

Boston College
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY
Continuing Education Encore Events

Transcript of
"Tending Your Own Garden: A Spirituality for Active Ministry"

presented by
Colleen M. Griffith
November 4, 2016

Dr. Jane Regan:

Welcome to Boston College. My name is Jane Regan, and I'm on the faculty of the School of Theology and Ministry. I serve as director of the Continuing Education program, and I'm chair of my own department, the Department of Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry. I bring the greeting of Father Tom Stegman, who is our dean, who would want to be here. He's presently in Rome with a big Jesuit jamboree; no, it's not a jamboree [laughter], whatever, anyway. And if you go to our STM homepage, you'll see a picture of Tom greeting the pope. So he's hobnobbing with powerful people.

Today the School of Theology is pleased to host this 13th Annual Ministry Renewal Day. It's a tradition that we've had great pleasure in providing an opportunity for our alums and students and friends in ministry to gather. You know, you are the disciples who faithfully serve the Church in so many different ways, and this service requires that you attend to your own spirituality as well. It is the direction on the plane: put your own mask on first; get oxygen yourself. It's our hope, as it is every year, that this day will offer you some new ideas, a community with which to discuss them, and ultimately a measure of new energy to sustain your ministry in an ongoing way.

Please note that the presentation is being videotaped, including the questions and response section. If you have a question, please know it will probably be part of the final edited version available online to the public. You will find a video of this presentation on our website at bc.edu/encore within about six weeks. The majority of the things that we host are videotaped, and Encore is a rich resource for you if you're working in any form of adult formation, which you all are at some point.

Now I'm pleased to introduce our speaker for this morning. Dr. Colleen Griffith is a professor of the practice of theology at Boston College's School of Theology and Ministry. She also serves as faculty director of the spirituality studies, and in that capacity, she created and directs the STM summer Post-Master's Certificate Program in Spiritual Formation, which is now in its 19th year. How did that happen? 19 years, wow! She holds a doctorate in theology from Harvard Divinity School, where she worked under the direction of historical theologian Margaret Miles.

Dr. Griffith works at the intersection of theology and spirituality, and her research and writing interests include historical and contemporary spirituality, Christian theology of the body, methods in practical theology, and exploration of the relationship between doctrine

Boston College

and spiritual practices. Colleen is a superb teacher and educator and much sought-after lecturer. She's been the driving force behind the Evelyn Underhill lecture, which we have, lecture in Christian spirituality, which we have every summer. It has become kind of an annual go-to event every summer, and that's been going on since 2001.

In addition to publishing many book chapters and essays, Dr. Griffith's text *Prophetic Witness: Women's Strategies for Reform*, published by Crossroads—that received a first place award by the Catholic Press Association when it came out in 2010. She also served as an editor for the *C21 Resources* magazine. So those of you who've taken online courses on Spiritual Practices—that was work that she had done pulling those resources together, and that was then transformed by Colleen and by Thomas Groome into a publication called *Catholic Spiritual Practices: A Treasury of Old and New*, which was published by Paraclete Press in 2012, which to date has sold 12,000 copies. That's pretty good.

Dr. Griffith is not only a scholar of distinction, a creative educator, and a prophetic witness in her own right, she's also a person who makes a practice of faith a centerpiece of her own generous work.

I want to have you join me in welcoming Dr. Colleen Griffith. Her title is "Tending Your Own Garden: A Spirituality for Active Ministry," although, when we were standing in the doorway, we all said maybe it should say, "we don't have time"—a spirituality. So I'm so glad you took the time to be with us today and to enjoy this day. So Dr. Griffith? [applause]

Dr. Colleen Griffith:

Thank you, Jane, for that generous introduction, and I want to thank Jackie Regan as well, for creating that lovely opening prayer service. Thanks too, to Melinda Donovan for tending to all the details of the morning and to James Burraston for all his technological assistance for this morning. Most of all, thanks to you for joining us. We're here to explore a topic that I have to say at the offset—because I'm going to feel better about it if I say it—that I am no expert at, but I have a lot of desire around, as I suspect that you do: a spirituality for active ministry. And in particular, we'll be focusing on a contemplative spirituality for ministry, and doing so with the help of some historical mentors from the Christian tradition.

But first, a word about gardens; I mean even seeing them up on the screen does something for us, right? There's something restorative, something so beautiful about gardens. They have such power. Gardens refresh; they take us out of worlds that are too narrow; and they point toward a bigger picture. And colors burst and life burgeons and gardens bring people together, offering comfort and enlivening the senses. Gardens also settle us; they return us to center. There's just such goodness in gardens—in these pieces of ground given over to the cultivation of herbs and plants, flowers, vegetables—the stuff of life that nourishes and sustains.

I think that the core of any minister or teacher's being is a lot like a garden. Thus the garden becomes a rich metaphor for our deepest center, the place "where our hidden self grows strong" (Ephesians 6), the place in which the Spirit of God dwells and our identity in the communal reality of Christ develops.

