

INVITED SESSIONS

APOSTOLIC RELIGIOUS LIFE: A PROPHETIC CHARISM IN THE CHURCH?

- Topic: Religious Life and the Current Apostolic Visitation
Moderator: Patricia A. Parachini, Washington Theological Union
Presenters: Susan Maloney, University of Redlands
Susan Rakoczy, St. Joseph's Theological Institute, South Africa
Respondent: Mary Ellen Sheehan, University of St. Michael's College, Toronto

Patricia Parachini opened the session by introducing each of the speakers and invited Susan Rakoczy to speak first. Rakoczy's paper, entitled, *Discerning the Spirit: An Analysis of the Apostolic Visitation* sought to "situate the Apostolic Visitation within the context of discernment and to evaluate it as a process of seeking the presence of the Spirit of God." For her analysis, Rakoczy used the discernment tradition as articulated by the fourteenth century mystic, theologian and Doctor of the Church, Catherine of Siena.

Rakoczy's paper unfolded in three parts. Part I offered a descriptive summary of the four stages of the Apostolic Visitation, currently underway and focused exclusively on Apostolic Religious Institutes of women in the United States of America. It cited the stated Vatican purpose and the responses from some USA women religious who are suspicious of the stated purpose and who are questioning the legitimacy of the process. Part II set out Catherine of Siena's understanding of discernment as a virtue (*discretio*) governing all other virtues and which is linked inextricably to self-knowledge, truth, and love as they arise from continuous prayer in the light of Christ. Part III asked from the perspective of Catherine of Siena's teaching, whether or not the current Apostolic Visitation could be seen to be a genuine discernment process. Rakoczy concluded that the Apostolic Visitation is lacking in this regard, even as she also asserted that Catherine's principles could indeed be very helpful to the congregations themselves as they take time to engage in ongoing self-evaluation in the light of their charisms and purposes and resources today.

Susan Maloney spoke next on her topic, "Witness to Integrity: Learnings from the Immaculate Heart of Mary Sisters of Los Angeles, California." In Part I, Maloney detailed the painful and tragic experience of the IHM Sisters of California with ecclesiastical authority in the late 1960s. Tensions arose between Cardinal McIntyre and the IHM Sisters over the implementation of Vatican II

changes regarding religious congregations of women. Eventually, these tensions led to interventions from the Vatican and the IHM Sisters were forced into an untenable decision to split into two communities, one of which lost its canonical status. In Part II, Maloney acknowledges the tragedy of this situation but by employing some basic principles of feminist theological analysis, she also points out some gains, one of which was an increased confidence in finding and claiming a corporately discerned voice that could resist absolute clerical authority and be a sign of courage for others. In Part III, Maloney describes the situation of the non-canonical IHM community today, noting that it continues to draw new members, to practice corporate discernment, and to engage in the ministries of education and care of the poor. She concludes with a series of challenging questions on ecclesiastical authority and the legitimising of a public Catholic community.

In response to these two papers, Mary Ellen Sheehan noted first that each of these papers used sources from the past, i.e., the fourteenth century and the more recent 1960s to analyze the current Apostolic Visitation. For different reasons, each approach led the authors to conclude that the Visitation is an ungrounded and unjust process. Sheehan then identified four themes embedded in the papers that need further and deeper theological analysis. First, how are the terms “feminist spirit” (Rod ), “radical feminism” (Butler), and feminist analysis (Maloney) functioning in the documents and process of the Apostolic Visitation? Minimally, the current Apostolic Visitation process requires a clearer and more nuanced understanding of Christian feminist theology. Secondly, what is the status of already approved Constitutions of Apostolic Religious Institutes and their commitment to ongoing self-evaluation and self-governance? The Apostolic Visitation seems to be introducing other criteria, more like a “measuring up” than a genuine discernment process already in place. Thirdly, what is the status of Apostolic Religious Institutes vis- -vis the teaching authority of the church? While not stated as such, certain doctrinal issues do seem to permeate the more explicitly identified concerns of the Visitation. Fourthly, will a more accurate theological method of correlation between faith and culture emerge on all sides in ongoing discussions? When is the faith tradition and its exercise of teaching authority truly the judge of culture and conversely when is contemporary culture a source that challenges received notions of doctrine, practice, and the exercise of authority in the church? As one could imagine, the session participants engaged in a stimulating, sustained, and seriously reflective theological discussion.

MARY ELLEN SHEEHAN

*The University of St. Michael's College
Toronto, Ontario*