

Conference on laity to outline 'solid ground for rejoicing'

By Beatrice Ganley, SSI

In spite of her conviction that modern men and women are greatly challenged by the large tasks of disengaging Church and society from the institutionalized evils of sexism and economic injustice, Elizabeth Dryer believes that we are on "solid ground for rejoicing."

That will be the theme when Dryer, assistant professor of theology at the Washington Theological Union, addresses a conference on the laity to be presented at the Sisters of St. Joseph Motherhouse Saturday, October 3. Speaking on the topic, "How Does God Fit into My World: Spirituality Paths for the Lay Person," she will bring an interest in medieval studies and the history of spirituality to bear upon the situation in the Church today. In particular, she will focus on the spirituality of the laity and the expression of the female experience of God.

In a recent telephone interview, Dryer expressed discouragement stemming from the enormity and long-term nature of the task ahead, and cautioned against complacency with whatever progress has been made. Yet Dryer, who holds a doctorate in historical theology from Marquette University, believes it is possible to find solid ground upon which we can celebrate.

Such rejoicing is rooted in the sense of spiritual hunger she finds in people everywhere. "There are these things going on at the local level which I see here in my classes and as I move around to different parishes and talk with people. I am very much in awe at the goodness of people," she said.

Here in the United States, for example, people are "just beginning to struggle to identify an indigenous kind of experience." U.S. Catholics, she observed, are challenged to deal with the pros and cons of being an affluent population, of power and education. Thus, she remarked, such factors must be considered in any discussion of spirituality for Catholics in



Elizabeth Dryer

the United States today.

"We are an immigrant Church, so money is new to us and power too. It has only taken 200 years, which is not very long," Dryer said. Nevertheless, Catholics today are being called to move beyond guilt for having the advantages wealth, power and education bring. They must re-examine these advantages and begin to use their resources for the good of society, she said.

Dryer puts prime emphasis on another arena in which she sees the Catholic Church and its laity called to re-examine the status quo — the status of women in the Church. She believes the movement toward recognition of women's experience of God — or as she prefers to call it, the feminine expression of the experience of God — is an enormous movement in the history of spirituality in the Church.

"It is hard to tell, of course, because we are

in it. But I think it has the potential for being one of the biggest human revolutions," she asserted.

Likening this "revolution" to the early Christians' painful realization that the second coming was not near at hand, Dryer said the hindsight of centuries enables us to see the Spirit at work in the development of the early Church. Even now, while we are in the midst of this movement, we can find evidence of the Spirit of God at work, she observed.

In her varied experiences meeting with women in many locales, "the genuineness, the signs of virtue present in people's call to ministry, their call to holiness almost drowns you . . . we will soon reach a point where we can begin to look more calmly at the pros and cons of different ways to go about bringing about change."

Encompassing the feminist movement within the Church is the current interest in the spirituality of the laity. Dryer speaks with enthusiasm of the "universal call to holiness," especially as it is borne out by her classes at the theological union. Although the school is a seminary co-sponsored by several male religious orders, the students body is 27 percent lay and includes people from all walks of life and throughout the world. "Spiritual life is no longer an elitist phenomenon," she observed.

Despite her strong interest in the women's movement, Dryer seems now to be most captivated by consideration of the "spirituality of the laity or the mysticism of everyday life." As a professor, she is able to bring an academic dimension to the topic, and she values her ability to make the results of scholarship intelligible for those who may never be interested in scholarly research.

"I try to keep up with historical studies as much as I can and read the original materials (in order to) expose other people to those things in a way that is accessible," she explained. She has pursued an interest in the lives

of the saints. "I do all the classic writers from Origen in the third century to people like Etty Hillesum in Holland during World War II," she noted.

She likes to discuss saints as heroes, role models to whom we can look as we struggle to discover what it means to live a life of holiness. Historically, however, "our categories of saints have been extremely narrow," she asserted. "The differences here between the past and the present is that we are now broadening our idea of what it means to be a saint . . . We are aware of all different kinds of holiness. It is not limited to the monastery; neither is it limited to men."

Dryer is critical of what she termed the economic and political nature of the process the Church now employs to recognize saints. Moreover, until recent years, the saints — and hence our role models, theology and spirituality — "have been 99 and 44/100ths percent European."

"Geography is important in talking about anything in theology," she said. "We can no longer talk about spirituality across geographic boundaries. For your spirituality to be plugged into your daily experience, you need to attend to your geographic, economic and cultural situation."

Despite these obstacles, Dryer encourages Catholics to stay with our task by celebrating our bonding with one another. "By allowing grace to operate in our lives — if you allow that to take place — if you are ready to open yourself to goodness, it is almost a foregone conclusion that when you know something is right, you have got to hang in there," she concluded.

The conference is being sponsored by the Rochester Association for the Laity, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester, the Sisters of Mercy, Becket Hall, the Diocesan Sisters Council and Great Lakes Ministry. The honorary co-sponsor is Bishop Matthew H. Clark.

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