Boston College

The garden, the truest center of us, is God's exquisite gift to us. It never automatically emerges full grown. This garden takes tending, as all gardens do, and a coming to gradual maturity in and through the daily round. In its unique beauty, the garden, that core of our being, is what we minister from when we're at our best. It is always awaiting our attention and our cooperation. And when there is a cherishing of this inner place, this garden within, our hidden selves can grow stronger. And when there is not, then, as the Jesuit George Aschenbrenner notes, poor self-image and spotty self-esteem result, both of which are real liabilities in ministry.

Thus, cherishing of and recognition of the beauty of the garden, our truest personal center, becomes a central building block in any spirituality of ministry. Ministry that proceeds from an inner garden has the possibility of unfolding in lively exchange with God, who is the gardener, whose own Spirit prompts us to join the work of caring for the garden, so that it thrives and can serve as that place from which we lead in ministry.

So we start today by pausing to notice the garden at the center of us. And we do so in wonder and delight, knowing full well that the garden is not of our making, though its flourishing depends on our cooperation. It is an awesome gift. It's what we have to bring to ministry. And as we grow in the recognition of the promptings of God's Spirit as gardener, we become teachable in ways of sowing and mulching and pruning and watering and harvesting that are the natural activities of ministry in the world. We're able to imagine contemplatively-edged ways of relating and contemplatively-edged ways of acting in the world.

Marcia Allen, the past president of the LCWR, makes a strong case for contemplative ministerial leadership. She writes: "We are called to this kind of awareness. We're called to an alertness that moves beyond stuckness, the stuckness we feel in the overwhelming plethora of the trivia, the endless minor tasks that pile on us day after day. We're called to see them as not something to get past, but as the mystery that life gifts us with at any particular day or hour."

A contemplative way is a set of lenses, lenses that make possible a seeing through to a gracious God acting or longing to act in favor of what it is that brings life. A contemplative bearing or a disposition, then, is a willingness to cooperate with the lead of a gracious God. It is the choice of what Allen references as "glad and practical cooperation" with God's Spirit.

How about you? What do you think a contemplative spirituality looks like? What does it require? What does it make possible in ministry? Let's take a few moments silently with these questions. I'll bet that all of us have had had few key persons in our lives who've modeled a contemplative way for us in some capacity or other. If we were to stop and pause—yes, let's do it—I'll bet that we can see the face of that person now, someone living or deceased that has shown us something about a contemplative way. What did that person model for you, show you that helps you to reflect on what it means to be contemplative? As a result of the grace of their presence in your life, what is it that you know about being contemplative that you prize?

Boston College

We're going to take a few minutes now, three, four minutes in our small table group, to chat about perhaps one contribution from that person who came to mind. In light of these questions, what does contemplative spirituality look like? I'll bet by the time our table speaks, we'll have some good responses to that. What might it require? And most importantly, what does it make possible in ministry? Go ahead.

So characteristics of a contemplative spirituality, what it requires, what it makes possible in ministry, and what we've learned from an important spiritual mentor about this. . . Jump in anywhere. We're going to put some thoughts about contemplative spirituality into the center of our room to begin. Is there anyone from a group that would like to speak on behalf of that group from a table, or speak your own word and someone else from the group can add in? There's a hand down there. We have mics, so please use them just so we all hear you.

PARTICIPANT: That first, what does a contemplative spirituality look like? It looks like the people in this room.

GRIFFITH: Thank you.

PARTICIPANT: Daily prayer life and consistency in that, and coming to your own center before you can move out to the service of others.

GRIFFITH: Yes. Thank you for both of those. Additional features of a contemplative spirituality?

PARTICIPANT: A few of us at our table shared. I think a common thread was there was a calmness in the being of the person that was a gift to those of us who are not as calm. [laughter]

GRIFFITH: Ah. I hear you. And another?

PARTICIPANT: Our table also mentioned the peace that seems evident in those that have a contemplative spirituality as well as authenticity, and how a groundedness in that relationship with God tends to give rise to an understanding that one is participating in God's work rather than accomplishing one's own work.

GRIFFITH: And when we meet up with a presence that emanates the kinds of qualities you're speaking about, it does something to us, doesn't it? I mean it kind of opens up space.

Well, I want to share with you three things about a contemplative spirituality that I've come to prize. And these are things that I have observed in wise mentors, and I've seen them witnessed to in the historic Christian tradition as well. So the three things that I'd like to talk about are firstly, *a contemplative spirituality requires tremendous confidence in the Spirit of God and a willingness to move at the pace of guidance of that Spirit*; to move at the pace of guidance even when we'd like to move a lot quicker than that or when we'd like not to move at all.

Boston College

A second characteristic that we'll be talking about is *suppleness*. It's really hard to imagine a contemplative way without there being inherent in it some degree of flexibility of heart, a kind of holy dexterity, the kind of holy dexterity that allows us to juggle important realities without losing key balls in the act of juggling.

And the third characteristic that we'll be talking about that is a hallmark of a contemplative spirituality is *an intentional practice of hope*, hope that calls for a renewed vision sometimes and other times the imagining of a brand new vision and a letting go of the old if we are to keep pace with "glad and practical cooperation with God."

So let's consider each of these in turn: full confidence in the Spirit and willingness to move at the pace of guidance; suppleness, flexibility of heart, a kind of holy dexterity; and an intentional practice of hope.

