clear that "total war" is morally unacceptable. This term applies to the wars currently being waged by the United States in Afghanistan and the Middle East. The reason is simple: the price paid by non-combatants—a price that is unavoidable—makes modern warfare fundamentally immoral. But the price is also paid by those who fight and by those who fund the fighting. Gumbleton reminded the audience of the most important mileposts in the Catholic theological turn away from war over the past half-century and challenged the entire Church, leaders, and ordinary members alike, to take an uncompromising stand against warfare, opting for civil disobedience when necessary.

Anne Patrick, also a past president of the CTSA, noted that the prophetic vocation belongs to all Christians by baptism and not only to a “self-appointed guild.” She asserted that prophets have a dual task: “to speak the truth to power, and to speak the truth in love.” This means that “none of us knows for sure we are speaking the full truth, much less voicing God’s opinion when we offer ours, but at the same time we have the obligation to do our best.” In particular, she suggested three commitments that theologians should make if they wish to speak both “with power” and “in love.” First, we should root our theological work in the experiences and sufferings of those who lack voice in the systems of power. Second, we are more likely to be effective prophets if we make our theology a collaborative effort. Third, and perhaps most imaginatively, Patrick proposed that theologians who aspire to speak prophetically must commit themselves to sharing their sense of truth more generously with lay people and not limit their audience to the academy. To conclude, she posed a challenging question: “Is it time for a committee of professional theologians, ordinary Christians, and Church leaders to reflect together and offer a theological comment on the political crisis in the United States, analogous to what was done a quarter-century ago with the *Kairos Document* in South Africa?”

The wisdom of Gregory Baum, Thomas Gumbleton, and Anne Patrick provoked a rich discussion and a standing ovation by the 75 people in attendance.

JAMES B. NICKOLOFF
College of the Holy Cross
Worcester, Massachusetts