

Response

Called unto Holiness, Church of our God

By

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“Holiness unto the Lord” is our watchword and song,
“Holiness unto the Lord” as we’re marching along.
Sing it, shout it, loud and long,
“Holiness unto the Lord” now and forever!¹

About fifteen years ago a group of “third-world” theologians, church leaders and scholars met to mobilize the Church for action. Thirty-six hours and as many papers later they departed. They had dealt with terms like “marginalization,” “contextualization,” “empowerment,” “preferential option for the poor,” “praxis,” “hermeneutics of suspicion,” “anti-foundationalism,” “people’s theology,” “public theology,” “local theologies,” “theology from the side,” and “theology from below.” Some had been challenged to return to their congregations and “make a difference.” Others were dismayed by how far the conference had strayed from traditional theology into socio-political matters. They felt that the essential evangelical concern for a personal relationship with Jesus Christ had been subverted. Some left frustrated by the continued talk of yet another conference with no real plan of action. Their desire to “do theology” in radical ways remained an idealistic and unattainable goal.

I approach this conference with a fear of *déjà vu*. But this one is different. It is to be a “theology conversation” that is inclusive in respect to participation, theological scope, and action. I commend and thank the planning committee for their sensitivity and vision. I already know, though, that at least one of the goals has not been totally achieved. I am a respondent by default.

Through the years I have experienced marginalization or worse, paternalistic patronization. However, I learned very quickly during our time in Africa and Melanesia that while my voice was appreciated I was the outsider, unable to converse authentically about how to do theology in those settings. My position, nationality, and the color of my skin gave me privileged status. I was the “oppressor” whose attempts to “empower” others were sometimes understood as patronizing. That is why I wish Mary, Denise, Daphne, Martha, Veronica, Elis, Lilly, Ruth and others were here. They represent churchwomen whose theological insights would grace and challenge this conversation. I would like to represent them, but I can’t. My privileged status prevents it.

My worldview has been confronted and changed because of the honor of learning and living with them and others; but I admit that the American paradigm subtly and subversively seeks

¹ Lelia N. Morris, “Called unto Holiness,” *Sing to the Lord*. (Kansas City: Lillenas, 1993) #503.

to squeeze me into its mold. It's not that other cultures are necessarily better or that the American culture is inherently evil or anti-God. What it means is that our cultures shape us as a Church in ways we seldom notice. While we joyfully celebrate our diversity and learn from each other, we must critically evaluate our perspectives and assumptions. It means that whatever our culture, if the Church is truly to be the Church, we *will* be marginalized. Ecclesial holiness will exhibit counter-cultural characteristics that place us out of mainstream human paradigms. The reality of God's reign demands it. Our desire is to live it, but how?

What would we be doing if we really were *doing* holiness? Would we reject consumerism and embrace a simple lifestyle? What is a simple lifestyle? Would it affect our approach to worship? Would we define ourselves more by our relationships than as individuals? Would we subordinate personal, family, clan, tribal, or national loyalties to identity in Christian fellowship? What would our churches look like? Would our leadership reflect ethnic, socio-economic and gender equality? How would we approach politics? What would happen to the "homogeneous unit" principle? What would ecclesial holiness look like for a church in the slums—where sometimes there is no hope and where memories are too harsh to recall, where mission means receiving rather than giving? What would sin look like for a Church engaged in ecclesial holiness? How would voices from the margin be heard by those in power?

What would ecclesial holiness look like? Maybe it would look like a collection of imperfect people with limited knowledge and wisdom, people with faults and blind spots and terrible failures, people who are in the process of being transformed into the likeness of Christ. In other words, is ecclesial holiness what we are? As I look around churches where I've worshipped and fellowshiped, I see people who are hurting and people who hurt. I see gossips and racists, hypocrites, and the self-deceived. At various levels I see hierarchical structures that oppress and divide. But I also see people who love and people who give, people who care and who show it in amazing ways. I see transformed lives, seeking to live out holiness. So, let the Church be the Church, with all of our imperfections and inconsistencies. Let's humbly listen to prophetic voices. Let's purposefully converse within the margin and across its boundaries. Let's strive to incarnate ecclesial holiness more consistently.

We will sing it,
Shout it,
Preach it,
And **live** it:
Holiness forevermore.²

² Haldor Lillenas, "Holiness Forevermore," *Sing to the Lord*. (Kansas City: Lillenas, 1993) #502.