We'll start with the first. So let's talk some about this Spirit, the Spirit that is the manifestation of God, something to be lived in and not manipulated. It's an experiential reality. You know, Paul so wisely described the Spirit using plural reference that reflected different points of emphasis regarding the Spirit's activities. Thus he speaks about the Spirit as the one who "leads" [Rom. 8:14], quickens [Rom. 8:11], and reveals even the depths of God [1 Cor. 2:10]. He describes the Spirit as "activator of gifts" [1 Cor. 12:4-11], the one who bears witness with our spirit, the one who reminds us that we are children of God [Rom. 8:16], the one "given" to us through whom God's love has been poured out into our hearts [Rom. 5:5]. For Paul, it is the Spirit that "helps us in our weakness" [Rom. 8:26] and "intercedes with sighs too deep for words" [Rom. 8:26].

Now, I'm not sure exactly why, but often in Christian history, the Spirit has been rendered impersonally and elusively; and perhaps this is the result of some highbrow theological concern that the immanence of God might overshadow God's transcendence. Yet the living Spirit has chosen to pervade the world and "to empower creation from within." It's an astonishing thing that God has chosen to live in and with us in this kind of intimate relational proximity that has given rise to the biblical language of "indwelling." Our sensing of the Spirit in contemplation offers us over and over a deep down reason for bliss; it is the basis for our joy. The Spirit keeps on revealing "the unspeakable closeness of God."

The vivifying activity of the indwelling Spirit is really a "creative blessing," one that we come gradually to trust more in the contemplative journey and the practice of ministry. The vivifying Spirit makes new what stands in need of recreation in order to live. It is not dependent upon human efforts. This Spirit animates and empowers us, awakening from within in our uniqueness. The fourteenth-century Flemish mystic van Ruusbroec [1293-1381], observed that God's Spirit "moves and impels each one in a particular way." Accompanying all creatures in love, the Spirit of God vivifies through a steady and faithful companionship of each, and does so without reserve.

In his book *Breath of Life: A Theology of the Creator Spirit*, the contemporary theologian Denis Edwards describes this vivifying Spirit as, and I quote, "midwife of a new creation." I find this metaphor really evocative. As midwives enliven those that they accompany through their knowledgeable presence in times of vulnerability, working in areas that are

Boston College

deep and intimate, midwives are present in natural ways, seeing ahead of the birth giver. Engaged and involved, a midwife is also lovingly “other.” She is not the one in labor or the one fatigued by the process of birthing. She is the one present to, for, and with the one in labor. The involvement of the birth giver in delivering new life is never bypassed; it is focal and cherished.

In all of these ways, the Spirit is very much like a midwife. Midwives bring birth givers to new levels of self-awareness and to clearer understandings of transitional moments. Midwives intercede for birth givers as well. As a midwife, the Spirit teaches and reminds (John 14:26): “And the Spirit groans for us, interceding on our behalf, with prayerful groaning that God’s work in us might be brought to completion.”

Because we human beings are invited to contemplate and participate in this groaning toward the birthing of God’s mercy and justice in the world, the metaphor “midwife” as a description of the Spirit, communicates something profoundly orienting for our living, for our ministering. How much do we trust the Spirit, in the things big and small, in whatever it is that we are trying to bring to birth?

The German mystic, Hildegard of Bingen [1098-1179], used the Latin word *viriditas*, a noun that means “greenness,” to point toward the multiple vivifying effects of the Spirit. Inspired by Hildegard’s lead and utilizing her language, the theological giant in our time, one of them indeed, Elizabeth Johnson praises the vivifying Spirit as “a guide in the fog, a balm for wounds; a shining serenity; an overflowing fountain that spreads to all sides. She is life, movement, color, radiance, restorative stillness in the din. Her power makes all withered sticks and souls green again with the juice of life.”

Through the Spirit’s vivifying activity, we who seem to wobble an awful lot find our legs, and that which is dying in us gets invited into a yet new possibility of life. This is the one we’re invited to trust, to place confidence in. And are we willing to move at the pace of guidance, at the pace of the guidance of this Spirit?

Whenever I ask myself this question, I’m reminded about a fascinating figure from our history, Jane de Chantal. She’s somebody who I think demonstrates the power of moving at the pace of guidance. She’s somebody who waited with expectancy upon the movement of the Spirit in her time, tending what was a longing in her, but something that seemed to be impossible.

Living in France at the turn of the seventeenth century, Jane de Chantal emerges as a hinge figure, standing between medieval and modern worlds. She lived in a time when the emerging nation states of the European continent were torn in warfare, when the scientific discoveries of Copernicus and Galileo were challenging existing intellectual maps, when the critique of Christianity jolted the foundations of society and the Catholic response to the Reformation at the Council of Trent gave rise to a new militant Catholic perspective. And here was a woman arguing for a Jesus-centered, affectionate spirituality, to use her own language!

Boston College

Jane was the daughter of a noble family; and because her mother died when Jane was very young, she was raised by her father and her aunt. She married a baron, and it was a happy match. The couple had six children, and two weeks after the youngest was born, Christophe, her husband, was killed in a hunting accident, leaving her a widow. The death was unexpected. She went through a very long grieving process, and she came to sense over time that she did not want to marry again but rather to follow what had been a strong religious impulse all along to join an intentional religious community. But how could this be? There were no religious communities for people with children who wanted to give themselves to prayer and service. What a strange nudging she felt.

