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A Theology of Communion: Communal Discernment Today

Religious Formation Conference Workshop
Judith K. Schaefer, O.P., PhD
7 September 2013
“As we enter the twenty-first century, we are experiencing a moment of grace.

Such moments are privileged moments during which the great transformations of the universe occur. . . .

The present is one of those moments of transformation that can be considered a cosmological, as well as a historical, and a religious moment of grace.”

Thomas Berry
What theology does ... 
... organizes 
... directs 
... motivates

Religious Life

J. K. Schaefer, O.P., PhD
“Holiness is achieved through submission of one’s will to the will of another.”

“Christ was obedient to the will of the Father, even unto death.”

J. K. Schaefer, O.P., PhD
Historical Role
300 AD to 1900 AD

- Theology of personal sanctification organized the life and actions of those pursuing holiness for more than a thousand years.

- Theology of personal sanctification directed the practices and ministry of religious (piety, mortification, silence, etc.).

- Theology of personal sanctification motivated religious to choose radical acts of selflessness.

J. K. Schaefer, O.P., PhD
Heroic acts of selflessness

J. K. Schaefer, O.P., PhD
“Between the sixteenth and nineteenth century, a distinct form of virtuosity arose . . . In this new form, the active provision of needed services was given equal, if not greater weight over prayer and personal spiritual growth. . . .”

Patricia Wittberg

Shift in the formula for holiness

J. K. Schaefer, O.P., PhD
Theological Modeled on the communion of relationships within the Trinity

Need for unity and for difference for wholeness

Difference of interpretations of the primacy of unity and difference

J. K. Schaefer, O.P., PhD
What is “communion” theology?

“The symbol of the Trinity functions to call forth loving relationships in the community and in the world as the highest good. . . . the trinitarian mystery of God actually empowering relationships of mutuality, equality, and inclusiveness among persons and between human beings and the earth. The goal of all creation is to participate in the trinitarian mystery of love.”

ELIZABETH JOHNSON, CSJ

J. K. Schaefer, O.P., PhD
Communion as End and Means of Vowed Life

- Communion as End
- Communion as Means
- Vowed Life Lived in Communion
Obedience is a singular thread of grace that binds us to each other in the only way that is divine – through and in communion. Vowed Life-in-communion is a commitment to live out the very cellular interdependence that the universe echoes and the interrelatedness upon which survival depends.

J. K. Schaefer, O.P., PhD
Discernment as decision making

- Recognizing the psychological aspects of moral identity operative in the vow of obedience, those engaged in a process of discernment and decision making need to be aware that:

  (1) A person acting out of the vow of obedience must have a developed and distinct personal identity as well as a unified moral perspective on life and action to be a mature, moral decision-maker; and

  (2) The moral identity of the individual needs to be integrated, and it needs to function as an organizing principle to the degree that the vowed religious can not define herself or himself outside of this moral perspective. Limits or lack of development in any of these areas affect the quality of the decision made.

J.K. Schaefer, O.P., PhD
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Application of Communion
Communal Discernment

... is a decision making process that invites all participants to listen, to discern, and to respond in ways that lead toward communion.
Movement One: Listening

1. **Self** - heart, spirit, and conscience

2. **Primary community**: religious or family

3. **Gospel and Church**: the Word of God speaking in the fullest of the Wisdom tradition

4. **World**: Needs and hopes
Movement Two: Discerning

- Openness to and confidence in God
- Process that allows for input from those whom the decision affects,
- Consideration of implications of various alternatives (pros and cons), with an agreement to not avoid conflict,
- Commitment by all to faithfully live out the agreed upon decisions.

J. K. Schaefer, O.P., PhD
Movement Three: Responding

“It is precisely at the moment of hearing a new need in the world that the Spirit speaks a fresh charism, a gift of response unique to that time in history.”

Responding to the Word and the Spirit are as necessary today as in any century of created history.”

J. K. Schaefer, O.P., PhD
“Religious congregations must release everywhere in society, at every level, through every individual member - wherever those members are, whatever separate things they do – the white heat of the congregation’s charism on the hard, cold questions of the age in one great corporate mind and one easily seen communal heart.”

J.K. Schaefer, O.P., PhD
To whom and to what do I listen?

What makes it difficult to listen and discern?

Who/What helps me/us make decisions toward communion?

J. K. Schaefer, O.P., PhD
We drift through this gray, increasing nowhere
Until we stand before a threshold we know
We have to cross to come alive once more.

May we have the courage to take the step
Into the unknown that beckons us;
Trust that a richer life awaits us there,
That we will lose nothing
But what has already died;
Feel the deeper knowing in us sure
Of all that is about to be born beyond.

John O’Donoghue

J.K. Schaefer, O.P., PhD
Questions ???
Please join us for the two upcoming webinars:

**Friday October 4, 2013**

That Your Joy May Be Full: The Emotional Journey to the Fullness of Life  
Presenter: Fr. Ray Dlugos, OSA  
Time: 3:00 - 4:00 pm EDT

and

**Wednesday December 4, 2013**

Contemplating the Gift of Vowed Life in the 21st Century  
Presenter: Sr. Mary Lou Mitchell, SSJ  
Time: 3:00 - 4:00 pm EDT

Watch for upcoming e-mails to register for the next event.