Columns
Spirituality
Social Justice



(Unsplash/Aziz Acharki)



by Nancy Sylvester

Contributor

View Author Profile
https://iccdinstitute.org/

Join the Conversation

December 30, 2021

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Anniversaries are times to celebrate and remember. They invite us to see again who we are and where we've been. Not to dwell in the past but to awaken to how the future has emerged and commit to its unfolding.

I had the opportunity to take part in the kick-off celebration of the beginning of Network's 50th anniversary earlier this month. On Dec. 17, 1971, 47 women religious gathered at Trinity College in Washington, D.C., and decided to form a national Catholic social justice lobby. Although I was not present for that initial meeting, I did join the staff in 1977 and was its second executive director from 1982 to 1992.

At this celebration, I was invited to reflect on what was happening during the years leading up to this momentous meeting.

Recalling what was happening in the 1950s and '60s helped me remember who we are as a nation and as a Catholic community.

In our society the modern civil rights movement took shape. The Freedom Riders, the March on Washington and the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. helped to get Congress to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964; the Voting Rights Act in 1965 and the Fair Housing Act of 1968. Public policy brought about significant change.

The peace movement strengthened as the Vietnam War was waged from 1955 to 1975. Educational sit-ins and peace demonstrations on most college campuses provided a sense of the power of grassroots organizing.

Feminism's second wave was a sociopolitical-cultural movement addressing gender issues, reproductive rights, job opportunities, and violence against women. The legal and political systems became central to effecting change.

In the Catholic Church, the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) changed the way the church saw itself. The document *Gaudium et Spes* understood that the church is to live and act within the world. An important dimension of the church is to proclaim and foster human rights, to establish and build up the human community, and to initiate action for the service of all, especially the poor.

The Latin American bishops, meeting in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968 reflected on their experience and strengthened that identity, articulating an option for the poor. They realized the power of grassroots action for justice as an important influence on public officials.

In 1971, both Pope Paul VI and the Synod of Bishops placed the ministry for justice at the center of the church's mission, stating: "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel."

Advertisement

This was the context within which women religious answering the call in 1971 understood their own vocation. Immediately following Vatican II, most congregations had renewal chapters — the highest governing structure in congregations — to reflect and articulate who they were becoming in light of the new understanding of church.

Those 47 women who gathered in Washington took this call from the future seriously. They gathered across congregations, experienced in traditional ministries of teaching and nursing as well as emerging ministries working directly with the poor or in the legal and political arenas.

During its 50th anniversary, the Network community will assess how faithful it has been to its original vision and how it is unfolding today.

I sense it is time for our nation and the Catholic Church to do the same.

Racism, sexism, economic inequality, patriarchy and other forms of violence are still with us and intensifying. The assault on the values of democracy and the body of Catholic social justice teaching needs to be addressed anew.

As a nation we cannot be helpless in the face of growing opposition to the right to vote, the right to nonviolent protest, respect for the equality of all persons regardless of race or gender, earning a livable wage, access to factual data informing political discourse, and the value of community or the common good.

As a church community we cannot be blind to how the centrality of action on behalf of justice in the church's mission has ossified in the U.S. church — no longer motivating its policies or structures, no longer preached to the people.

I found the writings of Eriugena as quoted in John Philip Newell's book *Sacred Earth Sacred Soul*, to be quite appropriate here. He says that everything is sacred, but we live in a state of forgetfulness about what is deepest in us. The more we forget our true identity, the less we treat one another as sacred. We suffer from "soul-forgetfulness."

Anniversaries are times to remember — to awaken once again to our true identity. To see what we've forgotten. To reclaim our "soul" so as to respond to the future.

Christmas is an anniversary. A yearly "epiphany." We remember the person Jesus, who as Eriugena says, comes to show us what we have forgotten: that we are bearers of the divine flow. Jesus reawakens us to our true nature and creation's true nature: that we are all sacred.

The future continues to call us forth but the choice of which direction we go is ours.

We will have many choices to make in the months and years ahead. An awakened sense of who we are is needed to respond.

Now that the festivities of Christmas are over and as the New Year begins, try to remember who you really are and how you will choose to respond to the future that is calling us.

Don't think too hard but simply take some time to "sit" — to rest in Divine Love and be open to the "you" who is emerging. And then recommit to the vision that is calling you forth.