Enter Francis de Sales, a wonderful man who became Jane's spiritual director and over time, her dear friend. Francis encouraged her, believed that this inner nudge that she felt was authentically of God's Spirit. He assured her that the deepest desire of her heart was trustable, and he advised her to cherish this desire and to tend it—to tend it—to nurture it in heart. He described her vision as a spark of divine flame, and reminded her that every day presented opportunities for her desire to mature and ripen.

Now Jane, who recognized her motherhood as the central dimension of her spirituality, motored on, tending this holy longing, which she came to believe for herself was of God. The phrase "Live Jesus," a very famous Salesian phrase, became for her a mantra for the making of her heart a vessel through which God could enter the world according to God's pace.

In 1619, several years later, Jane de Chantal and Francis cofounded the Congregation of the Visitation of Holy Mary, which was a community for women who felt attracted to religious life but were not sufficiently young or robust or free from family ties or the raising of children, or simply were not drawn to the physical austerity that characterized many religious orders for women at the time.

Here was a very different model of religious life, something brand new, a possibility for those who did not fit the cast or the prereqs regarding religious life in Jane's time. Jane herself, in this style of intentional religious community, was able to move in and out of community life, visiting the sick and poor, giving herself in spiritual direction, writing, counseling, and taking care of her children in this new style of intentional Christian community.

This new moment, this new style of religious community, this charism of the Visitation, caught the imagination of many. Here was a community model that obviously attracted, so much so, that by the time Jane died in 1641, there were already 86 Visitation houses in existence. Jane de Chantal kept an open-eyed watchfulness and waited upon the movement of God regarding something that belonged to the future and required tending before it could come to be.

Back to you for a few moments. As you seek glad and practical cooperation with God's Spirit, what do you find yourself tending these days? Are you willing to move at the pace of guidance, as Jane de Chantal did? What might we learn here? Let's have a chat again at

Boston College

our tables. How is that kind of language, that terminology suggestive to us ministerially or in our lives? What might we learn from Jane de Chantal here?

Who wants to start? Somebody over on this side.

PARTICIPANT: One of the things we were discussing was patience: patience with God's plans and God's ways and timing. And some of the conclusions were, we go back to trust, trust in that Spirit, because if we have trust, then we'll trust the timing, we'll trust what is happening. And that leads to a certain kind of flexibility, a letting go and letting God, and coming to terms with that.

GRIFFITH: The word patience was thrown into the mix here. Thank you for that. And I can't help but wonder if she would have been able to tend in the way that she did without the support of another, a trusted friend who said, "stay with that, that is such a vision, that is right." And how much we do need that in order to be able to keep pace with the guidance of the Spirit or to tend what looks to be impossible at first blush.

Other thoughts? Somebody's being volunteered there. Somebody's pointing to one of their table members. Anybody else? Anybody have a good story of tending? We have a couple there, towards the back. Thank you. The woman in blue, behind; I think we haven't heard from you yet. Yes?

PARTICIPANT: I was just saying about the first thing: do you seek glad and practical cooperation with God's Spirit? That's [inaudible] the Spirit. You have to go with the Spirit's timing; there's no other way to do it.

GRIFFITH: Yeah. Sometimes that's pretty hard to discern though, isn't it, and to sort out? Yeah. And in the back here, light blue blouse? Thank you.

PARTICIPANT: Sometimes I wonder . . . The question about what do you find yourself tending these days. So in a garden, there are weeds that have to be torn out.

GRIFFITH: Pests, let's not forget the pests.

PARTICIPANT: I'm sorry, say that again? It's what?

GRIFFITH: Pests.

PARTICIPANT: Oh, So I can find myself doing that a lot. And this time of the year, when things are supposed to lie fallow and get ready for the spring, what I really want to do is to plant bulbs and to cut back the rose bush and take care of things like that. But to find that kind of, I don't know, it's not so much time. There's a desire and there's an impetus. It's hard to put the language together. But if you've been tending weeds a lot and hoping that things won't choke to death on the way, and then wanting to grow, so that things will prosper for the future, it's hard sometimes to motivate yourself, I guess, to have that glad and practical cooperation with God's Spirit. The Spirit, as Paul said, "The Spirit is willing but the, or the, flesh is weak."

Boston College

Not quite that, but anyway, I'm sorry, I'm giving a whole speech. But how do we really, how do we work through those days, that time? And it can be a, it's not just a month or it's not just one season. How do we work through that so that this, which the Spirit is within us, and the desire and joy is there. How do we keep it alive, really?

GRIFFITH: Yeah. Thanks for your reflection. And I think what your reflection does is remind us all that, you know, this business of tending isn't passive. It's not like, OK, I'm going to hang out here and wait. That's not tending. Tending is about getting down and pulling out the weeds, etc., and being able to discern what's going on with the pests and what needs pruning and all of those things. So tending is an active posture, not a passive posture. One more.

