

Vale Therese

Rowan Ireland, on behalf of The Sense of the Faithful team, mourns the death of a key member, Therese D’Orsa.

Over many years, Therese was a leading educator in Catholic missiology. She was the Director of Catholic Education and director of Education in the Diocese of Sale from 1997 to 2007. More recently, she was Professor of Mission and Culture at the Broken Bay Institute of Theological Education. There she added to a long career as hands on teacher and researcher.

Her professional publications were extensive. Over several years, from 2009, she published four books with her husband Jim D’Orsa relating to education in Catholic missiology.

When Therese joined the executive team of SOF just two years ago, she declared herself “a Johnny-come-lately”. Her reasoning, apparently, was that she had not been formally a member of the team in the years when it was trying to persuade our Catholic bishops to take the opportunity of the Fifth Plenary Council (PC) to walk with all the faithful towards an Australian Church that embodied the vision and energy of the Second Vatican Council.

Therese’s mild self-deprecation as latecomer never washed. From her very first meeting with the team, it was clear she had accompanied SOF in all its PC engagements, albeit at a short distance. And, from the start, she contributed to all agenda items as if she was a team veteran. The team quickly learned that, over the years, Therese had written and acted in parallel with SOF as she called for recognition of the role and responsibilities of the laity, and especially women, in the ministries and the governance of the Church.

Therese was delighted when she was asked to join the team which she had long held in high esteem because of its PC work. In turn, the rest of the team was delighted to discover quickly that Therese had much to offer as SOF sought to find its feet after the PC came to a disappointing close with a set of worthy but very general decrees published in November 2022.

A range of questions had to be faced at that point. Should SOF continue or disband? If it continued, was its role simply to monitor implementation of the PC decrees? Or should it move on to devote energies to participation in chosen levels and stages of the World Synod on Synodality?

Therese’s responses to these questions were clear by the beginning of this year. The work of SOF had only begun, in her view. She did not have a detailed program for our future, but she did bring to us a sort of methodology for working on SOF’s new chapter, and as well, a theological grounding for the methodology.

The methodology and the theology are encapsulated in one word: Mission. Therese thought that any organization in the Church should determine future directions by first reflecting on its Mission – in the Church, in the local and wider world, and in the lives of its members.

Underpinning the notion of Mission was a deep theology which Therese explored in her publications. Central to that theology is the notion that the constitutive purpose of the Church and such organizations as SOF is to continue Jesus’ mission to build God’s Kingdom of love, of justice and peace on Earth.

We will miss Therese as we try to discern SOF’s mission in detail for the years to come. We will miss her not only for her theological vision but for the witness of her own deep faith.

— Rowan Ireland