PARTICIPANT: Thank you. This is so wonderful. I'm just going to share something practical and which I see as cooperative and collaborative. In my experience with my own spiritual director, whom I have been seeing monthly since 2004—so there's a lot of steadfastness and faithfulness there on both sides—but I can just imagine that Jane de Chantal perhaps would have received a similar advice from her spiritual director or other very, very close companions on her life. And the advice was that, if for instance one has an experience of a certain movement taking place in one's life that seems to be helpful and coming from God's Spirit, to make that the substance of the daily *examen*. And I have found that so, so helpful.

GRIFFITH: What a great suggestion. Yeah. It's almost as if living the reality now, which is not yet here, and allowing that to really shape one's practice of the *examen*. Yeah, thanks for that. Well, look, you've been sitting a while. We're going to come back in about 10 minutes and chat about suppleness and what holy dexterity might be all about. But in the meantime, a cup of coffee and a bit of coffee cake would be good.

REGAN: I just want to invite you to two special events that we're having over the next couple of weeks. On Thursday, November 10th, Rick Gaillardetz, who is chair of the Boston College Theology Department, will be offering his thoughts on Francis and really looking at the question whether this is an historical anomaly or the beginning of something new. So he's a scholar who's well rooted in the Vatican II and those kinds of documents, and he'll be really good at that. So that's . . . and he's a fine presenter . . . so that's next Thursday, November 10th.

The following Tuesday evening, Father John Baldovin, who's from our own, the STM, faculty, will be offering a presentation on the Eucharist as medicine of immortality, and looking at very much how this has shifted over the past several years, particularly in light of Pope Francis.

Both of those begin at 5:30 in this room. And for more information on that, you can check out our brochure or on the website bc.edu/stmce.

Another program you might be interested in is Crossroads is offering an online course for Advent, which starts the Sunday after Thanksgiving, Jesus Foretold and Fulfilled, which

Boston College

begins on that Monday and ends on December 13th, so it's a short kind of nice way to do it. You can register for that online as well.

I have known people who've done that more than once. And just like when we hear the readings each Sunday we hear something different, because these are looking at the readings, kind of Jesus's, the foretelling of Jesus in the Old Testament and the expression in the New, because we're doing Scripture, many people have done that over. So if you've done it, think about, and you're looking for some kind of Advent experience, that would be one to do.

And one of the things that struck me from Colleen's comments so far is that so often we tend our garden as communities; like that's where my garden gets tended to—prayer, quiet, etc.—but it's like sometimes I just need to be with other people who are also there with their own hoes. And so let's see what else is next.

GRIFFITH: OK. So we move to our second characteristic of a contemplative spirituality: suppleness, a holy dexterity. Now I've got to ask you, do we have any jugglers out there? I mean is there anybody in this group that really seriously knows how to juggle, like actual balls? That does that as a side hobby or something? Nobody? Not a juggler in this group? I can't believe it. And yet a room full of jugglers at another level, right? Yeah. Well, I'm not a juggler either. I have tried. I have some balls in my office, and they're soft, so when they fall, as they do so often, nothing breaks, etc.

But I really respect good jugglers. There is an art to juggling. It requires skill and grace and a capacity to handle multiple things at once. And when you watch talented jugglers, it's mesmerizing, because they're not thrown off by changes in speed or motion or the number of items in the air. So they start with three and then they're adding four, and they get up to five. And their concentration is pretty amazing too. They bring such concentration to their craft. Their extraordinary dexterity really captivates my attention.

People today find themselves having to juggle an awful lot: multiple responsibilities as a result of the commitment to plural vocations, plural vocations rising from seen an unforeseen circumstance. A painter sensing a genuine calling to her art finds herself caring for two aging parents and needing a further job to make ends meet. An inner-city teacher believing fully in the power of education discovers himself being asked to help his students and families outside of class time loads, even as he's trying to complete his master's degree in educational leadership at the local university. A husband and father dies of a rare disease, leaving a widow, a single mother of three, now in need of fulltime work to support a young family.

Life continues to roll, and with it new responsibilities emerge. The vocational choices that we make require plenty of tending, as do unexpected happenings, which signal the need for additional commitments on our part, giving us more to juggle. Active juggling of multiple responsibilities and commitments is not for the fainthearted, and it's a regular feature of ministerial life, ministerial life that takes focus, energy, practical wisdom.

Boston College

One has to discern what is necessary to keep in play and what is not. And sometimes the things that we thought were ours to juggle are not the things we've got to play with anymore at all. Suppleness, a holy dexterity, becomes the virtue for which we hope in a contemplative spirituality for ministry.

A prominent figure from the historic Catholic Christian tradition who demonstrates an abundance of holy dexterity in juggling multiple and diverse responsibilities is the American saint Elizabeth Ann Seton. Born in New York City, this wife, mother, educator, administrator, foundress, and community superior—yeah, really—was left to raise five children under the age of seven following the death of her husband. She looked after her husband's orphaned younger brothers and sisters. She regularly assisted the dying as a ministry she held sacred. She established the first American women's religious community, and she became the founding mother of the Catholic school system in the United States. Wow.

Over the course of her lifetime, she knew affluence and poverty, love and loss, the fullness of spiritual consolation and depths of sorrow. Faced with great obstacles and dire hardships, she approached the challenges that beset her—and there were a lot of them—with creative fidelity, prayerfully reassessing her path at every crossroad, opting for what she deemed most practically wise.

For these many reasons, Elizabeth Seton stands as a symbol for millions of contemporary un-canonized saints who daily assume complex responsibilities with courage, refusing to drop the ball when forced to juggle multiple and necessary commitments.

Seton's husband died when she was 29, leaving her to raise three daughters and two sons as a single mom. As a married woman inspired by the work of St. Vincent de Paul, she had organized a group of women who regularly visited the sick in their homes. Now trying to support herself as a widow, and her children, she turned her energies to teaching, deciding she would start a small school with four boarding students and her own three daughters. When Seton's husband had become seriously ill, the two went to Italy with their oldest daughter, hoping that maybe a warmer climate might help him to rally. Upon their arrival, however, they were held in quarantine, and her husband William died.

Now, the families of William's business associates looked after Elizabeth, looked after her daughters, welcoming them with caring and heartfelt hospitality, and it was through their influence that Elizabeth Seton was exposed to Catholicism. And soon thereafter, she became Catholic herself, having been raised Episcopalian. Now, that particular decision evoked the chagrin of so many family members and friends. Her Catholicism posed difficulties for her professionally, too, in a dominantly Protestant New York, where parents feared the influence of Catholicism on their children's minds.

With news of Seton's conversion to Catholicism, many families removed their daughters from her school. And during this period of ostracization, Seton received an unusual invitation from William Valentine Dubourg, a bishop, to begin a Catholic community school in a poor area.

Boston College

Following her best lights, in accord with her natural proclivity for prayer and apostolic spirituality, she moved to Emmetsburg, Maryland, where she established St. Joseph's Academy and Free School, dedicated to the education of young women. This became the first parochial school for girls in the U.S.

Juggling the demands of teaching, administration, and parenting, she proceeded to found a religious community in Emmetsburg, a community of women committed to the care of the children of the poor. The group initially was called the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph. The rest is history.

Over the years, Seton experienced bouts of poor personal health, troubling financial concerns. She found herself in the position of repeatedly being the one to accompany a lot of loved ones through death, not only her husband William and her father but her sister-in-law, her best friend, two of her own beloved daughters, several friends and younger sisters in community. She persisted and embraced contradictions with realism, seeking to keep her faith ever concrete.

The suppleness of spirit that she developed over the course of her lifetime blossomed into a holy dexterity, one utterly real and grounded in God. In her writings, specific practices of Elizabeth Seton stand out that prove suggestive for contemporary people like us who juggle multiple responsibilities. These practices include: a commitment to more *practical enactment of the love of God and neighbor* command in whatever circumstances one finds oneself. Two: the adoption of a *can-do mentality*, grounded in the realization that the work at hand is God's work. And three: regular *practice of prayerful praise*, prayerful praise to God, particularly when tired, lacking in cheer, or being utterly worn out.

Now, these practices helped Elizabeth Seton to maintain her balance and to juggle wisely without overwhelm, and I think that they continue to inspire us as well. Let's consider each of these practices.

A really *practical love of God*: Seton focused on what the embodiment of love of God and neighbor for the sake of the reign of God looked like amidst changing life contexts and shifts in roles with respect to herself.

When she had the wrenching experience of losing her husband and became a widow at a young age, she turned around and founded the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows. In Seton's view, the experiences that we undergo point us in the direction of a concrete love of God and neighbor in fresh ways. Her sincerity and conviction, coupled with her attraction to a charity that was eminently practical, led a lot of others to follow her. The vocation of loving effectively in ways that were concretely useful to others became the central commitment of multiple branches of the Sisters of Charity.

Her second practice: *a can-do attitude*. This second practice apparent in her life was her adoption of a very positive mentality: can-do. The basis for this attitudinal disposition came, however, not from some over-assessment of her own capacities and purposes but rather from a deep conviction that the work at hand was one piece of something much bigger than her—namely, the work of God as sustained by the grace of God.

Boston College

Elizabeth Seton showed healthy detachment from her own efforts. She wrote, "If I succeed, I bless God. If I do not succeed, I bless God, for then it shall be right that I not succeed." She would leverage her resources and lead in innovative directions without over concern for success, because the work itself was God's. And if the work wasn't of God, it would fail. And that, in her mind, would be as it should be.

Third practice: the practice of *prayerful praise*. This third practice prominent in the life of Elizabeth Seton is intentional praise of God, which was a cherished way of prayer that she sensed bolstered cheerfulness, cheerfulness of spirit in her, enabling her to be more adroit at handling complex life realities. "Praise the Lord, oh my soul," she exclaims. "Praise God, that the blessed impulse of grace may rebound to your own happiness and glory, for to God your praise can add nothing. To yourself, it is now the means of grace and comfort, and hereafter will be your pleasure and joy."

It seems that prayers of praise lent perspective and reminded Seton of her confidence in God as Guide. And that was a favored referent of hers: Guide, capital G. She writes, "With such a Guide can I fear; with such a Friend, shall I not be satisfied; with such a Supporter, can I fail?" Songs of praise to God spared her of "the pain, both of retrospection and anticipation," making it more possible to "correspond to the grace of the moment" and freeing her to place trust in the lead of God's creative Spirit.

A practice of praise remained central to Seton's spirituality throughout her life. It corresponded with a strong desire in her. "While I live, while I have my being in time and through eternity, let me praise my God." Concrete enactment of the great love command, a practical approach to work as ultimately God's, a habit of praise of God; very simple practices, very simple.

Doing it in natural ways that are true to us, however we address God, whatever words of praise come. I think praise sometimes falls out of the equation in our prayer repertoire. Simple practices, hallmarks of the life and way of Elizabeth Seton, but cumulatively considered, we get a picture of the woman, and these practices stand as pointers for us, ushering in the possibility of deft ministerial leadership on our part too, and hope for a holy dexterity as we juggle so many responsibilities.

Back to you again. So what is your response to this notion of holy dexterity amidst all of the necessary juggling you're doing? And have you had an experience of thinking you had all these balls to juggle with and then all of a sudden realizing that these aren't your balls to juggle at all anymore? And what practices of Elizabeth Seton end up proving suggestive to you, the concrete practices, in your life and your ministry? Let's have a chat.

OK. So let's keep our conversation going together in large group now. So responses to this notion of holy dexterity and suppleness, to the practical suggestions, practices of Elizabeth Seton, where'd you go?

PARTICIPANT: Hi. While we were talking about flexibility, I also realized that I have to be flexible in a lot of my life, but there are rigidities in little pieces of it, like as we were talking about, there are things that maybe we don't want to let go that we have to or times that we

Boston College

have to ask for help and we hesitate, balls that we want to keep for ourselves but we really need to give away so that somebody can learn, or that kind of thing.

GRIFFITH: Yeah. Thanks for that, Kathy. You know, we just keep adding sometimes. We just keep adding, and it's killing us, and we know it's killing us. And yet we haven't realized that we might not be the ones that have to juggle those right now. So yeah, thanks for that, and also for the notion that there are areas in our life where we say, "Oh yeah, this is evident, I'm becoming a lot more supple there and there and there." And then we are very stiff necked or tightfisted in other areas; yeah. Thank you. Other thoughts? Yes?

PARTICIPANT: It just strikes me that holy dexterity is perhaps a very wholesome and acceptable way of expressing that "no" is just as sacred as "yes."

GRIFFITH: Well said: "No is just as sacred as yes." Yes, she was saying that this term, holy dexterity, that a practical way of rendering it could be "no" is just as important at times as "yes."

PARTICIPANT: One of the things that resonated for me was the freedom that comes from releasing yourself from that fear of retrospection and anxiety over anticipation. It's just such a surrender and hope, and it saves so much energy. [laughter]

GRIFFITH: It does.

PARTICIPANT: If you're not bogged down by those two things.

GRIFFITH: Yeah. Wisely said. OK, what I love about this group is we have such an intergenerational mix of ministers here this morning. That's really great. Any of our people brand new to ministry, our young folks in our group, have a thought or a word on this? Thank you.

PARTICIPANT: Yes, we talked about the challenges to, in our day to, I mean it's easy to not worry about something if it doesn't work out and say it wasn't God's will if you're your own boss, you own your own company [laughter], and yet there are areas where we do have a bit more autonomy. And in those areas, then I like that approach of, if you do your best prayerfully and it does not work out, then maybe seek counsel or try something different, tweak it. And if in the long run it doesn't work, then there must be another way, but, and then be grateful for the things that do work.

GRIFFITH: There must be another way, or maybe I'm not the one to see this through, or maybe this isn't the time, or you know, maybe this really isn't of God, even though discerning it I thought perhaps it was. So all of those remain such big possibilities, don't they?

I think the interesting thing is, when we're juggling like balls and it's taking so much focus and concentration to just keep them in the air, and then there's a day when we realize that these aren't our balls to juggle at all anymore, in a new season of life, and being willing to look around then to see which ones we ought be picking up. Right, that's a real, that takes

Boston College

real spiritual maturity, I think, because so often we hanker after what is no longer the season of play with the balls that we had. Yeah. One more. Thank you.

PARTICIPANT: Colleen, I just want to add to that because I feel that there's such a freedom that comes with that letting go of those, that juggle that is exhausting, and recognizing not my juggle. I just also just want to add on a personal note how inspiring it is to hear about these women. Thinking of Elizabeth Seton at 29 with five children, as a widow. Personally, a widow at 44 with no children, what I went through in that dark chapter, and here today with such gratitude for God's work in my life and to have this kind of a role model, and without embarrassing you, you in front of us as a spiritual leader, it's just an enormous gift, so I praise God for that.

GRIFFITH: Thank you. OK, we move to the third characteristic of an, at least from my renderings, folks, there are a lot more than these, right? But these are just the three that I thought we might pause before together today with perhaps some good fruit, the *practice of hope*, that third essential ingredient of a contemplative spirituality for ministry.

In seeking to develop contemplative capacities, we grow in steady familiarity with the figure of hope. There's a good book in the back, by the way—pause for station identification—on hope, that the faculty of the STM actually put together. And it has its own story, because the project arose at a time when the new School was in its birth pangs, and there were new colleagues and different ways that needed melding and the best of the wisdom of each party involved needed to be brought to the table. And there was a lot of angst and groaning and all kinds of stuff at that point in our history.

And a very dear colleague, Richard Lennan, had this great brainchild and said, you know, we've got to keep at what we're about, the people we are. We're theologians, and we should think about doing theology together, common project, and started to ask around how much interest there was in a book on hope, and met with a lot of positive response—almost full show of the faculty in terms of being willing to write an essay for the collection. And in addition to that, those that weren't able to, it was more time than anything else, just the commitments they had on their plate at the moment, so they were saying no with good reason at that juncture.

But the great thing was that, in the topic itself I think that a faculty came alive, in actually having to kind of burrow down into whatever our discipline is within theology, and to really think mightily about hope, we were forced to grapple with some of the less-than-hopeful places that we've been living out of in the previous months, and etc., in those early days of being one School. And it was such a generative project at multiple ends. I have to say, of all the many essays, chapters, whatever that I have written over the years, that this one was profoundly impactful personally in the writing of it. And I think that was the case for so many of our faculty. But anyhow, it's a great book; it's back there.

So here we are talking about hope. And hope is always a fleshly kind of grace, huh, isn't it? Its presence is locally perceived. It comes to the forefront in memorable words or actions or images or places or stories or songs. Yeah, it's a fleshly virtue, and ministry so often asks hope of us. There is need to see more than what is immediately in front of us. There

Boston College

is need for a flexing of our imaginations to conceive what could be, might be, and then to bend toward that which isn't yet with all our might.

There is grace in hope, but it's a choice too, and it's the practice of prayer—that's the place in which hope becomes this renewable resource. In prayer, we're steadied and renewed and readied to continue hoping. So hope born of prayer, in the words of Richard Lennan, "frees us to risk involvement with the world we cannot control." We're led to hope amidst the chancy business of life. And it's in prayer that persons acquire the taste for hopefulness despite the chancy business of life.

Now, the theologian Jurgen Moltmann says, and I quote, "We become active in so far as we hope." Now that would mean that the opposite of hope therefore is not firstly despair, as is commonly thought, but rather lethargy. The opposite of hope is lethargy, because hope's disposition is to act, and this is what distinguishes hope from wishing or some kind of fantasy. A person who hopes decides to start acting as though what is longed for will come to fruition. So she or he steps forward with hands ready, perceiving possibilities, and sinking into what is anticipated. And that's how hope brings into the limitations of the present an anticipated future that hasn't fully arrived yet.

In the early twentieth century, few voices of Christian spirituality witnessed to the union of hope and action more persuasively than the English-born spiritual writer, Evelyn Underhill. Underhill was a married laywoman, and she was the first woman invited to give theological lectures at Oxford and the first woman to direct clergy retreats. I don't know about you, but I love that fact [laughter]. And we split those two, the person giving, invited, first woman to be invited to give theological lectures at Oxford, would hardly be the person directing clergy retreats now, would it be? But whose split is that? How far have we strayed from this kind of a unitive way of proceeding as we see demonstrated in Evelyn Underhill?

For her, the union of contemplation (which always births hopes) and action made possible, and I quote here, "a life soaked through and through by a sense of God's reality and God's claim." The adoption of a contemplative spirituality had unmistakable active propulsion for Underhill. So she's reflecting on the Lord's Prayer, and she has public life very much in view.

And she asserts: "Thy Kingdom come." Now, that's a huge hope, folks. "Thy Kingdom come. There is energy, drive, purpose in these words," she writes, "an intensity of desire for the coming of perfection into life, not the limp resignation that lies devoutly in the road and waits for the steamroller, but a total concentration on the interests of God, which must be expressed in action."

Hope that acts allowed Underhill and allows us to assume our small part in the vast operations of God's Spirit. This seems to be the only way of proceeding ministerially, particularly in terms of struggle requiring backbone and long effort.

So where is the opportunity to practice hope presenting itself in your life these days? And I think this is a good question for us to take a couple minutes of silence around first; maybe

Boston College

jot a response. And given the fact that part of these gardens we're creating are those very tables that are yours today, it would be nice to hear from almost everyone around the circle in your table regarding the opportunity to practice hope that's presenting itself in your life and ministry these days.

OK, so we will not take those responses in large group today, but perhaps our response to this question is best processed back in the garden anyhow. One thing seems clear: the practice of hope is never going to be a singular choice made once and for all by us as ministers but rather an ongoing one decided in freedom so many times over. We're forever reorienting to the next thing in our ministerial lives, and thus the decision to hope is never static. It presents itself anew as the circumstances of life change. And as we practice hope in these lives of ministry, we can count on being prompted to move at the pace of guidance, we can count on being prompted to stay supple and flexible of heart, and we can count on being prompted to remember the ways of the garden.

In our hope, we intend the future. It may not look as though the future is arriving soon enough, but we can lean in all the same. And at the end of the day, a contemplative way, folks, is all about leaning in.

I want to thank you very much for our time together this morning. [applause] And I hope that in the minutes that we have left, because we have about 10 minutes left, that you'll be easeful with one another. It's rare that we have a group like this inter-generationally, ministers in the vicinity, for chat and conversation. Stay as long as you like, and God go with you. [applause]